

Envisioning Fire Theophanies as Gender-Neutral Expressions of Selfhood

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ABSTRACT

The Bible is not an obvious source of affirmation for non-binary or agender identities. Commentaries on gender in the Bible focus on narratives in which gender is foregrounded by the text, and queering these narratives requires negotiation around binary categories of gender. This article proposes that biblical narratives which portray God through gender-neutral images may speak especially to non-binary and agender identities. This premise can be demonstrated by applying a genderqueer hermeneutic to two biblical fire theophanies: Moses' encounter at the burning bush (Exod 3) and the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2). Exodus 3 and Acts 2 describe encounters with the divine in which divine selfhood is revealed in gender-neutral or ungendered terms. The deeply personal nature of divine self-disclosure within these encounters is underpinned by expressions of selfhood which exist outside binary categories of gender—indeed, beyond gendered categories altogether. Far from being irrelevant to the discussion of gender, gender-neutral images in the Bible offer a method of “re-imagining” divine selfhood in ways which affirm genderqueer expressions of the self.

KEYWORDS

Genderqueer; agender; non-binary; theophanies; Exodus; Acts; burning bush; Pentecost; God; *imago Dei*; personhood; fire imagery

Conversations regarding gender in biblical interpretation often presuppose a binary construction of gender. This presents a particular issue for the development of genderqueer hermeneutical approaches which seek to affirm non-binary or agender expressions of self without dependence on an assumed gender binary. Judith Roof observes that even where discussions of gender are more varied and dynamic than “female” and “male,” such as those involving non-binary and genderqueer conceptions of gender, they struggle to break free from the cultural assumptions of a binary structure.¹ The gender binary so pervades the social and cognitive structuring of gender in present-day Western culture that it is difficult to escape its influence, for even deliberate deconstruction of gender may reinforce binary conceptualizations by orientating itself in reference to that binary. Situating non-binary, trans, and genderqueer identities as disruptions of the female/male binary, for instance, relies

¹ Judith Roof, “Is There Sex after Gender? Ungendering/‘The Unnameable’,” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 35, no. 1 (2002): 53.

on the pre-eminence of a feminine/masculine duality, which is thus reaffirmed as normative.² Nevertheless, it is important to put this present dilemma into perspective. In the volume *Genderqueer and Non-binary Genders*, Ben Vincent and Ana Manzano evidence “multiple understandings of gender across time and place” which show complex and culturally-bound gender expressions that are not predicated on a modern, Western, predominantly binary view of gender.³

In terms of biblical interpretation, efforts to dismantle or subvert readings of gender in the Bible may inadvertently bolster assumptions that place gender on some kind of binary scale. This can be seen in the way that questions regarding God and gender are orientated around gendered language and imagery (often designated “masculine” or “feminine”) even though interpreters acknowledge that gender is a human attribute and, therefore, God may be considered “beyond” gender.⁴ The Bible contains numerous non-gendered images for divine reality, describing God as light, fire, lion, rock, and fortress, among many other metaphors.⁵ Since these images are drawn from natural forces, inanimate objects, and non-human animals, they are considered not to offer a clear locus for the discussion of personal gender expression. This is because such non-anthropomorphic images do not seem to relate to personhood as human beings recognize or experience it. Moreover, the application of such non-gendered images to notions of personal identity runs directly counter to the dominant Western assumption that personhood is necessarily gendered. Such images have thus been largely considered non-personal ways of describing God.⁶

The predominance of gender norms in construing personhood suggests the need to not only transgress or subvert binary understandings of gender, but to locate selfhood beyond the bounds of gender altogether.⁷ In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler destabilizes the role of gender as a constituent part of human personhood. For Butler, gender “has no independent ontological status” because it is produced, reinforced, and regulated through one’s embodied participation in social life.⁸ Nevertheless, a person’s relationship with, and experience of, their own gender has a

² For further examples of the ways in which contemporary discussions about gender reinforce binary conceptualizations, see Roof, “Sex after Gender,” 53–58.

³ Ben Vincent and Ana Manzano, “History and Cultural Diversity,” in *Genderqueer and Non-binary Genders* (ed. Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman, and Meg-John Barker; *Critical and Applied Approaches to Sexuality, Gender and Identity*; London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 11.

⁴ David E. Stein, “On Beyond Gender: Representation of God in the Torah and in Three Recent Renditions into English,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues* 15 (2008): 108.

⁵ Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., “God,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 334.

⁶ As reflected in Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, “God,” 334.

⁷ Roof, “Sex after Gender,” 62.

⁸ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 48.

significant bearing on their experience of personhood. When one's gender is not recognized as a valid or intelligible form of being human, one's full humanity is undermined.⁹ Along with other marginalized and racialized social positions, forms of "non-normative embodiment" (whether in terms of gender expression, anatomy, dis/ability, sexuality, etc.) are subjected to intersecting systems of oppression; these systems of oppression work to exclude one's full participation in "the human" in various and mutually enforcing ways.¹⁰ Thus, erasure of one's experiences relating to gender—including agender and non-binary experiences—is tantamount to the erasure of fully-realized personhood, even though gender is not itself a prerequisite for being human.

There are few spaces within biblical reception to locate and explore non-binary and agender experience. This adheres to a wider pattern within Western society in which "many non-binary people do not feel that they have specific spaces within which they fit."¹¹ It may seem counter-intuitive to turn to images of divinity to find spaces for genderqueer expressions of humanity. However, concepts of God envision ultimate reality in ways which relate to, and reflect, human self-understanding.¹² As a result, cultural and theological ideas about divinity exalt those human traits that are considered "God-like" and degrade those that are excluded from the divine image.¹³ Based on Gen 1:27, the theological definition of humanity as being made "in the image of God" (or *imago Dei*) has become widely influential in Western conceptions of human value and personhood.¹⁴ Moreover, the second half of the verse appears to assume an understanding of personhood predicated on binary gender: "male and female [God] created them." While the concept of a gendered God affirms personal gender expression by associating human gender with the divine, the concept of a God who is without gender—or in some way beyond gender—has not been correlated with the affirmation of genderqueer (and especially agender and non-binary) individuals in biblical interpretation. This lack of affirmation implies a disconnect

⁹ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 2, 30–31.

¹⁰ Kay Inckle, "Bent: Non-Normative Embodiment as Lived Intersectionality," in *Theorizing Intersectionality and Sexuality* (ed. Yvette Taylor, Sally Hines, and Mark E. Casey; Genders and Sexualities in the Social Sciences; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 255. See also Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 31, 35.

¹¹ Meg John Barker and Christina Richards, "Further Genders," in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Psychology of Sexuality and Gender* (ed. Christina Richards and Meg John Barker; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 171–72.

¹² Linn Marie Tonstad, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* (New York/London: Routledge, 2017), 1; 10.

¹³ John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 17.

¹⁴ Regarding the widespread liberative and oppressive effects of the *imago Dei* doctrine, see Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 3–37.

between genderqueer personhood and the divine image—an implication that must be corrected if we are to ensure that agender and non-binary persons are fully recognized within the scope of human existence.

Non-gendered images for God provide one route toward finding spaces within biblical interpretation that both acknowledge and elevate agender and non-binary ways of being. Especially rich for hermeneutical exploration are fire theophanies, in which significant disclosures of divine selfhood are encoded in personal, non-gendered, and non-anthropomorphic manifestations of divine fire. This article will establish grounds for reading theophanic fire imagery as a non-gendered expression of divine selfhood, which may be taken forward as a potential site of genderqueer interaction with biblical images of God as well as conceptions of divine and human personhood.

“Re-imagining” as a Hermeneutical Foundation

A contemporary (re)interpretation of God-related imagery has precedent in any number of feminist and queer re-readings of biblical texts.¹⁵ A particular hermeneutical foundation for this article is the imperative laid out by Isabel Carter Heyward. A lesbian feminist theologian, Heyward argued powerfully for the need to “re-image” our concepts of God, especially gendered concepts, in a way which places “power and intimacy in mutual relation rather than in dominating, hierarchical, relation.”¹⁶ For Heyward, re-imagining is a form of “re-naming” reality for the purposes of liberation from oppressive systems.¹⁷ Historically, certain images of God have been used to perpetuate unjust power relations between people: God as male “king” and “father,” for example, have been interpreted as endorsing hierarchical patriarchy in which men hold social power over other genders.¹⁸ Re-defining the interpretative foci of such gendered terms has been offered as one way to “re-image” God, such as by

¹⁵ See, for instance, the myriad examples in Mary Grey, *Introducing Feminist Images of God* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Isabel Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982), 11.

¹⁷ Heyward, *Redemption of God*, 10; 14.

¹⁸ Christie Cozad Neuger, “Image and Imagination: Why Inclusive Language Matters,” 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 Press, 2006), 162.

emphasizing the role of father as loving and self-giving parent rather than dominating patriarch.¹⁹

Another method involves generating new images, or reviving under-utilized ones, which move the conception of God away from male definitions. Biblical images in which God is associated with birth and motherhood, for example, have been employed by feminist scholars to re-image God as “mother” against the male emphasis of the image of God as “father.” While God is not directly given the title “mother” in the biblical text, “God is likened to one who is pregnant (Is 6:3–4), gives birth (Is 42:14), acts as midwife (Ps 22:9–10), nurses (Is 49:15), [and] is a home-maker (Ps 123:2).”²⁰ For Mary Grey, among many others, these images locate femaleness in God and thus elevate the experiences and bodies of women by asserting that the feminine is included within divine reality.²¹ However, the positioning of “mother” against “father” not only reinforces the binary opposition of gendered roles, but essentializes those roles through the conflation of birth/motherhood with woman-ness. Social and reproductive functions are only determinative of gender within a strictly imposed gender binary—a binary that is disrupted by the very existence of intersex, non-binary, trans, and genderqueer people.

Womanist, Latinx, and *mujerista* theologies (amongst others) have challenged the assumptions which underlie white feminist engagements with images of God, especially as they relate to the oppression and lived experiences of women of colour. Womanist theologian Delores S. Williams critiques feminist images of God for divinizing white femininity, encoding in divine imagery what is to be considered “acceptably female.”²² Women of colour have responded to the predominant imaging of God as white and male by re-imaging the divine from within their own context and experience: “Speaking from their positions of marginalization, poverty, oppression, and abuse, Hispanic, Asian, and African women theologians have advocated not only feminine images of God, such as mother or parent, but also images associated with birth and nature.”²³

¹⁹ Heyward, *Redemption of God*, 10–11. See also William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 58–62.

²⁰ Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, “God,” 333.

²¹ Grey, *Introducing Feminist Images of God*, 22.

²² Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Twentieth Anniversary Ed.; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 159, 162.

²³ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 300.

Heyward is careful to distinguish “re-imagining” from “imagining ... in the popular sense of creating reality in one’s mind.”²⁴ Such hesitancy in regard to the role of imagination reflects a common hermeneutical anxiety: namely, that applying too much imagination produces nothing more than a “fantasy” of one’s own making. One’s interpretation would not, therefore, represent a genuine interaction with the text. This supposition would suggest that imaginative engagement is not only disconnected from, but actually contrary to, a critical hermeneutical approach. H. Richard Niebuhr attributes the scholarly suspicion of the imagination to a false dichotomy between imagination and “reason.”²⁵ Imagination is regarded as misleading, taking the interpreter too far beyond the text into theological (and exegetical) flights of fancy. Yet imagination is already a prerequisite for any act of interpretation, because interpretation calls us to reach beyond our own immediate context and experience to make sense of the ideas and images we encounter.²⁶ Whether one chooses to embrace this imaginative aspect is only a matter of degree; it is not actually an issue of fantasy versus reality. When it comes to imaging the divine, the question is not whether the imagination should be used, but how it is applied.²⁷

The willingness of feminist, queer, and liberation theologians to engage imaginatively with biblical imagery has carved space for explorations of the divine feminine within Jewish and Christian traditions, opening the possibility for dialogue concerning ways in which God may be expressed through and beyond gendered conceptions of divine reality.²⁸ Mary Grey has called this “imaging a new symbolic world” for which “creativity ... blazes the trail.”²⁹ The creation of new images of God has accompanied the re-interpretation and re-discovery of existing biblical imagery to re-conceptualize the divine as reflecting or containing feminine attributes. This method has offered a corrective for the heavily masculinized language and imagery which has characterized both religious practice and theological scholarship in Western culture.³⁰ Where feminine expression and experience were once excluded and thereby denigrated, femininity becomes elevated; through re-imagining, femininity is acknowledged as worthy of constituting part of an ultimate reality.³¹ At the same time, masculine-aligned images for God have been reconsidered for the ways they

²⁴ Heyward, *Redemption of God*, 26.

²⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (2nd ed.; New York: MacMillan/London: Collier MacMillan, 1960), 70.

²⁶ Niebuhr, *Meaning of Revelation*, 70–71.

²⁷ Niebuhr, *Meaning of Revelation*, 72.

²⁸ Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 121–23; Grey, *Introducing Feminist Images of God*, 15; 17–18.

²⁹ Grey, *Introducing Feminist Images of God*, 15.

³⁰ Grey, *Introducing Feminist Images of God*, 15.

³¹ Grey, *Introducing Feminist Images of God*, 22.

might be applied once they are removed from sexist and patriarchal interpretive frameworks.³² The hermeneutical method of “re-imagining” therefore offers a broader vision of both human and divine expression which is not limited to the androcentric modes of being that have formerly been emphasized.

As necessary and valuable as it is to re-assess feminine and masculine images of God in this way, the continual conceptualization of the divine in gendered terms fails to make room for non-binary and agender experience. As Joy Ladin notes from a transgender (trans) perspective, “When it comes to understanding the kinship between humanity and God, the gender binary is like the snake in the Garden of Eden: an archetypal, damning temptation to understand God in terms that ... are inadequate even for understanding humanity.”³³ For theologians engaged in the task of re-imagining the divine, care must be taken to develop images which affirm the full personhood of people of all genders and none. If the exclusion of femaleness from images of God is contrary to the affirmation of female gender identities and experience, so too is the exclusion of gender diversity in God equally unfair to genderqueer individuals.

For genderqueer hermeneutics more broadly, the analysis of ungendered revelation proves significant because “narratives of degendering actually provide a metaphorical blueprint for sense-making after gender.”³⁴ Heyward frames the process of re-imagining the divine in terms of human identity and self-understanding: “To shape an image of God, to image the world, is to affirm one’s humanity.”³⁵ This work is inherently relational in nature, because interacting with images of God draws on communal conceptions of divine and human selves.³⁶ Those whose attributes are found to correspond with some aspect of the divine are validated through that association. Conversely, those who are considered somehow distanced from divine reality are assumed to embody less fully the “image of God” imprinted on humanity.³⁷ Exclusion from the *imago Dei* has dire theological and social implications: distance from the concept of God directly contributes to violence and oppression towards those who are thus considered less than human.³⁸ Engaging with non-gendered biblical theophanies is one way to re-image God—and thus humanity—beyond potentially oppressive categories of gender.

³² See, for example: Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, 60; Grey, *Introducing Feminist Images of God*, 114.

³³ Joy Ladin, “In the Image of God, God Created Them: Toward Trans Theology,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 1 (2018): 57.

³⁴ Roof, “Sex after Gender,” 59.

³⁵ Heyward, *Redemption of God*, 11.

³⁶ Heyward, *Redemption of God*, 26; Plaskow, *Standing Again*, 121.

³⁷ Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 44.

³⁸ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 21, 28–30.

Seeking to identify points of entry for non-binary and agender experience in biblical images of God may be seen as an attempt to impose contemporary gender categories which are not native to the text. Yet the Bible is continually being interpreted and re-interpreted as scripture; it is a primary locus of identity formation and ethical structures for those faith communities who treat it as a sacred text.³⁹ With the Bible possessing such great potential for both affirmative and destructive interpretations of queer selfhood, it is therefore vital to open up hermeneutical avenues which empower queer communities and individuals to find themselves within the Bible's scope of human existence and belonging. I therefore do not focus on the "intention" of the text but on how contemporary receivers of the Bible may find affirming images of selfhood which do not demand negotiations of the binary as a prerequisite for interpretive engagement.

Re-imagining God by engaging imaginatively with biblical and natural images forms our hermeneutical foundation for approaching fire theophanies as a site of a non-gendered re-imagining of the divine. I am not the first to suggest that nature-related images such as fire provide a non-gendered and "inclusive" alternative to the gendering of the divine; but such images are often taken to be abstract or impersonal.⁴⁰ Judith Plaskow, for example, argues that "[o]nly deliberately disruptive—that is, female" anthropomorphic images can unseat androcentric conceptions of God.⁴¹ Plaskow's prioritization of "female" images rests on the presupposition that non-gendered, non-anthropomorphic images cannot directly address a gendered view of the divine. However, eliding non-gendered images of God with descriptions of an impersonal divine reality seriously undermines the concept of gender-neutral or non-gendered personhood. Rather than aligning such non-gendered natural phenomena with an impersonal force, I argue that the non-anthropomorphic imagery of fire theophanies demonstrates the scope for non-gendered images to be re-orientated to the identification and expression of a *self*.

Fire theophanies as divine self-expression

This section examines two fire theophanies in which God is revealed through non-gendered manifestations of divine presence. Exodus 3 and Acts 2 reveal images of divine selfhood which are associated with personal self-disclosure of God, inviting an understanding of divine gender neutrality in personal (rather than abstract) terms.

³⁹ Plaskow, *Standing Again*, 26, 28.

⁴⁰ Grey, *Feminist Images*, 18.

⁴¹ Plaskow, *Standing Again*, 160.

Against the assumption that non-gendered and non-anthropomorphic imagery can only relate to impersonal ideas about God, I address the applicability of theophanic fire imagery for a personal, gender-neutral (or ungendered) re-imaging of the divine. First, I establish Exodus 3 and Acts 2 as theophanies which reveal divine presence and identity to human beings. I then go on to argue that theophanic imagery is not incidental to the revelation but a significant component of the divine self-disclosure; that is, the lack of anthropomorphism in these images does not imply an impersonal revelation but constitutes a specific form of divine self-expression. In this way, I envision fire theophanies as gender-neutral expressions of divine selfhood.

In Exodus 3, the divine presence is revealed to Moses through a flaming bush that does not burn up. Moses approaches this spectacle and finds himself caught up in a transformational encounter with divine reality. Though we are initially told a divine messenger appears in the burning bush, the narrative also affirms that God speaks “out of the bush”; in response, Moses hides his face “because he was afraid to look at God” (Exod 3:4–6). There is no doubt that this is a theophany, a manifestation of divine presence in the world.⁴² God commissions Moses to become an agent of liberation for the Hebrews, empowering Moses to speak on God’s behalf by imparting valuable knowledge about divine identity (Exod 3:10–18). It is a charged dialogue that challenges Moses’ self-understanding and causes him to re-define his own identity as a chosen envoy of an ancestral deity whom he encounters through theophanic fire (Exod 4:1–20).

The manifestation of divine presence at the “burning bush” of Exodus 3 is foundational for the conception of God in the Bible. This early fire theophany has particular theological significance as the context for an act of divine self-naming, which defines the profoundly personal character of this revelation. The divine name, YHWH, is most commonly rendered “Yahweh” in contemporary scholarship. In Jewish tradition, the divine name is held to be unpronounceable in its true form, and the precise meaning of God’s self-descriptions in these passages have attracted much attention and debate.⁴³ Translator and editor David E. S. Stein regards the convention of translating YHWH as “Lord” somewhat misleading to a modern audience, pointing out that the prevalence of masculine assignations in Bible translations has given a false impression of a male-gendered deity which is not present in these four Hebrew letters.⁴⁴ In his preface for *The Contemporary Torah*—a version of the Torah that seeks to be “gender accurate” in its translation of the Hebrew text—Stein remarks

⁴² Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus* (Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 126.

⁴³ See Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 135–36.

⁴⁴ Stein, “On Beyond Gender,” 120.

upon the far-reaching implications this single translation choice may have for modern readers: “Rendering God’s personal name as ‘the Lord’ can function like wearing male sunglasses to view the invisible deity: ‘I’m not sure what I’m seeing—but it appears to be masculine.’”⁴⁵ To the extent that the divine name is understood to be gendered, the imaging of God in the burning bush theophany is thus intertwined with the reception of the divine name.

Other exegetes have noted that the disclosure of the divine name takes the form of a masculine grammatical formulation.⁴⁶ This is not, in itself, evidence for a masculine presentation of the divine in Exodus 3. Grammatical gender and social ascriptions of gender do not always cohere, as illustrated in Hebrew by the existence of the linguistically masculine form of the plural noun “women” (*našîm*). Masculine grammatical forms can be utilized to refer to a man, a woman, a group of mixed gender, and groups or individuals whose gender is unspecified.⁴⁷ The language contains two grammatical genders—masculine and feminine—with no neutral form. Within biblical Hebrew, “grammatically masculine language would have been the only way to refer to a *non*-gendered deity.”⁴⁸ Hence, the non-gendered form of the burning bush does not operate contrary to other gender indicators in the passage but forms one of many biblical descriptions of God. Even if one were to interpret references to God in the masculine, this would not threaten the non-gendered reading of this fire theophany as much as open up readings for a God who is revealed as both masculine *and* without gender.⁴⁹ This may seem paradoxical to some, but masculine-presenting agender individuals already embody this possibility. As Stein puts it, “the situation is not binary.”⁵⁰ In any case, if “all language about God is analogical and metaphorical” there is no conflict, only a confluence of images.⁵¹

The revelation of the divine name marks a clear disclosure of divine selfhood at the burning bush. Yet rarely has the *mode* through which God is revealed been afforded the same degree of emphasis as the *words* through which God is revealed. As such, non-gendered theophanic imagery is not always read as an inherent part of the disclosure. Yet in Exod 3, Moses does not interact with the divine presence other than through the burning bush. In other words, theophanic phenomena are what

⁴⁵ David E. S. Stein, “Preface,” in *The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation* (ed. David E. S. Stein; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2006), ix.

⁴⁶ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 17–18.

⁴⁷ Stein, “On Beyond Gender,” 127.

⁴⁸ Stein, “Preface,” x. Original italics.

⁴⁹ Stein, “On Beyond Gender,” 110; 120.

⁵⁰ Stein, “On Beyond Gender,” 110.

⁵¹ Grey, *Feminist Images*, 17.

make the immanent presence of God knowable and accessible as an external reality to the human beings in the narrative. The emphasis in Deuteronomy on the uniqueness of a God who “spoke out of the fire” (Deut 4:12) illustrates that the flames of fire theophanies should not be understood as merely accompanying signs but as motifs of divine expression. Because these images play an active role in God’s self-disclosure, they may also be construed as the manifestation of the divine self—that is, the visible or tangible presence of God.⁵²

Like the encounter between God and Moses at the burning bush, the self-revelation of the divine at Pentecost is distinguished by the peculiarity of the event as a unique configuration of theophanic images and experiences. The theophanic imagery of Acts 2, in which a divine manifestation occurs in “a sound like the rush of a violent wind” and “divided tongues, as of fire,” does not involve a declaration of divine presence in speech. Instead, natural imagery portrays the personal manifestation of divine presence and selfhood, which the narrator explains is the arrival of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1–4). These twin signs of theophany are non-gendered images drawn from the natural world, though they are not identical to wind and flame as human beings ordinarily experience them. The appearance of wind and fire at Pentecost is often held to be a marker of continuity with Hebrew Bible theophanies, including Exod 3.⁵³ Even so, exegete Darrell L. Bock points out that any proposed reference to a specific Hebrew Bible theophany, such as the law-giving at Sinai, is “not necessarily” to be found in the text, but is primarily derived from intertextual links forged by the interpreter rather than the author of Acts.⁵⁴ This is not to suggest that connections should not be made between Pentecost and other biblical texts, but rather that the narrative of Acts 2 reaches beyond referencing previous theophanies to suggest a new self-disclosure, which is depicted through interactions with familiar images.

Certainly, this theophanic imagery is ambiguous. Since the connections between the imagery of fire theophanies and the nature of the deity are not explicated in either Exod 3 or Acts 2, critics might argue that revelation through fire is not an explicit focus of the theophany and therefore should not be overstated. After all, the burning bush is mentioned only once, at the beginning of the passage (Exod 3:2–4), and its only stated effect is to cause Moses to approach the deity. Similarly, the “sound like a wind” and “tongues as of flame” that occur in Acts 2 are mentioned briefly before a much longer passage relating Peter’s speech to the crowd. Yet the

⁵² James K. Bruckner, *Exodus* (Understanding the Bible Commentary Series; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 39.

⁵³ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 96–98.

⁵⁴ Bock, *Acts*, 98.

manifestation of divine selfhood through non-gendered, natural imagery constitutes the specific mode of divine self-expression captured within these texts. The fire encountered by Moses in the unburned bush is more than a dramatic flourish underscoring a supernatural occurrence; it is a constituent part of this specific self-disclosure at this specific time, location, and conversation. At Pentecost, the sound like a rushing wind and the tongues like flames of fire do not merely set the stage for divine encounter but are integral to the specific self-expression of the divine in this moment.

As a distinctive feature within the narratives of Exod 3 and Acts 2, (super)natural phenomena define the character of the self-disclosure and shape how the theophany is received. The *Interpretation* commentary series approaches the theophanic imagery of Acts 2 as part of a narrative which would lose its full theological significance if rendered more prosaically.⁵⁵ Images are prompts for the imagination, not codes to be deciphered; theophanic phenomena in the Bible should not be treated merely as literary shorthand for divine presence, but understood to convey something of what is being revealed. In this way, the divine revelation takes on meaning and character through theophanic images. The fact that these phenomena are not anthropomorphic, and are also non-gendered, is significant to the scope of divine expression as portrayed in the Bible.

The ambiguity contained in the imagery and language of Acts 2, as well as other biblical portrayals of the Holy Spirit, has provided space for explorations of gender variance in the Christian concept of God. Some of these readings are substantiated through an appeal to grammatical gender, since the vocabulary used to refer to the Spirit is “feminine in Hebrew, neuter in Greek, and masculine in Latin.”⁵⁶ Though generally referred to with masculine pronouns in mainstream church liturgy, the Holy Spirit has also been understood as a feminine or gender-neutral aspect of the divine.⁵⁷ However, theologian Linn Marie Tonstad finds that conceiving gender “difference” within the Trinity—in this case, claiming the femininity of the Spirit alongside the masculinity of the “Father” and the “Son”—“fails to undo the masculinity of God.”⁵⁸ Tonstad warns that the attribution of gender to members of the Trinity reveals much more about “the historical proclivity of Christianity to encode

⁵⁵ William H. Willimon, *Acts* (Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 29.

⁵⁶ Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, 63.

⁵⁷ Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, 63.

⁵⁸ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 16.

masculinism and (symbolic) heterosexuality” in God than it does about the nature of the divine.⁵⁹

The gender fluidity of the Holy Spirit in biblical reception owes much to the gender-neutral imagery which presents the personal presence of the Holy Spirit while avoiding gendered assignments. Trinitarian Christian theology has maintained the personal nature of the Holy Spirit as a member of the Trinity while also acknowledging the array of non-gendered, non-anthropomorphic images used to convey the Holy Spirit in the Bible.⁶⁰ As well as the wind and fire imagery of Acts 2, the Holy Spirit is characterized as a dove, as breath or breathing, and as oil.⁶¹ Non-anthropomorphic imagery is an important component of various biblical portrayals of divine reality: see, for example, the naming of God as “my rock, my fortress” in Psalm 18:2, along with the fiery theophanic imagery of smoke, burning coals, and devouring fire in vv. 7–14; the appeal to precious metals, fire, and rainbows to describe God’s appearance in Ezekiel 1:27–28;⁶² and the blend of anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic imagery in Daniel 10:4–6.⁶³

These images do not limit the portrayal of God to an impersonal cosmic force. In the Bible, God is characterized as having personal agency to interact with human beings, even in non-anthropomorphic forms, and is therefore consistently portrayed as a relational deity.⁶⁴ The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* argues that the question of anthropomorphic as opposed to abstract imagery for God is too narrowly defined; it should rather be discussed in terms of “cosmomorphic” imagery which covers the full scope of material reality (including human and non-human existence).⁶⁵ The various configurations of theophanic imagery attest to the complexity and dynamism of a divine self whose presentation is always changing and transforming in response to human conversation partners. The ascription of theophanic imagery to a personal

⁵⁹ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 1.

⁶⁰ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 1.

⁶¹ Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., “Holy Spirit,” *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998): 390–93.

⁶² “Upward from what appeared like the loins I saw something like gleaming amber, something that looked like fire enclosed all around; and downward from what looked like the loins I saw something that looked like fire, and there was a splendour all around. Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendor all around. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord” (Ezek 1: 27–28).

⁶³ Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, “God,” 332–36. Daniel 10:4–6 describes Daniel’s vision of a “man” whose “body was like beryl, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the roar of a multitude.”

⁶⁴ Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, “God,” 335.

⁶⁵ Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, “God,” 334.

reality illustrates the capacity of such cosmomorphic images to function as descriptive devices dealing with the nature or expression of a self.

Tonstad observes that approaching divine selfhood in predominantly anthropocentric terms “overpersonalize[s]” God by collapsing the distinction between descriptive metaphors based on human roles (e.g. father, mother, ruler) and divine personhood itself.⁶⁶ The undefined character of biblical images for the Holy Spirit simultaneously provides scope for a non-binary/genderqueer concept of the divine and a reminder of the distinctions that must be maintained between divine and human selfhood if they are not to collapse in on one another. Cosmomorphic theophanies give rise to images of the divine which avoid anthropocentrism *without* excluding humanity altogether. Divine images are not restrained to anthropomorphic ideas in the description of divine selfhood, but human realities are still contained within this broader category of existence within the cosmos. At the same time, human experience provides the touchstone for theophanic imagery. The divine presence of Exod 3 appears in the form of “a flame of fire out of a bush,” where incongruity with human expectations (that the bush should burn up) proves revelatory of a reality which reaches beyond the natural world. Likewise, Acts 2:2–3 emphasizes that the arrival of the Holy Spirit is “*like* the rush of a violent wind” and manifests “*as* a flame of fire” (emphasis added). Human experience of the sensations that are evoked by a violent wind or a flame of fire constitutes the starting point for communicating a mode of divine self-expression which is similar to, but also profoundly distinct from, ordinary human experiences. In a similar manner, non-anthropomorphic theophanic imagery allows for comparison between divine and human selfhood. Even as the imagery de-centres anthropomorphic modes of being, the broader vision of personal expression and agency in these fire theophanies may be construed in relation to human experiences.

The narratives of Exod 3 and Acts 2 do not explain exactly how non-gendered theophanies relate to divine selfhood, but this does not rob their imagery of power for genderqueer interpretation and reception. On the contrary, the openness of the text and its imagery invites thorough imaginative exploration as part of its analysis. Themes commonly associated with fire—such as danger, illumination, transformation, and cycles of life, death, and renewal—present a range of potential connections between theophanic fire imagery and queer experiences of self-disclosure. Additionally, biblical theophanies provide occasions to explore ways in which selfhood may (and may not) be conceptualized through comparisons to non-human phenomena.

⁶⁶ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 227.

Envisioning gender-inclusive images of God

Interpretation of these biblical images requires that we re-position ourselves to consider the role of the imagination in queer hermeneutics: specifically, how engaging imaginatively with biblical images of the divine can open further theological possibilities for the reception of the text in a way that liberates from gendered categories. An array of gender-neutral images for the divine should be thoroughly investigated for the breadth of theological insight they may contain; but such images should also be carefully examined for their implications in terms of intersectional power dynamics and their value as liberating metaphors. Scholars should be wary of the assumption that any and all non-gendered images inherently contribute to a gender-inclusive imaging of the divine. Certain non-gendered images for God may give rise to problematic implications when applied to human identities (for example, imagery which associates God's appearance with hybridized, monstrous creatures).⁶⁷ Others may require careful contextualization to ensure that they are understood within appropriate theological, cultural, and cognitive frameworks. For there is always a risk that non-anthropomorphic, ungendered biblical images are used to depersonalize agender and non-binary individuals through repeated association with non-human animals and objects. Such associations, in turn, may have particular connotations depending on context; for example, rock imagery may be read as symbol of strength and resilience, but might also imply that a person is cruel and unfeeling, as in the phrase "a heart of stone." Particular attention should be therefore given to the underlying assumptions at play in various interpretations of the image, especially with regard to the encoding of social norms or power structures in what is (and is not) considered godlike.

Assigning fixed gender roles to the Trinity (even genderqueer roles) only risks reinforcing gendered hierarchies with the full force of the Godhead.⁶⁸ At the same time, there remains a need to find "some home, some familiar place in God" for genderqueer individuals.⁶⁹ For many, experiencing gender beyond the binary means, as Joy Ladin puts it from a trans perspective, "being human in ways that other humans beings may not comprehend."⁷⁰ If no room is found within the image of God for human beings whose gender does not align with the "male and female" binary, or who

⁶⁷ Such as the four 'living creatures' in the theophanic vision of Ezek 1; compare the four similarly-described (but malevolent) 'great beasts' of Dan 7.

⁶⁸ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 1.

⁶⁹ Grey, *Feminist Images*, 22.

⁷⁰ Ladin, "In the Image of God," 57–58.

do not identify with gendered categories, then the gendered image of God only contributes to the oppression of our genderqueer siblings.⁷¹ Butler discusses the pain and erasure experienced by those whose gender is “unintelligible” to society, and whose personhood is undone by a society which refuses to recognize them as fully human.⁷² Genderqueer readings of the image of God are needed if we are to render non-binary and agender identities “intelligible” within a theological framework that affirms, rather than undermines, these ways of being human.

As in Heyward’s re-imagining process, images constructed on the basis of ungendered theophanic imagery are to be evaluated with regard to their implications for power relations between the categories that the image employs.⁷³ Rosemary Radford Ruether articulates how easily feminine and androgynous images of God may become “subordinate principle[s] underneath the dominant image of male divine sovereignty.”⁷⁴ As already noted, Tonstad argues forcefully that apportioning gender to the persons of the Trinity undermines the queer and feminist task, since to do so reinforces gender hierarchies in which the masculine actually dominates, or subsumes, other expressions of divine “gender.”⁷⁵ For this reason, even as feminist theologians have moved to embrace imaging the Holy Spirit using feminine and genderfluid images, they have also cautioned against making the Holy Spirit a “token presence” within an otherwise masculinized conception of the divine.⁷⁶ The prominent “Father-Son” dynamic of the first two persons of the Trinity relegates a feminine or neutrois Spirit to being “Other,” fully subordinated to the divine masculine.⁷⁷ Those human beings who do not find themselves reflected in this divine masculinity are “included ... [only] as symbolic adjuncts” to the masculinized imaging of a God who is primarily Father and Son.⁷⁸ Therefore, instead of conceptualizing theophanic fire imagery as a blank slate upon which to project (non)gendered assignations onto specific persons or aspects of God, it would be better to re-image the theophanies of Exod 3 and Acts 2 as revealing specifically ungendered expressions of divine selfhood.

Treating fire theophanies as specific moments of divine self-expression, rather than constitutive of divinity, helps to avoid over-universalizing the imagery by

⁷¹ Ladin, “In the Image of God,” 54.

⁷² Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 30.

⁷³ Heyward, *Redemption of God*, 11.

⁷⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 60–61.

⁷⁵ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 199.

⁷⁶ Grey, *Feminist Images*, 101.

⁷⁷ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 206.

⁷⁸ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 199.

anchoring it within its narrative context. The encounters narrated in Exod 3 and Acts 2 convey a relational process in which an individual (Moses) and a community (the disciples) are confronted with an unfamiliar way of being (theophanic fire). In response, the receivers of the revelation not only recognize the validity of the Self they encounter, but allow their own sense of self to be shaped by it. Beyond simply stating that non-gendered theophanic imagery reinforces the otherness of God, enquiring after potential points of connection between divine selfhood and human experience brings the receiver back to those aspects of divine self-revelation which can be accessed, explored, and even applied to one's own understanding of what it means to be a "self." Imagine a bush on fire: the flames continuously fluctuating, never precisely the same, and yet always remaining *fire*. In its constant motion, fire contains infinite expressions of itself, continuous and unbroken iterations of its nature created anew in each moment. Applied to selfhood—whether divine or human—the image of fire evokes a constant unfolding revelation. When Moses and the disciples recognize the self-disclosure of God in these theophanies, their own identities are cast in a new light (cf. Exod 3:6, 11–15; 4:18; Acts 2:14–21; 11:15–17).

The enigmatic nature of ungendered theophanic imagery raises questions about the significance of the encounter for those who participate in it—both divine and human—and invites imaginative engagement through which one might re-image divine reality. Just as feminine imagery for God has proven transformative in validating feminine self-identification with the divine, so non-gendered imagery for God provides much-needed imagery which aligns divine reality with non-binary, agender, and genderqueer expressions of the self. Non-gendered fire theophanies create space for genderqueer folks to find themselves within the image of the divine by placing God firmly beyond the constraints of gender.

Conclusion

Through the non-gendered imagery of fire theophanies, the Bible offers a source of affirmation of selfhood beyond the binary and beyond gender. Theophanic imagery provides a point of entry for genderqueer interpretation that may be particularly relevant to agender and non-binary expressions of self, offering a means by which non-binary and agender experience may be given a place within biblical texts. The openness of non-gendered theophanic fire imagery makes it a valuable resource for the creative hermeneutical approaches advocated by Isabel Carter Heyward, Delores S. Williams, and others. Holding fast to their liberative ethos also means treating ungendered imagery with particular care on the basis of power relations. Therefore, I have not offered any specific "re-imagining" of God, as that task is better left for

genderqueer interpreters and receivers of biblical imagery. Instead, I have suggested the suitability of non-gendered theophanic imagery for developing a conception of divine selfhood which is not reliant on gendered categories. Re-imagining God in this way rejects the assumption that human and divine selfhood are governed by a binary configuration of gender, or that gender is compulsory for the expression of personhood. This creates greater space within the *imago Dei* for genderqueer people to find their personhood reflected. This is especially significant for non-binary and agender people of faith, whose understanding of their own humanity may be deeply affected by the extent to which they see themselves as being made “in the image of God.”

There is no conflict in applying ungendered images to a self, because lack of gender does not mean lack of selfhood. The suggested hermeneutical approach therefore offers theologians a way to ground both the doctrine of God and theological anthropology beyond a reliance on gender as some essential category. A multiplicity of God-images is needed to avoid reducing the concept of God to one or two governing metaphors which preclude readings from the margins. Such a limited interpretive strategy produces an *imago Dei* that cannot speak to the expansiveness of humanity, let alone the infinitude of God.⁷⁹ Conceptualizing God as beyond human categories of gender is not to undermine or erase the gendered images of God which already exist. Diverse images may be read alongside each other to speak in different ways about the divine.⁸⁰ If interpreters wish to maintain that God can be understood as masculine and/or feminine, but do not explore ways in which God can be understood as a personal, gender-neutral self, then they merely pay lip service to the idea that God is unconstrained by gender. Furthermore, re-imagining God through gender-neutral images which do not demand or perpetuate assumptions of gender based on a binary scale of “femaleness” or “maleness” is a necessary part of deconstructing the unjust power relations of heterosexism and ciscentrism; otherwise, we risk proposing a vision of ultimate reality in which there is no place for non-binary or agender experience and personhood. Following Heyward’s call, we must continue to engage with re-imagining the divine as a task of liberation from oppressive categories which so often dominate our conceptions of the human and the divine.

⁷⁹ Ladin, “In the Image of God,” 57.

⁸⁰ Grey, *Feminist Images*, 17.

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