

# THE ABSENCE OF MOTHER AND THE PRESENCE OF THE DIVINE

*A Trauma-Informed Exploration*

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**Abstract:** This article will explore the rhetorical and theological significance of the metaphor of divine adoption in the Hebrew Bible. In Ps 22:10-11 and Ps 71:6-9 God is not only said to pull the psalmist out of his/her mother's womb, but in a context in which many mothers all too often died in childbirth, the newborn is cast upon God who steps in as the adoptive mother. This idea of divine adoption is further found in Psalm 68:5 when God is described as the "Father of orphans . . . [who] gives the desolate a home to live in". And in Psalm 27:9-10, God is praised by the psalmist as "God of my salvation!" saying that "if my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up". In a context in which fathers and mothers either have died or have forsaken their children, God is thus portrayed as the adoptive parent who, as evident in the creative reinterpretation of Ps 68:5 in the African American spiritual referenced in the title of the essay serves as "Mother to the motherless, and father to the fatherless". I argue that when it is important to keep in mind the complexities associated with this metaphor, which includes not only the multiple layers of trauma associated with the origin and reception of this metaphor but also the trauma associated with the adoptive process and the ongoing relationship between parent and adopted child that may be fraught with ambiguity. Read in the context of individual and collective trauma, this article makes a case for the interpretative potential of this metaphor in times when people literally and figuratively have felt, and still may be feeling, like motherless (and fatherless) children.

## INTRODUCTION

Yet it was you who took me from the womb;  
you kept me safe on my mother's breast. On you I was cast from my birth,  
and since my mother bore me you have been my God (Ps. 22:9-10)

Upon you I have leaned from my birth;  
it was you who took me from my mother's womb (Ps. 71:6)

As so often happens, I stumbled on the topic of adoption in the Hebrew Bible by accident. In my monograph, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife* that explored female imagery for God as liberator in the biblical traditions, I focused in one of the chapters on the metaphor of God as Midwife in Ps 22:10-11 and Ps 71:6-9 (Claassens 2012, pp. 71-77; 2006, pp. 166-75; 2007, pp. 761-76).<sup>1</sup> In these Psalms, God is not only said to pull the psalmist out of his/her mother's womb, but in a context in which many mothers all too often died in childbirth,<sup>2</sup> the newborn is cast upon God who steps in as the adoptive mother. Indeed, in the case of maternal death, caregivers, wetnurses or adoptive mothers were vital in offering the ongoing care and support a helpless baby would need to survive in a hostile world. As Phyllis Trible (1978, p. 60) captures this intertwining of divine and maternal imagery in Psalm 22: "Subject has become object; divine midwife has become divine mother. To be kept safe upon the breasts of the mother is to be cast upon God from the womb" (Cf. also Claassens 2012, p. 74).

This idea of divine adoption is further found in Psalm 68:5 when God is described as the "Father of orphans . . . [who] gives the desolate a home to live in". And in Psalm 27:9-10, God is praised by the psalmist as "God of my salvation!" saying that "if my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up".<sup>3</sup> In a context in which fathers and mothers either have died or have forsaken their children, God is thus portrayed as the adoptive parent who, as evident in the creative reinterpretation of Ps 68:5 in the African American spiritual referenced in the title of the essay serves as "Mother to the motherless, and father to the fatherless" (Gilkes 1989, pp. 57-85).

In this article, I will expand on this notion of divine adoption in the Psalms by exploring the multiple layers of trauma that inform this metaphor as well as its reception. I propose that underlying this metaphor of divine adoption that occurs in the Psalms cited above is a greatly traumatic time of war and displacement that in a literal sense was responsible for a lot of children losing their parents. However, this image of God as an adoptive parent also on a metaphorical level expressed the keen sense of abandonment and the lack of care experienced by individuals and the community as a whole, traumatized by living in the shadow of one empire after another. Furthermore, as evident in the special significance Psalm 68:5 holds for the African American community, it is clear that communities ever since have found solace in this idea of God as an adoptive mother/father in contexts in which social bonds increasingly have become dissolute.

In addition, there also is a whole other layer of trauma associated with the adoptive process, as well as the ongoing relationship between parent and adopted child that I argue ought to be taken into account when considering the metaphor of divine adoption in the Hebrew Bible. In an essay that reflects on the Pauline adoption metaphor in Romans 8 in a contemporary context of adoption, Erin Heim (2016, pp. 65-80), an adoptee herself, poignantly reflects on the complexity of the adoption process that affects all the members of the triad of adoption involved, including the biological mother, the adoptive mother, and the adopted child. According to Heim, all these individuals

experience various levels of trauma as they try to navigate the ambiguity and complexity associated with what she describes as “boundary ambiguity” as they in their respective ways try to negotiate “displacement and belonging” (Heim 2016, pp. 65-80).

This article argues that when considering the rhetorical and theological significance of the metaphor of divine adoption in the Hebrew Bible, it is important to keep in mind the complexities associated with this metaphor, which includes not only the multiple layers of trauma associated with the origin and reception of this metaphor but also the trauma associated with the adoptive process and the ongoing relationship between parent and adopted child that may be fraught with ambiguity. Read in the context of individual and collective trauma, this article makes a case for the interpretative potential of this metaphor in times when people literally and figuratively have felt, and still may be feeling, like motherless (and fatherless) children.

### MOTHERLESS AND FATHERLESS CHILDREN

Some years ago, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (1989, pp. 57-85) wrote a powerful article, “Mother to the Motherless, Father to the Fatherless: Power, Gender and Community in the Afrocentric Biblical Tradition”, in which she demonstrates how the reference to God being a father to the fatherless in Psalm 68:5 in the African American religious tradition creatively has been reinterpreted to also include the idea that God is “Mother to the motherless” (“Sister to the sisterless”, “Brother to the brotherless”).

Gilkes continues to reflect on the significance of this change, making the point important for this essay that the application of this metaphor comes out of a context of deep trauma in the African American community, who in a very literal way has experienced a great deal of abandonment with children having had to grow up without their parents. To be motherless was, according to Gilkes (1989, p. 75), considered to be the ultimate social tragedy given the important economic role of women in this community, as well as the cooperative network of support with other women provided by mothers. Thus, on a metaphorical level, to be a motherless child very much captured the sense of abandonment and the proclivity for abuse experienced by many African American individuals, who during the time the Spiritual first was composed, but also since, felt as another song proclaims, “like a motherless child, a long way from home”.

In a context of alienation and abandonment that characterized much of the African American experience, this creative appropriation of the metaphor of God as an adoptive parent who offers a safe haven for motherless and fatherless children with no one to care for them indeed is a source of comfort. However, this claim also is an important identity marker. For African Americans to claim that they were children of God served as a strong counterclaim; an act of resistance in a context in which their human dignity

was constantly denied by their oppressors who purported to be God-fearers themselves (Gilkes

1989, p. 70). This “subversive knowledge”, according to Gilkes (1989, p. 78), countered the “anti-black, anti-African, anti-female” sentiments of that time and hence may be viewed as “dangerous good news” that not only reclaimed the Bible for African Americans but also played an important role in “the cultural production of hope”.

Gilkes (1989) wrote this article to draw attention to the fluidity of God-language of the African American religious experience that saw no difficulty in using a female metaphor adjacent to the more traditional metaphor used in the Hebrew Bible of God as a father to orphans. By viewing God also as “a Mother to the motherless”, female experiences of suffering are included in this metaphor, in the process affirming and valuing the women, and in particular, the mothers in this community.

For the purpose of this exploration on divine adoption in the Psalms, Gilkes’ article is particularly helpful as it allows us to recognize the importance of such boundary-shifting language for God for traumatized individuals and communities to not only voice their feelings of abandonment and desolation, but to also help them feel secure in the knowledge that they belong to God. I argue that this imaginative reinterpretation of God as mother to the motherless in the African American reception of Ps 68:5 helps us to explore further the multiple contexts of trauma associated with the original metaphor of divine adoption in Ps 68:5 as well as Ps 27:9-10. In the rest of this article, we will consider further how the metaphor of divine adoption in these two Psalms emerged out of context of trauma and offered to its original and future readers an imaginative means of capturing both individuals as well as the community’s experience of abandonment and desolation.

## **DIVINE ADOPTION IN A CONTEXT OF INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE TRAUMA**

In both Ps 68:5 as well as Ps 27:9-10 the presence of orphans serves as a candid reminder that war leads to death with actual children left exceedingly vulnerable without the necessary care and protection afforded by having parents. Indeed, war, violence, and displacement permeate Psalm 68’s description of God’s mighty deeds that are recounted in the context of the many tribal skirmishes in which Israel was involved throughout its history. In conversation with the Canaanite hymnic tradition, Psalm 68 imagines God as a storm god, riding upon the clouds (v 4), and emerging victorious in his battle against enemy kings (vv 21, 28-29) (Brueggemann 2014, p. 39; Hopkins 2016, p. 196).<sup>5</sup> It may be thought that this image of a triumphant God who reigns supreme in the temple in Jerusalem (vv 24, 29, 35) served as a way to compensate for the feelings of defeat that informed much of Israel’s legacy with its neighbours, especially in terms of its encounter with the imperial regimes of the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian empires that constitutes the

backdrop to the book of Psalms.<sup>6</sup> As elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (cf. also Jeremiah 46-51 and also Isaiah 63:1-6), God may be presented in such a hyper-masculine fashion precisely to mitigate the people's experience of defeat in the face of war (Carvalho 2010, pp. 131-52; Frechette 2016, pp. 67-83).

Within this context of violence and bloodshed that is assumed in this Psalm, the metaphor of God as an adoptive parent offers a sharp contrast to the powerful imagery of a mighty warrior God who scatters kings (v14), who shatters heads (v21), and who tramples underfoot (v30) that is found throughout this psalm.<sup>7</sup> Psalm 68:5 asserts that God will step in to take over as divine father (or divine mother in terms of the creative reinterpretation of the African American spiritual cited above) in a context of trauma that is characterized by the absence of mothers and fathers who are leaving their children exceedingly vulnerable without a protector/provider. Given the numerous references to violence and bloodshed associated with the description of divinely led battles in Psalm 68, one may well imagine that these children are orphaned due to the ravages of war and its aftermath.

This context of trauma is even more overt when considering the portrayal of God as an adoptive parent in Psalm 27:9-10. Even though the caption in the NRSV characterizes this Psalm as a "Triumphant Song of Confidence", Psalm 27 is permeated with expressions of suffering in which the Psalmist is surrounded by enemies who encamp against him/her, with evildoers, adversaries, and foes who "assail me", who like wild animals "devour my flesh" (v 2). It is this experience of being under constant threat, which Dorothea ErbeleKüster (2016, pp. 48-49) poetically describes as "finding herself in the midst of people who narrow down her ways, who try to eat her up, to swallow her, take her body", which is responsible for the psalmist feeling that God is hiding God's face (v 9).

Psalm 27:9-10 specifically acknowledges the tragic reality of parents, who, due to the incredible strain placed upon them by war and migration, are separated from their children, abandon their children, or as evidenced in the horrifying imagery in the book of Lamentations 2, 4 of women eating their children,<sup>10</sup> do great harm to their offspring. However, similar to the cluster of images in Deutero-Isaiah in which God is portrayed as the divine mother who shall not abandon her children even if biological mothers do the unthinkable (Isa 49:13-15; Isa 66:10-13), Psalm 27:9-10 imagines God once more as the adoptive parent who will step in when biological parents are unable to parent their children (Sommer 2021, p. 366).

Both Psalm 68:5 and Psalm 27:9-10 capture on a very personal level the tragic reality of children being orphaned. However, being a fatherless (and motherless) child may also serve on a symbolic level as a cipher that encapsulate the many stories of individual suffering that underlie this divine metaphor. In this regard, several scholars have acknowledged the link between individual and collective trauma at work in the Psalms. For instance, corresponding to the reference to the poor and needy in the cluster of psalms immediately following Psalm 68 (Pss 69-72), Alphonso Groenewald (2019, p. 793) demonstrates how these psalms with which Book 2 of the Psalms end,

speak of the poor as “belong[ing] to the margins of society and liv[ing] in a constant state of human degradation and traumatisat[i]on”. In such a context of trauma, God is portrayed in these Psalms as “the saviour of the poor, their hope, their stronghold and liberator” (Groenewald 2019, p. 799).

Also, Danilo Verde reflects on the interwoven nature of individual and collective suffering in the Psalms, focusing on what he describes as the collectivizing tendency in which earlier individual laments later are appropriated for liturgical/communal use. Verde (2021) argues that Jerusalem’s wounds have become “etched” on to the consciousness of the traumatized community as these psalms shape the “social imagination”, so establishing a particular way of “understanding and representing wounds of the nation”. Drawing on the notion of cultural trauma as propagated by Jeffrey Alexander, Verde (2021) contemplates how the suffering of individuals in these Psalms is appropriated to reflect the trauma of the community as a whole, so contributing to the shaping of a collective understanding of the trauma of events associated with the Babylonian invasion and exile. By making what had happened memorable, the traumatic memories are kept alive and passed on to the next generation (Hays 2016, p. 193).

In terms of the metaphor of God as an adoptive parent in Psalm 68:5 and Psalm 27:9-10, it may be that to feel like a fatherless or motherless child, on a metaphorical level, offered the traumatized community the language to express the collective trauma experienced by the people of Judah at this time, capturing Israel’s vulnerability in the face of empire. As Verde’s comments regarding Psalm 102 attests:

Even though individual voices take the floor, the focus of their speeches always remains on the community. The trauma of individual victims recorded insofar as they are connected to the national trauma. The individual trauma is the national trauma. (Verde 2021)

As in the case of Deutero and Trito-Isaiah in which the metaphor of divine adoption is picked up again (cf. e.g., Isa 46:3-4, 49:14-15, 66:7-14) during a time in which people truly felt abandoned by God during the Babylonian exile (Maier 2012, pp. 235, 242), the metaphor of divine adoption in Ps 68:5 and Ps 27:9-10 assures motherless and fatherless children, both literally and figuratively, of God’s love for them.

To help us understand the rhetorical function of such an innovative image for the traumatized community, June Dickie (2019, p. 893) reflects as follow on the role of novel images to transform traumatic memories. She writes how a compelling visual picture may counter a traumatic memory by changing perceptions, in the process inspiring “new ways of seeing and imagining, even to new ways of thinking”.<sup>16</sup> In this way, by associating new positive images with trauma so that the original negative memories are not activated, this image of God as father to the fatherless (and mother to the motherless) can be said to help individuals and the community as a whole in transforming traumatic memories by removing negative associations and integrating these painful memories into an individual’s personal biography as something that

happened in the past, which is an essential step in the journey towards recovery (Dickie 2019, pp. 889-90).

However, as will be evident in the next section, there is yet another level of trauma associated with the metaphor of God as an adoptive parent that has not yet been considered. The metaphor of divine adoption carries with it a range of connotations associated with the adoption process that in itself is a greatly traumatic experience that affects all partners involved. I propose that insight into the complexity and ambiguity associated with the multiple layers of trauma informing contemporary adoption will offer important perspectives in how we view the metaphor of divine adoption in the Psalms referenced in this article.

## THE TRAUMA OF ADOPTION AND GOD AS ADOPTIVE PARENT

In her essay on Paul's use of the adoption metaphor in a context of contemporary adoption, Erin Heim poignantly outlines the various layers of trauma associated with adoption that affect all members of the so-called adoption triad, which includes the biological mother, the adoptive mother, and the adoptee him/herself. Heim creatively employs a short story by Virginia Woolf called, "A Haunted House", in which a number of female characters "each exists on the periphery of the other's world, yet they occupy a communal space". Heim (2016, p. 67) writes how these "women are present yet absent, tangible yet elusive, eerie yet reassuring ghosts to one another".

According to Heim, much like the women in Woolf's narrative, members of the adoption triad must negotiate the complex and ambiguous boundaries and relationships between individuals who are inadvertently joined and separated by adoption. This includes the "women whose hands are empty", the women "whose hands are full", as well as the adoptee who has to make sense of living life "between emptiness and fullness" (Heim 2016, p. 68).

Heim (2016, pp. 68-69) furthermore argues that there is no "safe story of adoption", as all too often "belonging comes at the expense of displacement". Concerning Paul's use of the adoption metaphor, which may well be extended to the original presentation of the adoption metaphor in the Psalms, as well as the creative appropriation of this metaphor in the African American community, one could argue that adoptees are often aware of "their displacement, caught in a liminal space . . . in a state of in-between, belonging to God's family, yet still displaced as occupiers of a new space created by the Father's act of adoption".

An important aspect of Heim's essay concerns the trauma experienced by all members of the adoption triad. This includes the suffering experienced by biological mothers, who have given up their children for adoption—for whom children are "physically absent, yet psychologically present" in the mother's thoughts. The stories of these biological mothers often go unheard as there is little space for them to grieve or process the loss of their children who "continue to exist in their minds and memories" (Heim 2016, p. 69). Adoptive

mothers struggle as well—partly also because cultural norms sometimes cause people to ask whether they are mothers in the true sense of the word. In terms of Heim's analogy, these adoptive mothers' hands are full, yet they struggle with the ghosts of the biological mothers "who are their silent companions through the journeys of motherhood" (Heim 2016, p. 71). And finding themselves caught between biological and adoptive mothers, adoptees too suffer from the experience of being neither here nor there. They have no control, and little say in being relinquished or adopted, which can be the cause of a deep sense of frustration (Heim 2016, p. 72). Heim shares her own ambiguous experience as an adoptee—on the one hand experiencing an overwhelming sense of belonging in her adoptive family, while at the same time also understanding something of the unnaturalness of adoption that involves separating a child from his/her mother. It is only when Heim had a child of her own that she was able to express her own experience of "belonging-yet-displacement as the daughter of two women, yet also of neither" (Heim 2016, p. 73).

In terms of the metaphor of divine adoption in the Psalms, insight into the multiple layers of trauma associated with adoption may help us to read the divine adoption metaphor in Psalm 68:5 and Psalm 27:9-10 with fresh eyes. In conversation with Psalm 22:9-10, and also in light of the reception of this metaphor in the African American community, we have been helped to imagine God as an adoptive parent in terms of the missing mothers, both biological as well as adoptive mothers, who so often are overlooked by the biblical text. Thus, even though one imagines a God whose hands are full, one should not forget that the adoption metaphor also implies traumatic memories of the mothers whose hands are empty—mothers who are unable to care for their children or who have died as implied by the context of violence underlying these Psalms.

In addition, Heim's essay also draws our attention to the multiple layers of suffering experienced by all members of the adoption triad. This includes the mothers—the biological mothers (and also fathers) who are unable to care for their children, as well as the painful ambiguities associated with being an adoptive mother (and father). Insight into these multiple levels of trauma related to contemporary adoption helps us to be mindful of the suffering potentially experienced by the adoptee is faced with the struggle of making sense of this experience of being neither here nor there. As Heim (2016, p. 79) reminds us: "Healing can only begin when triad members come to terms with their suffering, find hope for restoration amid the complex stories of their past and moving with hope towards the unwritten narratives of their future".

## CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have seen how the metaphor of divine adoption in the Psalms emerged out of a context of the trauma associated with childbirth but also a context of war and displacement that made it very difficult if not



impossible for some biological mothers to live out their maternal obligations. In addition, attention to the multiple layers of trauma associated with the suffering experienced by the adoption triad was shown to be helpful in uncovering new levels of meaning in terms of the metaphor of God as an adoptive parent in the book of Psalms and its reception. For instance, we saw how the African-American community, who has greatly suffered during the time of slavery, as well as the ongoing struggle for Civil Rights that endures until this day in the ongoing quest to have people, and the police, in particular, recognize that Black Lives Do Matter, could cultivate a new life-affirming narrative as evident in the creative expansion of the original metaphor of God as a Father to the fatherless (Psalm 68:5) to also include God being a Mother to the motherless.

We also saw how this language of trauma and suffering in these psalms associated with this metaphor of God as an adoptive parent offered traumatized individuals and com-

munities the ability to put into words their experience of suffering.<sup>17</sup> One could thus argue that this metaphor of God as a father to the fatherless, and a mother to motherless, presented the original community in travail, as well as the African American community that picked up and reappropriated this metaphor to encourage traumatized individuals in their community, by presenting them with a new reality that involves new ways of imagining themselves as adopted children of a God who steps in the absence of human parenting.

These new ways of thinking also extends to new ways of doing. With reference to the notion of “esthetics”, Erbele-Küster (2016, p. 43) contemplates the connection between poetics and ethics in what she describes as the “poetic miracle”, i.e., that what happens when poetry captures our imagination and speaks to our emotions in such a way as to challenge the status quo. In this context of violence in which the orphans and the adoptive parents are survivors of war and imperial invasion that forms the backdrop of the book of Psalms, the metaphor of God as a Father to the fatherless (and Mother to the motherless) is all the more profound as it presents us with a very different view of power, i.e., the power to care and nurture the most vulnerable members of the community, which extends beyond biological mothers and fathers also to adoptive mothers and fathers who work in tandem to ensure the wellbeing of the child, which ultimately is what is at stake, both then and now. This reinterpretation of the original metaphor expands our understanding of God as our Father (and Mother), but as Gilkes (1989, p. 78) has rightly argued, it also “redefines boundaries of motherhood and fatherhood, demanding that men emulate the tenderness of God as a nursing mother and affirming the right of women to an assertiveness that defends, protects, changes, brings justice and gives birth to a better world”.

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