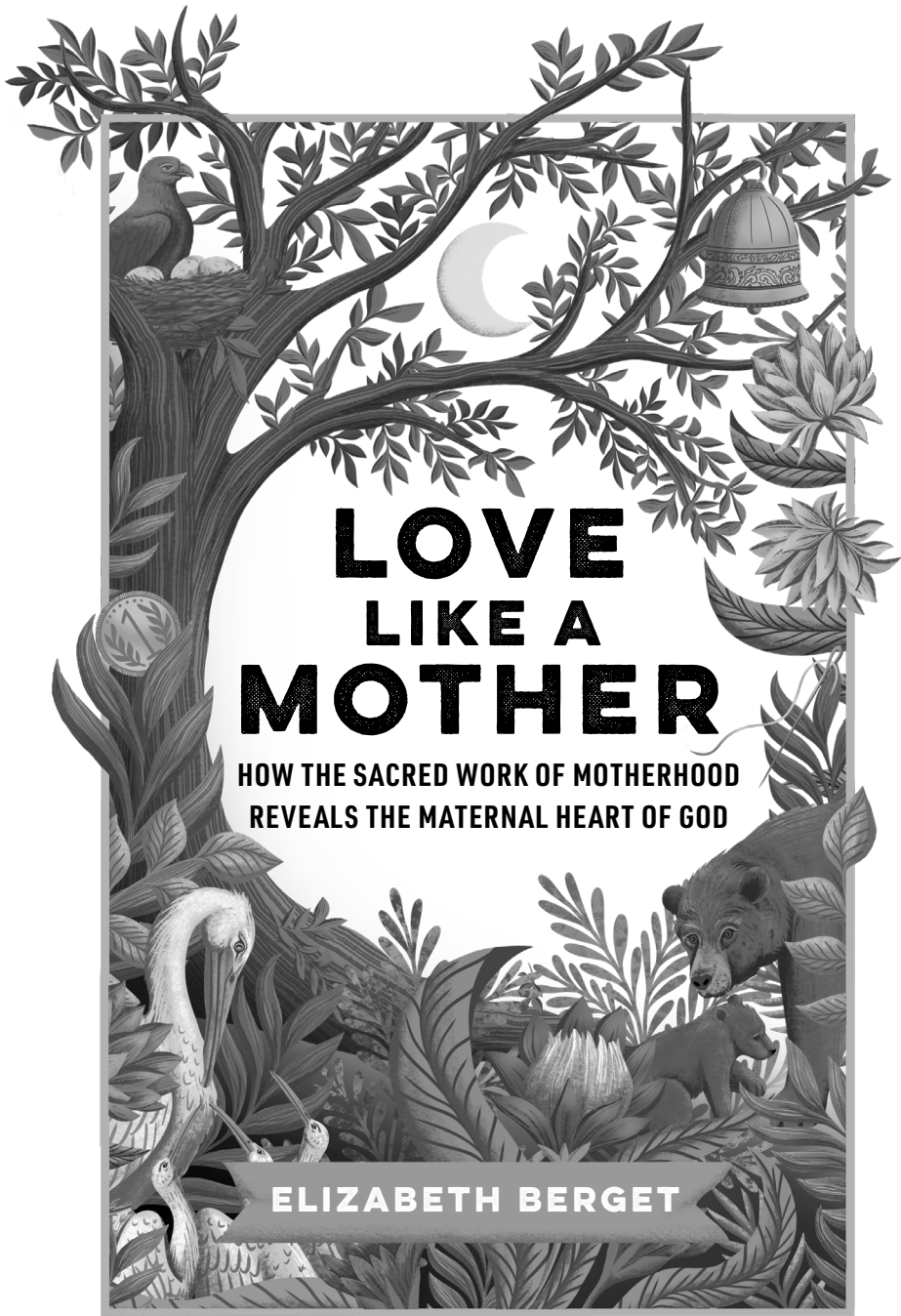




LOVE LIKE A MOTHER

HOW THE SACRED WORK OF MOTHERHOOD
REVEALS THE MATERNAL HEART OF GOD

ELIZABETH BERGET



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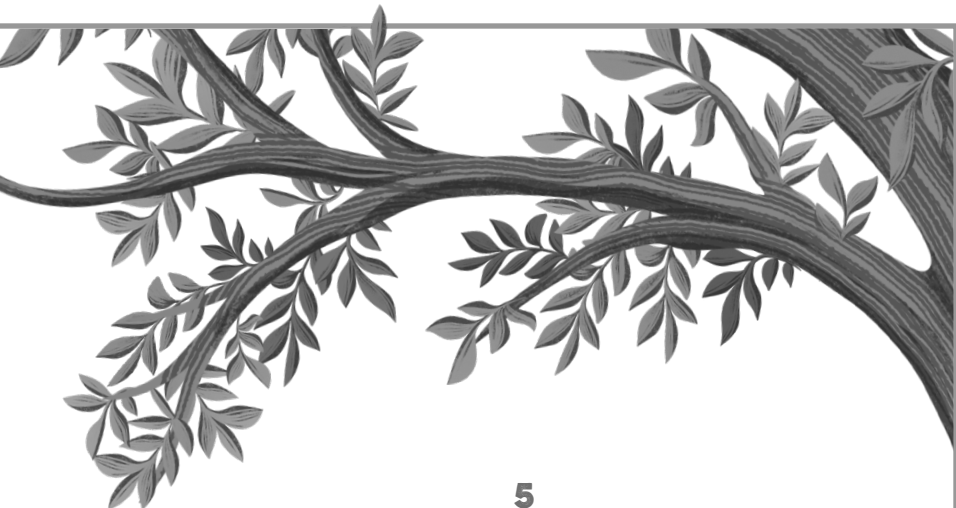
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INTRODUCTION

“Does God love us like a mother?”

My eight-month-old baby squirmed in my arms, alerting me that this internal question had stopped me mid-motion in my rocking chair as I tried to get him to sleep one night. I resumed rocking, leaning back into the soft blue cushions. As he settled into sleep, I began to try to reconcile this question with the events that had occupied my time that day, caring for three young kids:

ten diaper changes
one puddle of pee wiped off the floor
nine individual plates made up for breakfast, lunch, and
dinner
plus snacks—so many snacks
four sibling squabbles settled
three separate car seats buckled and unbuckled
one LEGO fished out of the baby’s mouth
one thirty-minute negotiation regarding the necessity of
pants in public

one toddler who dressed herself into abstract art
sixteen board books read
one high chair wiped down, three times
four naps (forced and fostered)
one scraped knee bandaged
one lost pacifier found (twice)
a startling number of dishes washed
hugs and cuddles doled out every other minute

Four years and three kids into motherhood, I was as overwhelmed with the work of caring for my kids as I was overwhelmed with love for them. My days were a whirlwind of need. And while I absolutely loved being a mom, in many ways I felt like a husk of my former self. These years had felt like a science experiment on the minimum amount of sleep a human needs to function. While I wouldn't trade those newborn head sniffs for anything in the world, my body felt like it was ever on the verge of collapse, and my mind felt like it had been run through a baby-food mill. I missed how I used to be able to read thought-provoking books and ponder their themes. Now my deepest literary reflections centered on whether Brown Bear might actually need glasses and why on earth Child Protective Services hadn't been called on Goldilocks's mother.

I was also wrestling with my faith. Like Christian with his burdensome pack in *Pilgrim's Progress*, I was lugging around a load of guilt heavier than the combined weight of my overstuffed diaper bag and newborn car seat; I just couldn't keep up with the spiritual practices that had served me so well in my life before kids. Get up early for quiet time? I was already waking up several times a night, and I wasn't sure I even knew what *quiet* was anymore. Join a Bible study? I could barely get out of the house to shop for groceries as I tried to juggle all the nap schedules. Plus, through the gauntlet of pregnancy

and the terrible beauty of birth, between first steps and first sleep regressions, my identity had deeply shifted into the role of mother. Becoming a mother had completely upended me. It had rearranged my body, my brain, and my schedule, but it had also offered me an entirely new perspective from which to understand the world—and God.

But that night in the rocking chair, as I tallied all I had done that day, I began to wonder if God cared for me in the same ways that I care for my kids—with ceaseless sacrifice, detailed devotion, continuous attention, and unconditional love. Despite the nursery’s blackout curtains, I began to see God in a startling new light. In ragged realization, I whispered it aloud under the din of the white-noise machine: *God loves us like a mother.*

Even in that moment, as my chair creaked softly over the hardwood floors, I wondered if it was okay to voice this thought. I mean, everyone knows it’s “Our Father,” not *Our Mother*, “who art in heaven.” And apart from the annual Mother’s Day sermon from Matthew 23, when pastors often talk about how Jesus compared himself to a mother hen, I couldn’t think of one other mention of God’s love as maternal in my thirty-one prior years of being a Christian. And I certainly didn’t want to add heresy to the list of things I already felt guilty about.

I realized that I was holding my breath even as my baby fell more deeply into sleep. What came to me in that tension were some of the very first verses I had memorized as a kid in Sunday school, Genesis 1:26–27, “Then God said, ‘Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness. . . .’ So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.”

Male and female.

Both created in the image of God.

In the past I had always focused on what this idea had meant about *me*, a human woman, made in God’s image. But for the

first time, I began to wonder, *What does it mean about God that women, too, are bearers of divine imaging?*

If women, if mothers, bear the image of God and show us what God is like, does God ever mother us? If God, like a father, protected the Israelites in the wilderness, did he also feed them manna, like a mother? Could the invitation to be born again be more fully understood when we recognize that the God who invites us to know him as father in Romans 8:15 is the same God *who gave us birth*, like a mother, in Deuteronomy 32:18?

Tears flooded my eyes as Scriptures I'd studied for years flooded my mind. In that moment, I began to see maternal aspects of God shining through a lifetime of Bible stories. As gently as I could, I laid my sleeping baby down in his crib, crept out of his room, and dashed to find my laptop in the blinding light of the dining room. I recorded the questions and theories that had come to me in the rocking chair as fast as my fingers could type them; my thoughts from that night would eventually become the bones of this book.

As a teacher and writer, I take the instructions we find in the Bible about not adding to or taking away from God's Word seriously. So in the years since that night in the rocking chair, I have closely studied the Bible and read many topically related books. Building on a foundation of formal Christian education—including a bachelor's degree in biblical studies, as well as decades of church attendance, classes, and personal study—I have found, in both the Old and New Testaments, many largely overlooked references to God's maternal love. This widespread theological blind spot for divine maternal imagery should also weigh heavily on us as we seek to honor the fullness of God's word.

To borrow the words of Shannon Evans, I believe we walk “with a spiritual limp” when we think of God as only male or only know God's love as paternal.¹ And author Amy Peeler puts it this way: “All humans suffer when God is more like some

than others.”² From an early age, we recognize that fathers and mothers show love differently. There is something special and unique about the love of a mother that we are born wanting and needing, and we shortchange ourselves in viewing God only as father because this need, like all others, can only be perfectly met in God alone. But more important, we diminish God when we apply these limiting human categorizations to a divine Spirit. Expanding our understanding of God’s love to see maternal elements doesn’t warp or corrupt our image of God but instead enhances our perspective and roots it in the diverse imagery for God that already exists in Scripture.

Imagine an artist who sits down one day at the foot of the Alps. First, she paints the mountains before her under the noon-day sun. With large brushstrokes, she sweeps shadowed blues and grays and greens across the canvas, layering in the sharp edges of rocky crags with finer brushes, detailing snow-filled ravines with dazzling white paint. Later in the day, she sits again to capture the mountain at sunset. In this iteration, the looming mountain is a soft silhouette of warm grays and browns; she paints the falling water and snowy peaks to reflect the glow of the brilliant orange and pink sky as the sun sinks behind the summit. While each painting depicts the mountain differently, they both depict its truth and glory.

Likewise, exploring the maternal face of God in Scripture does not have to be an either/or endeavor—mother is not better than father as father is not better than mother. Instead, when we begin to see God as both father *and* mother, our understanding of and love for God only increases.

While motherhood is certainly not the only or primary way we can grow in our understanding of who God is, it’s nonetheless an important and often-overlooked way. Whether we are actively mothering, or have been lovingly mothered, or have experienced the acute lack of a mother’s love, motherhood provides a crucial window into God’s heart toward us. And

that's good news. This expanded understanding of God's love can serve as a deep relief, especially to those of us in the most intense seasons of motherhood. We don't have to "keep up" with spiritual practices to maintain our connection with God, because God is already there with us in the midst of our mothering. When we understand God's love as maternal, we can recognize how we uniquely bear God's image *as mothers*. After all, the God who wiped the disciples' dirty feet can certainly relate to wiping toddler butts. We can begin to see how even the most mundane moments of motherhood are infused with meaning because they reflect divine love, and in doing so we learn that we do not have to carve out time *apart* from motherhood to connect with God. Instead, we can grow our faith in the ordinary everyday of mothering, in more contemplative and integrative ways, right between the diapers and the dishes.

This is not a stuffy theology textbook, nor is it a Bible study. You won't find "one weird trick" for making time to read your Bible. But you will find stories from the chaotically delightful trenches of motherhood, in which bodily fluids practically play a supporting role. You'll also find the chapters divided into short reading segments because I know, firsthand, how hard it can be to sit down and read some days. And you will find plenty of Scripture because it's so important for us to see how these ideas about the maternal love of God, while not historically highlighted, are indeed firmly anchored in the pages of the Bible.

Beginning with the first two lines of a positive pregnancy test, chapters 1 through 3 will explore how the experiences of pregnancy, labor, and birth, plus the work of adoption and foster care, expand our understanding of the maternal love of God. We will discover a God who birthed all of creation, who speaks in Scripture of a womb-like love for us, and who labored with incarnate love that we might be born again. In chapter 4, we will explore how God, like many of us, is familiar with the grief of loss (this chapter contains stories of miscarriage,

infertility, and child loss, so you may want to consider skipping it if you feel the need to avoid triggers). Chapters 5 through 8 take a closer look at the everyday effort of caring for our kids: the feeding and protecting that mothers do, the unceasing work of attending to needs, the unrelenting sleepless nights. In the sacred work of everyday mothering, we will recognize a God who nourishes us, protects us, comes when we call, and calls us to rest. We will find a God who loves like a mother.

At the end of each chapter are a few simple practices to help you find connection with God in the middle of your day—or night! Most of these are contemplative practices and reflective prompts that you can consider while sterilizing bottles or pushing a swing at the park. In other words, these practices won't demand extra time that I know you don't have. Instead, I hope they offer you a lens through which you can begin to see continual reminders of God's love for you as you love and care for your children.

As I share snippets of my own motherhood journey, I want us to reexamine our everyday lives and turn the old flannel-graph stories of Scripture over in our hands to catch a glimpse of God's maternal love where we haven't seen it before. In writing this, I long for you to know that you are intimately seen and loved as you mother. I hope that these words will encourage you in your faith as you find connection with God, right within the everyday of motherhood, as you bear God's own image. My prayer is that you will sink into the soft cushions of God's gentle, maternal love for you.

Before moving on, it seems appropriate to cover a couple of important details. First, I will be extrapolating a good deal from my own life in these pages, so it will be useful for you to know the basics of who's who:

Husband: Eric

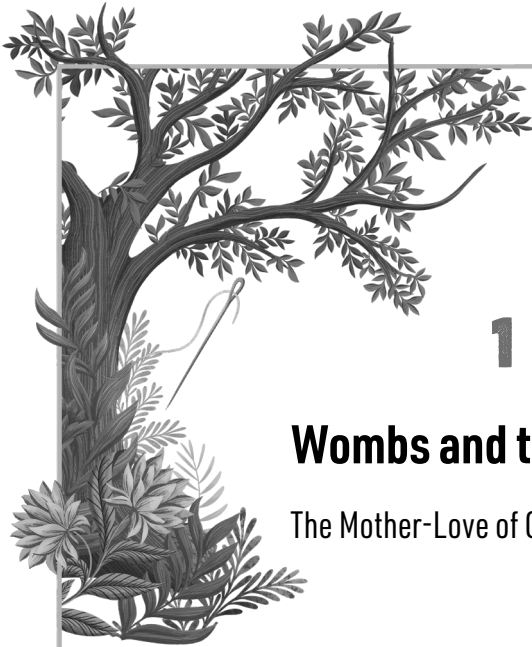
Oldest Kid: Owen

Middle Kid: Elsa

Youngest Kid: Lewis

Second, motherhood is an expansive universe, so I drew from the stories of other mothers in my life in an attempt to include a wider breadth of experiences. Each of these stories was handled to the best of my ability and has been used with permission.

Finally, writing a book about the maternal love of God gets tricky when it comes to the pronouns we use for God. After wrestling with how to go about this, I decided to use *he/him* to reflect the way the biblical writers talk about God. Plus, in all honesty, it's the language for God that I grew up with, so in many ways, it feels natural to me. But I want to acknowledge that exclusive use of male language for God is unbiblical and can lead to distorted teachings, which is why you will find plenty of feminine language and imagery for God in this book, plucked straight from Scripture, alongside the male pronouns. This choice admittedly makes for some clunkiness, but my sincere hope is that we can hurdle the grammatical awkwardness together in pursuit of a fuller picture of God's love.



1

Wombs and the Weaver

The Mother-Love of God in Pregnancy

I stood in the predawn light of our bathroom with one hand slung around my husband's waist and the other gingerly holding a freshly used pregnancy test. The three-minute tilt-a-whirl of waiting for results had finally come to a stop, and I now found myself considering the bacterial ramifications of saving the pregnancy test in a Ziploc bag as a memento for posterity.

I was going to have a baby.

Minutes earlier, I had hobbled my very full bladder into the bathroom and ripped open the box I'd so carefully placed on the counter the night before. I had crossed and uncrossed my legs as I squinted once more at the tiny printed instructions on how and when and where to urinate. Never one to play fast and loose with the rules, I'd stopped just short of using a level to ensure that the back of our toilet was actually a flat surface, per the guidance given.

After a deep breath, I'd gone for it. I had counted my Mississippi's, started my phone's timer, and then joined my bleary-eyed husband in the hallway. While we waited, I worked to slow

my breathing in an attempt to convince my anxious body that I wasn't actually standing at the dizzying edge of a steep precipice. When the timer rang out, we'd stood in the bathroom and hugged after a bewildered first and then delighted second look at those two pink lines, and I fell head over heels off the edge into something between overwhelmed and overjoyed.

I wasn't exactly surprised by the pregnancy; we'd waited five years into our marriage to try. The truth was, I'd felt ready for kids for a little over a year (though, at the time, I would not have known what "ready for kids" was if it had punched me in my well-rested face). But what did surprise me was how quickly the mantle of motherhood settled into my bones—or maybe just into my head, which at that point felt like it was audibly pounding. I had decided, out of an abundance of caution, to give up caffeine entirely, so the headache that consumed me as I journeyed into motherhood was the very first drop in what would become a cascading waterfall of sacrifice and love for my kids.

That instinct to protect the life within overtook me quickly and fiercely. Outwardly, I may have complained about being bereft of so much of what makes this life worth living: soft, unpasteurized Brie on crostini, a glass of red wine on a Thursday night while watching *The Office*, napping on my stomach at the beach. Yet on some ancient, internal level, I knew that I would happily give up these things forever if it meant my baby stayed safe.

And that is just what mothers do. When those two lines appear on the test, they add up to more than just an addition to the family. In that moment, |+| equals a new life, a new identity. Moms-to-be intuitively begin to check for signs of spotting with each visit to the bathroom; they force down prenatal horse pills and count every flutter and kick. Their lives begin to revolve around the effort to create a life that is happy and healthy for the baby within.

In short, their wombs become cultivators of compassion. And God is no stranger to this kind of compassion.

The Wombed Compassion of God

It is tricky to picture God with a womb, isn't it? It's easier for us to imagine a God who looks like Zeus, complete with bulging biceps and a white beard. But Christian tradition teaches us that this image stems more from Renaissance art than it does from the pages of Scripture. The consensus that God has no gender reflects broadly accepted teaching among most corners of Christendom, from Richard Rohr to John Piper. Piper himself, who once controversially stated that God gave Christianity a "masculine feel," nonetheless dispelled the image of a Zeus-like God when he said, "God is not male. . . . From eternity, God has not had a body—a physical body—and therefore, he doesn't have male features: facial hair, musculature, male genitals, no Y chromosome, no male hormones. . . . 'Male' is a biological word, and God is not a biological being."¹ This matters because considering God a male diminishes God, who exists above and beyond human categorizations.

But in Exodus 19, no one would have blamed the newly freed Israelites for picturing a dominant, masculine deity, like those of some of their neighboring cultures. We read that they stood like ants at the base of a mountain that was covered with dark clouds and violently shaking, waiting to formally meet this God who had parted the seas and turned the Nile bloody. We read, "All the people who were in the camp trembled" when God descended on the mountain in raging fire and billowing smoke and thundered the law down from the summit (Exod. 19:16).

But fifteen chapters after these first impressions, it's almost as if God pauses, having gotten ahead of himself, and provides an overdue introduction to his new people. In Exodus 34:6 we find God's very first *self-description* of his character in the

Bible, and what we read, given the context, is surprisingly comforting and unexpectedly maternal: “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (NIV).

The first self-referencing descriptor God uses is *compassionate*, which in Hebrew carries a lot more intensity than it does in English. The word is *rakhum*, and it has its roots in the Hebrew word for *womb* (*rekhem*), which indicates that the compassion of God, the *rakhum* of God, is a womb-born, deeply emotional love that time and again moves God to act on behalf of his children. The word conveys the urgency that a mother feels when her baby cries—an instinctive, reflective response that she feels in her body to soothe her baby’s distress.

We read of God’s *rakhum* for the Israelites when they were enslaved in Egypt. God heard their cries and was deeply moved, urged by his compassion to the incredible acts that led to their liberation. Later, in Psalm 51:1, it was God’s *rakhum* compassion that King David appealed to when he prayed for forgiveness after wronging Bathsheba:

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions. (NIV)

It was *rakhum* that compelled God to respond to the desperate cries of his exiled children later in the Old Testament, saying, “Can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these might forget, yet I will not forget you” (Isa. 49:15). With these words, the prophet Isaiah was essentially asserting, “Can a woman forget to ‘womb’ the son of her womb?”²

Perhaps the most stark example of the meaning of *rakhum* comes in the account of Solomon and the baby. You have

probably heard the story; it's a memorable one. Two women from the same household each had a baby within days of one another. One of the babies tragically died, and an allegation was made that the mother of the deceased baby had swapped the babies in the night, claiming the living baby as her own. Solomon pondered this accusation and declared that the baby should be cut in two so that each mother could take a half.

While the lying mother agreed to Solomon's ruling, the true mother of the living baby was deeply moved out of her *rakhum*. Pastor and author Chad Bird writes, "The Hebrew [in 1 Kings 3:26] is something like 'her wombs warmed,' that is, 'her compassions grew hot within her.' This mother, who had borne this child in her womb, 'wombed' him once more. Far from being cold-hearted, like the lying mother in this story, the true mother was warm-wombed toward him. So much so, in fact, that as she told Solomon, she would rather the false mother have the child than that he should be cut in two. Such womb-like compassion is gripping and unforgettable."³

This is *rakhum*. And if God chose this wombed word to begin his spoken self-revelation, then perhaps it is there that we should begin the search for an answer to the question: Does God love us like a mother?

Rakhum gives us a picture of love that is at once both divine and distinctly maternal. God loves us with a womb-like love that is overflowing with emotion and intervening action. It is caring protection, inextricable oneness, and constant provision. In *rakhum* we find a description of God that surrounds us with safety and love, who cannot help but come when we call. In *rakhum* we find a God who loves like a mother. And from the very beginning of the journey into motherhood, from the moment we see those two pink lines and begin to restructure our entire lives around this other tiny person, we are mirroring this womb-like love of God, even in, especially in, what we give up.

What We Give Up

In those early months of pregnancy, I learned quickly just how often *motherhood* and *sacrifice* go hand in hand, and I learned it while kneeling, head bowed and eyes closed, in humble submission before a porcelain altar. While once I had been a person who could make and eat a turkey sandwich, now the very sight of the packaged deli meat in my refrigerator drawer made me want to retch. I had previously loved sampling the world of cuisines available in my city zip code, but I could no longer drive by my neighborhood taqueria without reaching for one of the plastic bags I kept in the glove compartment, just in case. On one freezing February night, I even made Eric take an entire half-cooked pizza into the backyard while I opened every window in the house because the odor of the baking pizza had completely overwhelmed me. In my defense, I was suffering. In Eric's defense, so was he.

The *only* thing propelling me through the dark haze of nausea—other than carbonated water and saltines—was the knowledge that all of it, even the time I relinquished my lunch in an alley, was for my baby. What continually came to mind for me during those moments were words from Philippians 2, which may seem forced and overly spiritual, unless you knew me when I was twelve.

I had just entered middle school when the pastor of our church issued a challenge to the congregation at the outset of his sermon series on Philippians: “Memorize and recite the entire book, three mistakes or less, and I will give you \$50!” *What luck!* I thought, *I'm short on cash and bored out of my mind at church. This will give me something to do, and maybe I'll even have enough money to get those JNCO jeans my mom refuses to buy me!* So for the next few months, I worked at memorizing each of the four chapters—during sermons, car rides, at the breakfast table, and even in the shower.

Finally the day came. With a nod at my mom, who remained behind chatting with the church secretaries, I entered the pastor's office and sat across from him at his imposing oak desk. After a deep breath, I began, pausing only occasionally as I rattled off all 2,294 words of the book of Philippians. Our pastor was silent, but he nodded along promisingly as he checked my recitation against the thick NIV Bible in front of him, his wire-rimmed reading glasses sliding toward the tip of his nose. It was only after I'd reached the end that he revealed I'd omitted, switched, or changed *five* words, just two over the limit, and that I would not be receiving the \$50 reward.

Cheeks flushed, I remember nodding and, I think, thanking him before opening his heavy door and walking out. I quickly made eye contact with my mom, shaking my head to indicate my failure. As we drove away, I told her that I had made too many mistakes, glumly thinking what a waste of time and effort this had been. But I woke up the next morning to an envelope containing \$100 on my bedside table, courtesy of my parents, who were stone-cold incredulous that our pastor had been such a stickler with a kid.

I still remember the \$100. More important, I still remember many sections and phrases of Philippians that I will probably be able to spout off alongside Destiny's Child lyrics when I am old and forgetful. But perhaps entrenched most deeply are Paul's words from Philippians 2:5–8, arguably the heart of the book:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
assuming human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a human,

he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

In these verses, Paul speaks of the humility and unimaginable sacrifice of Jesus's incarnation as he gave up robes of radiant light, equality with God himself, and earth as a footstool in exchange for human form—complete with our heartbreaks and sore throats and faulty eyesight. Here we see a God who willingly limited his ageless eternity to be born a baby, live life as a servant, and eventually succumb to an excruciating death. The trade-offs are unthinkable: The God who stretched out the skies as a blanket and danced on rolling ocean waves gave up perfect trinitarian communion in order to redeem us.

The immensity and magnitude of this sacrifice take on new meaning within the “nearly self-obliterating sacrifices of motherhood.”⁴ In the early days of pregnancy, as we reorient our lives around our growing babies, as we trade wine and caffeine for flavorless crackers, and as we become more familiar than we'd like with the various toilets and trash bins in our orbits, literally *emptying ourselves*, we have the opportunity to echo the crescendo of Christ's sacrifice with our own. As we stumble through our days without sleep and without respite from nausea, trading lives of freedom for the subsequent eighteen years marked by voluntary limitations, service, and sacrifice, we are bearing the image of a God who sacrificed immeasurably more so that we, his children, might live.

And that sacrifice stretches far beyond driving past our favorite sushi place. As we shift our identities to mother, and as our bodies seemingly revolt against everything they've ever loved, we often find that we need to adjust our pace as well as many of our former habits. Buried somewhere in my basement is a dusty box containing file folders full of pamphlets, patient handouts, and birth class notes I accrued during my combined twenty-seven months of

being pregnant and giving birth. Amid manufacturer brochures for breast pumps, leaflets about the dangers of preeclampsia, and half-filled charts tracking wet diapers lie pages upon pages detailing the importance of caring for your body during pregnancy and after giving birth. In that season, I was inundated with reminders to get enough sleep, eat healthy food, and drink enough water every day to endure a trek across the Sahara.

This is for good reason. In pregnancy and the early years of motherhood, our bodies are literally reorganized. We navigate hormonal upheavals, relentless nausea, and draining exhaustion. One study even found that during pregnancy our bodies expend energy at similar rates to elite athletes participating in ultra-endurance races, but we sustain this intense output for nine long months!⁵ This is a time in our lives when we are forced to face our limitations head on. Our bodies demand that we slow down because we are simply unable to do what we've always done. We are forced to do less.

And God knows this. In Isaiah 40:11, the prophet writes of God,

He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young. (NIV)

God knows how weary you are and how your back hurts from carrying all that extra belly. God knows how little you've been able to keep down. God knows how many times your newborn woke you up last night. God knows how your arms ache from lugging around the diaper bag and the toddler who went on a walking strike halfway home from the park. God knows that tantrum yesterday afternoon nearly took you out. God knows how the laundry never ends, how crabby your tweenager is, how many times a day you hear someone call, "Mom?" God knows how hard you're trying.

And God is gentle with you.

God gently leads those who have young, and this God is not asking you to keep up. God knows your early morning quiet times got obliterated by your baby's six-month sleep regression. God knows why you keep falling asleep when you finally get a moment to pray. God knows that preschool pickup is right in the middle of your church's midweek Bible study for moms. God knows how your calendar is filled with soccer practices, play rehearsals, and birthday parties, and how each day is filled with so much—from the time the baby wakes up at the crack of dawn to the time your high schooler is finally ready for bed.

But there is no checklist in the Shepherd's hands. Instead, there is an invitation to do less.

In motherhood, we can find new ways to connect with God that we didn't have access to before. In the lived experience of our bodies as they create human life, in the sacrifice of sleeplessness, in the euphoria we experience when that baby first belly laughs, we get to know God's love for us a little more each day. As we walk with God through the everyday work of growing and raising humans, we are given endless reminders of God's love for us in the love we have for our kids. God is already with us in the midst of it all, ordaining the ordinary and holding us as our arms grow heavy.

Rest assured, we do not have to do what we've always done. We can give up our ceaseless striving and instead fall in with the slower pace of our Gentle Shepherd. We can do less, assured of the abundant love and grace that God has for us in this season of being with our young.

God as Weaver

Slowly but surely, I clawed my way out of my first trimester. With each flutter and kick made by the life within me, I grew more and more mindful of my womb. As my baby grew and

rolled over, making himself known with fists and elbows and feet pushing into my rib cage, I marveled at the God who “formed my inward parts . . . [and] knit me together in my mother’s womb . . . when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth” (Ps. 139:13–15). I hung up each blurry black-and-white sonogram image on the fridge and reveled in the fact that God was quite literally weaving my baby together inside of me.

In his book *Body of Praise*, W. David O. Taylor writes of the creation of humans:

From this man’s flesh (*Ish*), moreover, God takes a rib, and then sews up the gash in the man’s wounded side. With the rib, God now makes a different kind of creature—a woman creature (*Ishah*). Holding this human-dirt in hand, so to speak, God possesses the human creature wholly, echoing in this way the language of Psalm 139:13, where God is said to knit the psalmist in his mother’s womb. It is the picture of God as weaver, making human beings out of a plait of bone, sinew, and vein.⁶

What I personally know of weaving stems from a brief but intense chokehold that a toy weaving loom had on me in the early 1990s. Over the course of several weeks, I “wove” my mother thirty-seven potholders. As suddenly as the obsession overtook me, it faded just as quickly. But what we know from history is that the art of weaving has predominantly been tasked to women, from the weaving tools found buried with women in excavations of ancient graves to the intricate embroidery practiced by many cultures, like Hmong women, today. While the Industrial Revolution turned weaving into a male enterprise, at the time Psalm 139 was written, weaving would have most certainly still been considered “women’s work.” And with the word *knit*, this psalm gives us an image of God that is unexpectedly feminine. What’s more is that in the knitting together

of individual humans, we are given a micro-picture of God's maternal work in gestating all of creation.

In Genesis 1:2, we read of watery nothingness—*tohu wabohu* in Hebrew—or “wild and waste” as the creators of the Bible Project put it.⁷ Water was often a symbol of chaos in the ancient world, and over this dark deep we find the Spirit of God, hovering or “brooding” like a mother bird over her eggs (Gen. 1:2 AMP). Her babies are at first unformed, hidden within the darkness of their shells, until the day they burst forth into the light with perfectly ordered beaks, wings, and tails. Likewise, in Genesis, the Spirit of God broods over the swirling disorder of unformed precreation, calling forth light from darkness, order from chaos, life from nothingness.

While any body part assigned to God in Scripture serves as a symbol, it is significant that the womb is the only reproductive organ assigned to God in the Bible.⁸ We read of this imagery in Job 38:8 and 29, when we are asked, “Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb,” or “From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?” Isaiah gave us an even more intimate image of God's womb when he spoke to his people:

Listen to me, O house of Jacob,
 all the remnant of the house of Israel,
 who have been borne by me from your birth,
carried from the womb;
 even to your old age I am he;
 even when you turn gray I will carry you.
I have made, and I will bear;
 I will carry and will save. (Isa. 46:3–4)

At that moment in Israel's history, God was preparing his children for deliverance and trying to impress on them just how much more trustworthy he was than the idols of Babylon. And

God did this by encouraging them to think of their mother's love, to remember the ways she had carried them since before they were born. Christy Bauman explores this kind of carrying in her beautiful book *Theology of the Womb*. When confronted with fear of loss during pregnancy, Bauman writes that she would imagine herself surrounded by a silver shield covering her entire body:

[The shield] felt representative of what the small child inside of me was experiencing, being surrounded by, yes, my uterus and nourished by my placenta, but even more surrounded by me, its life-source, its mother, its creator. In my fear and anxiety, I began to trust a theology of the womb, that I, this child's mother, had little control but was surrounded in the womb of God. God carries each of us in a womb, and women, in turn, have been invited into the understanding of carrying a child in our womb. I am surrounded by the great Creator, the most nurturing Mother.⁹

All of us are ultimately surrounded by the one who wove us together in our mothers' wombs. And those mothers who have been pregnant have had the distinct privilege of cocreating life with this wombed God, mirroring the work of God as their bodies grew a cluster of cells, hidden in the dark of their wombs, into a new life.

God Within a Womb

One surefire way to eat a dozen frosted cut-out cookies in a row is to be heavily pregnant and hormonal around Christmastime. I was nine months along with Elsa in late December 2013, and never before had I thought as much about Mary the mother of Jesus. As my hips stretched and ached, I shuddered at the thought of getting on a donkey for a road trip. As I

toured pristine birth centers and hospital wings, I grimaced as I pictured giving birth next to a pile of manure. With my own uncertainty about my looming birth, I began to consider the actual, physical experience of Jesus's mother in new ways.

It's easy for us to picture Mary as she is presented to us in Christmas pageants, glowing in clean blue linen as she stares down at the cherubic face of her newborn. But the mystery of the incarnation invites us to imagine a nauseated Mary, a hormonal Mary, a Mary with cravings that weirded Joseph out. Theologian Lucy Peppiatt, building on insights from the early church father Tertullian, reflects on why God would choose pregnancy and a human woman as a portal for the incarnation: "Jesus is made 'of her,' not just 'in her.' He is made from her and not just through her. She is not only a receptacle of the Divine, she contributes from her own body."¹⁰ We know that half a child's DNA comes from the mother, so it is meaningful, if not essential, to the incarnation that Jesus spent time in a woman's womb. Beyond that, it is significant to our understanding of God's love to know that "God chose to have a mother."¹¹

In the 1960s, scientists discovered the existence of maternal microchimerism, which is the exchange of cells between a fetus and mother. During pregnancy, fetal cells cross the placenta into the mother's bloodstream and vice versa. But the amazing thing is that the effects of microchimerism last well beyond pregnancy. In fact, fetal cells have been found in mothers, and maternal cells in their children, up to decades after birth.¹² What's even more extraordinary is that some studies have shown that fetal cells actively travel to maternal organs that are injured and in need of healing, in some instances landing on C-section scars to help produce needed collagen.¹³ Similarly, theories are emerging that maternal cells from microchimerism may contribute to healing in children as well.

This lasting connectivity between mothers and their children speaks volumes about the love God has for his own children.

Read again this passage from Isaiah 46 in my own words: “Listen! I have carried you from the womb, carried you since birth, and even to your old age I will carry you.” In God’s love, we find a spiritual microchimerism, an unbreakable connection between ourselves and the God who knit us together, a bond sustained by the Holy Spirit.

With each pregnancy, we are carrying a child that will always be with us, always be ours. For every nauseous morning, we are saying to the life within, *I will carry you*. With each mug of decaf that we wish was regular, we are making the essential sacrifice to say, *I will carry you*. With every grunt and groan as we pull on compression tights, with every sleepless night surrounded by eighty-six pillows, we are saying, *I will carry you*. During each moment our wombs hold a child, we are imaging a God who carries us and all of creation, forever.

Waiting for the Day

My friend Rachel and I regularly meet in the parking lot at a local state or regional park. As our kids pile out of our cars and sprint toward the trailhead, she will laugh as I pull out an apocalypse-worthy backpack filled with everything we could possibly need. I, in turn, marvel at the small bag she easily slings over her shoulder as I heft my overstuffed pack into place. Have we ever used a buried item from my bag in an unexpected hiking situation? Yes. Do I often lug around ten extra pounds of unused pack weight? Also yes.

I have always been like this, using preparation as a defense against anxiety and uncertainty. My first pregnancy was no exception. I read the entirety of *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*. Twice. I was constantly checking for updates on what my baby looked like each week and what each stage of pregnancy should feel like, which led, inevitably, to a lot of Google-induced panic. The internet had convinced me that

something was wrong so often that, at one point, a kind but likely annoyed midwife gently suggested I shut down my computer and just take a nap after one of my *many* concerned calls to the clinic.

This was in the heyday of mommy blogs, and I scoured them for recommendations for the best car seats, best strollers, and best high chairs. During my pregnancy, I read copious materials about whether to use a pacifier, how and when to introduce solid foods, and how to have a baby sleeping through the night by Sunday. I combed Craigslist for used furniture, painted the walls, and watched videos about how to install the car seat. I was so eager to meet my baby, and I wanted to be totally prepared the day he arrived.

They call this *nesting*, a word that might sound patronizing, until you've watched a bird build its nest. There are some of us, like the humble city pigeon, who lay a pile of three sticks on the sidewalk and call it a day. We buy a blanket and some diapers and check *nesting* off the list. But some of us are more like southern Africa's sociable weaver birds. As their name implies, these committed parents weave intricate and permanent community structures with built-in temperature variation, each Pinterest-worthy chamber constructed by a pair of parents as they breed and roost.

I'd put myself somewhere in the middle of this spectrum of preparedness, but as I rounded the corner into my third trimester, almost all my thoughts centered on being ready to receive my baby. I laundered all his little clothes in baby detergent and lovingly folded them in a way only someone with zero other kids has time for. I obsessively cleaned the house and prepped meals. But eventually the day came when all my to-dos were checked off. The hospital bag was packed. The freezer was stocked. All I had left to do was wait.

And for so many of us, waiting can feel unbearable. This is especially true if we are suffering through infertility or walking

through a difficult journey of fostering or adopting. In these situations, the waiting is even more definitively beyond our control, and longing marks our days.

It is difficult for us to imagine God waiting—God, the Alpha and Omega, who set the clocks of time in motion and omnisciently knows the future. But throughout Scripture, we see that God is achingly familiar with waiting. We do not know the exact number of years that the book of Genesis encompasses, but in Genesis 5, we read a genealogy spanning from Adam to Noah that contains at least nine generations, each one living many years beyond our average human lifespan. Suffice to say, it was a really long time from the account of the creation to the flood. Even more time passed before God’s covenant with Abraham: that early promise of Christ’s redemptive work coming around two thousand years before Jesus made his entrance on earth as a squalling, squirming infant.

Even then, Jesus waited thirty years to officially start his ministry—thirty years before revealing the beginnings of the miraculous harvest that Mary had seeded when she sang her Magnificat. She had waited three long decades to see her son unveil himself as Messiah when she spoke to him with surprising authority in a back room of a wedding. This was a mother who had waited to see the promised fruits of her labor poured out from water jugs as rich red wine.

After the crucifixion, Jesus waited in the sealed tomb for three whole days, a parallel to the months he spent in the dark of his mother’s womb, before bursting forth into the blinding sunshine beyond the stone rolled away. Toward the end of his time on earth, Jesus told his bewildered disciples that he was going to prepare a place for them, that at some point in the future he would return for them, and that they would be together (see John 14:2–3). In that key word—*prepare*—we find a nesting God who deeply understands what it is to wait. Even now, God waits. He has waited millennia to make all things right, to free

us from the curse, to restore the parts of his good creation that have been scorched and damaged almost beyond recognition, and to restore the parts of *us* that have been scorched and damaged seemingly beyond repair by sin.

The last weeks of any pregnancy are marked with the intensity of this waiting. We wake each morning wondering if today will be the day. We waddle around feeling like our insides are going to fall out and questioning if our hips will ever recover. We wonder if the baby will come, when the baby will come, but mostly we just can't wait to meet the baby. In these long weeks, the veil is pulled back even further on God's love for us as Jesus longs to be with us.

Paul employs the language of maternal waiting to describe our longing for the redemption promised us in God's coming work of renewal. He writes, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:22–23). He is speaking to us, the would-be adoptees, speaking to our hopes deferred, to our knowledge of what should be as seen in the light of what actually is. He addresses our deep, instinctual yearning to be reunited with God, right alongside all of creation who flowed forth with us from the Weaver's womb.

We can imagine an implied counterpoint of our longing in this passage. Maybe God is groaning in maternal anticipation too. We can picture a third-trimester God, a God who counts every kick and every hour, dreaming of the day when he can welcome us home. This God who waits is the God of wombs, and with each and every day that we carry a baby inside of us, we can better know this God who, like a mother, surrounds us with love and longs to someday hold us in his arms.

PRACTICES

1. Take a few minutes to reflect on a God who is pregnant with love for you, groaning with anticipation at the thought of meeting you, who suffered in his own body for your sake. Reflect on how God is carrying you in spiritual microchimerism to this day and will do whatever is necessary to bring you into the completed fullness of new life.
2. The sacrifices that begin in pregnancy are often a foretaste of the work of motherhood that follows for the next two decades. From morning sickness and missed sleep to messy bedrooms and adolescent angst, motherhood is often an ongoing practice in service and sacrifice. When we consider how Jesus gave up equality with God to come to earth, we often think of his birth, but Jesus spent thirty-three years “emptying himself” on our behalf.

As you go through your day, mentally clock the sacrifices you make—small and big—and know that God sees each one. Be comforted in the awareness that when we are called as believers to put the needs of others before our own (Phil. 2:3–4), as mothers, we are often already doing that steady work of devotion. Consider how God might long for you to be taken care of in this ongoing work of emptying yourself: What do your body, your mind, your spirit need to avoid burnout in the long game of mothering?

3. Think back to your pregnancies and remember all the logistics of getting ready for your baby to come. Or, if you are pregnant, take notice each time you do something to prepare for your coming child—whether it’s a prenatal visit or buying new pacifiers or organizing all

the newborn clothes. Maybe you're preparing to foster or adopt and are putting together a spreadsheet of all the supplies you will need while you work through a mountain of paperwork. Take some time as you do this to imagine God nesting, preparing a place for you, eager to be with you as we read in John 17:24, "Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world." As you long to meet your child, as you prepare a life for your baby that is healthy, happy, and safe, reflect on how Jesus longs to be with you.

BREATH PRAYER

Inhale: The weight of love is heavy.

Exhale: You carry me with love.

NOTES

Introduction

1. Shannon K. Evans, *Rewilding Motherhood: Your Path to an Empowered Feminine Spirituality* (Brazos, 2021), 165.
2. Amy Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God* (Eerdmans, 2022), 92.

Chapter 1 Wombs and the Weaver

1. John Piper, “The Frank and Manly Mr. Ryle,” *Desiring God*, January 31, 2012, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-frank-and-manly-mr-ryle-the-value-of-a-masculine-ministry>; John Piper, “God Is Not Male,” *Desiring God*, March 10, 2014, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/god-is-not-male>.

2. Chad Bird (@birdchadlouis) notes that “Isaiah, a master wordsmith, is saying, ‘Can a woman forget to “womb” the son of her womb?’ He could have said ‘love’ or ‘be gracious to’ or ‘show mercy to’ but he chose the ‘womb verb’ to echo the other Hebrew noun for womb or belly, **יָבֵן** (beten).” “Womb-Like Compassion in Hebrew,” X (formerly Twitter), November 11, 2023, <https://x.com/birdchadlouis/status/1723308972894024061?s=20>.

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4. Laura Fabrycky, “Motherhood and the Intellectual Life,” Comment, 2024, <https://comment.org/motherhood-and-the-intellectual-life/>, quoted in Chine McDonald, *Unmaking Mary: Shattering the Myth of Perfect Motherhood* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2025), 94.

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8. Mike Ferguson, “Firing Up Our Sanctified Imagination,” *Presbyterian News Service*, May 3, 2022, <https://centernet.pcusa.org/story/firing-up-our-sanctified-imagination/>.

9. Christy Bauman, *Theology of the Womb: Knowing God Through the Body of a Woman* (Cascade Books, 2019), 71.

10. Lucy Peppiatt, “On God’s Mother,” WTC Theology, December 16, 2020, <https://wtctheology.org.uk/theomisc/on-gods-mother-lucy-peppiatt/>.

11. Amy Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God* (Eerdmans, 2022), 7.

12. Sandhya Shrivastava, Rupali Naik, Hema Suryawanshi, and Neha Gupta, “Microchimerism: A New Concept,” *Journal of Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology* 23, no. 2 (2019), https://doi.org/10.4103/jomfp.jomfp_85_17.

13. Gaven S. Daw, Wei Tan, and Zhi-Cheng Xiao, “Cell Migration from Baby to Mother,” *Cell Adhesion & Migration* 1, no. 1 (2007), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2633676/>.

Chapter 2 Birth Plans and Birth Pangs

1. *Strong’s Hebrew Lexicon*, רוּחַ (*ruach*), Bible Hub, accessed October 27, 2025, <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/7307.htm>. In and of itself, *ruach* connotes breath, wind, or spirit; in its simplest definition, it could indicate the breath within a living animal or human. But the word connotes trinitarian meaning when paired as *Ruach Elohim* (Spirit of God, see Gen. 1:2), *Ruach Hakodesh* (Holy Spirit, see Ps. 51:11), or *Ruach Yahweh* (Spirit of Yahweh or Spirit of the Lord, see Isa. 11:2). In these pairings, *ruach* is understood to be “part of God and identified with God.” John J. Parsons, “Hebrew Name for God—Ruach Elohim,” Hebrew4Christians, accessed October 28, 2025, https://www.hebrew4christians.com/Names_of_G-d/Spirit_of_God/spirit_of_god.html.

2. *Strong’s Hebrew Lexicon*, חוּל (*chuwl*), Bible Hub, accessed February 22, 2025, <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/2342.htm>.

3. Insights drawn from David Guzik, “John 3—The New Birth,” Enduring Word, accessed February 22, 2025, <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/john-3/>.

4. Richard Stracke, “Jesus Walks on Water,” Monreale Cathedral, Christian Iconography, accessed February 22, 2025, <https://www.christianiconography.info/sicily/walkOnWaterMonreale.html>.

5. Other ancient Near Eastern cultures surrounding the Israelites included similar elements of a watery chaos, like in the *Enuma Elish*, a Mesopotamian creation narrative. We can also find symbolic waters preceding creation in many post-ancient mythologies around the world, including Hindu, Norse, Greek, and several Indigenous American traditions.