

This transcript accompanies the *Cambridge in your Classroom* video on 'Does God have a gendered body?'

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## Does God have a gendered body?

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Right at the beginning of the Bible, in a passage shared by Judaism and Christianity, the book of Genesis, chapter 1 verse 27, describes all humanity as being created in the image of God. It says:

*'God created the human being in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.'*

When examined more closely, this passage could challenge many widely held beliefs about God, human beings, human bodies and gender.

I'm Dr Daniel Weiss, and I'm a Senior Lecturer in Jewish Studies at the Faculty of Divinity in Cambridge. I study Philosophy of Religion in connection with textual interpretation, and, in particular, I am interested in links between ancient scriptural texts and how people behave and think today.

Many people assume that ancient texts treat males

as more important than females, and as closer to God – but this opening chapter of Genesis describes both females and males as being created 'in the image of God'. But what does that really mean?

When this chapter in Genesis describes human beings as 'made in God's image' and 'after God's likeness', does this mean that human bodies look like God or are shaped like God? This question might seem funny. God doesn't have a body...right?

Well, throughout the Hebrew Bible, which are the scriptures that Jews call the Tanakh and Christians call the Old Testament, we actually find passages that do seem to describe God in bodily terms.

To give just a few examples: The book of Genesis says that Adam and Eve 'heard the sound of the Lord God walking around in the garden of Eden'. In the book of Exodus, it says that Moses and Aaron and seventy-two other people went

up Mount Sinai, 'and they saw the God of Israel: under His feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire ... He did not raise His hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they beheld God, and they ate and drank'. Later on in the book of Exodus, Moses asks to see God. God says: 'I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen'. And, elsewhere, the book of Daniel describes God's hair as white 'like pure wool'.

So, those are references to God's feet, hand, back, face, and hair, and other Biblical verses refer to God's ears, arm, eyes, and nostrils. And, although human beings are prohibited from making a statue or picture of God or God's body, there are no verses in the Hebrew Bible that say that God does not have a body.

So, the next question would be: what kind of body is it? Is it a male body or a female body?

In other ancient Near Eastern cultures, and in ancient cultures around the world, gods were typically depicted as having either male or female bodies when drawings or statues were made of them, or when people talked about them. So, some gods have a beard, and others have breasts. Some are described as having a penis, and others as having a vulva. But the Hebrew Bible is different. It never describes God as having bodily characteristics that would mark God's body as being specifically male or female. There are no mentions of a penis or vulva, or breasts or even a beard.

Although many later Western artistic portrayals of God – most famously Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel portrayal – portray God with male bodily features, particularly a beard, this doesn't match with what we find when we examine Biblical descriptions of God's body. God

is repeatedly described in the Hebrew Bible in ways that sound like God has a body, but no gender-specific body words are used. So God is presented differently in the Hebrew Bible than in other ancient Near Eastern descriptions of gods.

Now, does the Hebrew Bible secretly think of God's body as gendered – either male or female – and just never mention that? Or is God's body in the Hebrew Bible somehow both male and female at the same time? Or does God's body somehow 'transcend,' or go beyond, gender?

Remember that both male and female human beings are created in the image of God according to Genesis. That could suggest that God's body somehow cuts across or goes beyond typical gender divides.

The description of both male and female as created in the image of God could also be taken to mean that God is equally concerned for all human beings, regardless of their bodily sex characteristics, and that all human beings should be given equal respect, regardless of the way their body is shaped in sexual terms.

A seemingly simple verse from the first chapter of the Hebrew Bible thus raises many interesting questions – the sort of questions that students and lecturers in the Cambridge Divinity Faculty think about every day.

What questions do you have when you hear the words '*God created the human being in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them*'?.