

Jesus Christ as Woman Wisdom:  
Feminist Wisdom Christology, Mystery,  
and Christ's Body

by

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### Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## *ABSTRACT*

This thesis explores Wisdom Christology, the association of Jesus Christ and the mysterious and neglected biblical figure of Woman Wisdom. Because the descriptions of her bear a striking resemblance to the portrayal of Jesus Christ, I argue that they can be seen as two names for the same figure: Christ-Wisdom.

This link between Jesus Christ and Woman Wisdom has some interesting repercussions in Christology. Firstly, it emphasizes the mysteriousness of Jesus Christ, preventing the illusion that Jesus Christ can be fully understood. In fact, the incarnation is a deepening of the mystery of God, meaning that theological language must rely on paradox and metaphor to describe the indescribable. I argue that the name Jesus Christ is inclusive, wide enough to hold many names, including that of Woman Wisdom, which he sanctifies so they become appropriate names for the divine.

Secondly, the association of Jesus Christ with Woman Wisdom affects the gender of Jesus Christ. Throughout Christian history, there has been a gender fluidity in depictions of Jesus Christ, something legitimated by his full divinity. This does not mean his historical life as a male human being can be ignored, but although he was of the male sex, he arguably did not strictly adhere to socio-cultural gender expectations. Likewise, in Woman Wisdom, Jesus Christ provides an alternative, atypical way of being female. This relativizes the gender of Christ-Wisdom, pointing beyond it to the radical solidarity of the divine with all humanity in the incarnation.

Thirdly, to view Christ as Wisdom changes the way gender is understood within the Church, the Body of Christ. If the Church is the representative of Christ-Wisdom, it is therefore a multi-gendered body in which Jesus Christ takes on male and female embodiment. In contrast to gendered ethical models, the Church thus has one ethical example in Christ-Wisdom, which all follow. Because of the various gifts of the Spirit, diversity remains, but is transformed so that differences, including gender, do not limit or determine the roles of believers in the Church, but remain part of the richness of the one Body under its one Head, Christ-Wisdom.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *The Resurrection of Woman Wisdom: Delving into Wisdom Christology*

“The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding, [...] the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.  
His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.”  
Isaiah 11:2-3a

“And [God] said to humankind,  
‘Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom [....]’”  
Job 28:28a

I first came across the figure of Woman Wisdom several years into my academic study of theology. Immediately fascinated by her, I could only wonder why I had never noticed her – or really even heard of her – before. It is not that the Bible lacks references to her, for once one begins to take notice of her, one realizes she permeates the Scriptures: she fills the pages of Proverbs and her name is scattered throughout the Old and New Testaments and Deuterocanon. So why is it that so many Western Christians, myself included, are so unfamiliar with her? Why have we denied ourselves the vivid and inspiring image of this dynamic figure every time we come across her name in the biblical text? Perhaps most importantly, why have we severed the undeniable and intriguing ties between her and Jesus Christ? This neglect of Wisdom extends to the academy as well, for although biblical scholars mention her and debate her significance, with the exception of Elizabeth A. Johnson’s *She Who Is*,<sup>1</sup> contemporary theologians have yet to produce a sustained account of Wisdom Christology. In response to this grave lack in my field of study, I offer this exploration of Wisdom Christology and its contemporary implications in reference to a few of the many themes it touches on.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1992).

Johnson's theology of Wisdom is highly trinitarian: she weaves connections between Wisdom and each person of the Trinity in turn. I have chosen to focus on Wisdom's ties to Jesus Christ, not because I do not value her theological or pneumatological significance, but because in my opinion, her ties to Jesus Christ are clearest in the Bible. As a Mennonite, mine is a christocentric theology in which the oneness of the Trinity converges in Jesus Christ, so to forge ties between Wisdom and Christ is to tie her to all three Persons of the Trinity. As reflected by my first chapter on the biblical portrayal of Wisdom, mine is also a very biblically-minded tradition, in which theology derives its authority from its firm grounding in the biblical text. My three other chapters, however, are more strictly theological, and are implicitly Trinitarian in their respective emphases on the mystery of the Incarnation, the gender of Jesus Christ, and gender in the Body of Christ. These three chapters thus approach the Trinity through the primarily christological themes of incarnation and gender, since Jesus Christ is God made (sexed and/or gendered) flesh.

The three theological themes I have chosen arise from Johnson's discussion of feminist Wisdom Christology, but are not limited to it, for they also connect to postmodern theology, feminist theology more generally, and various orthodox theologies, including insights from my own Mennonite tradition. In my thesis, I seek to use sources from all of these areas to build my own, multi-faceted Wisdom Christology. My somewhat eclectic sources do not nearly always speak directly of Wisdom, but of the issues I have identified that are closely bound to her identity. In using such a variety of perspectives, I hope to explore these issues in a dialogical way, navigating between contemporary debates and biblical and theological traditions in such a way that they mutually correct and inform one another, and are each taken seriously.



In more detail, my thesis will unfold as follows. In my first chapter, I will lay some biblical and conceptual groundwork for Wisdom Christology. Because Wisdom is unfamiliar to many, I will trace her biblical appearances, beginning with Job, Proverbs, and the Deuterocanon. This will be followed by a discussion of her relationship to other ancient Near Eastern goddesses, to the God of Israel, and to the people of God. Secondly I will draw attention to her somewhat less apparent presence in the New Testament discussions of Jesus Christ, whose actions, words, and relationship to God bear a profound resemblance to Wisdom's. This will be followed by a summary of some of the prominent scholarly debates among feminists and others concerning her significance in relation to Christ, including their similarities, differences, and whether or not Jesus Christ actually replaces Woman Wisdom. In this chapter, I hope to highlight how prominent a biblical figure Woman Wisdom is, as well as to sketch a rough portrait of her and summarize some of the arguments for and against Wisdom Christology. At the end of this chapter, I hope Wisdom Christology will at least seem a viable and potentially fruitful option for the rest of my project, consisting, as I have said, of an exploration of three connected themes arising from the interaction between Christ and Wisdom.

Chapter two will focus on the theme of mystery as it affects discussions of incarnation and language in Wisdom Christology. In response to the arguments that Wisdom is too vague or mysterious, especially because she seems to remain a mere metaphor while Christ is incarnate in history, I will argue that the mysterious Woman Wisdom can provide an important corrective for our attempts to own or explain Jesus Christ in a complete way. Using the work of Karl Rahner, Gordon D. Kaufman, and Sallie McFague, I will explore the mysterious quality of the divine, the way God occupies a paradox between hiddenness and revelation, something seen in Wisdom as well. The Incarnation, far from resolving this paradox, deepens it as God becomes flesh and

dwells among us in Jesus Christ, knitting the divine mystery and human history together in a singular and intimate way. The theme of mystery furthermore raises the issue of proper ways to name the divine, leading to a discussion of the function of metaphor and analogy in preserving the paradoxes of theological language. Because metaphor is all we have to describe the divine mystery, there cannot be a stark division between history and metaphor, or between Jesus Christ and Woman Wisdom as divine names. I will argue that the name of Jesus Christ is inclusive, wide enough to hold many names, including that of Wisdom, for the divine mystery is finally beyond all human language, yet God uses our human words and transforms them to acceptably speak of and to the divine mystery.

My third chapter concerns the gender of Jesus Christ, particularly the way in which Wisdom Christology complicates the supposedly male gender of Jesus Christ, in response to the argument that Woman Wisdom cannot be a christological name on the basis of gender. Feminists like Johnson are rightly critical of the assumption that Jesus Christ is simply male. I will argue that the tradition of seeing the gender of Jesus Christ as fluid goes back as far as the patristic era, as exemplified in the thought of Gregory of Nyssa, Hildegard of Bingen, and Julian of Norwich, among others. What allows this gender fluidity is that Jesus Christ, in his full divinity, is beyond male or female, and therefore can be imaged as either gender, or neither. This does not mean, however, that the Jesus Christ of human history can be forgotten, but though we know he possessed a male body, this does not mean he conformed strictly to the patriarchal gender assumptions of his context, as argued by Graham Ward. Jesus provides an alternative, ironic way of being male, a way which sometimes had him doing men's work and sometimes women's work, a way of service and compassion towards women and men alike. Thus in his earthly life, Jesus Christ also displays a gender fluidity. Furthermore, this same gender fluidity exists in

Woman Wisdom. She too behaves in atypical ways, refusing to conform to the stereotypical feminine behaviours of her context. In Wisdom, then, we see Christ providing an alternative way of being female. I will argue that Christ-Wisdom finally overflows gender roles, and therefore can be imaged male or female. Gender ultimately matters less than the more profound mystery of the Incarnation: that in Christ-Wisdom, we see the divine in radical solidarity with humanity, especially the oppressed.

My fourth and final chapter will explore the repercussions of Wisdom Christology in reference to how gender is viewed in the Church as the Body of Christ. If Woman Wisdom is a christological name, then the Church is in fact the Body of Christ-Wisdom, the earthly representative of the ascended (bodily-absent) Saviour until the Second Coming. In the Church, then, Christ-Wisdom attains embodiment in our male and female bodies as we follow the way of discipleship, rendering the Church a multi-gendered Body, as Ward argues. This does not mean, however, that Jesus Christ and Woman Wisdom are two gendered saviours with two gendered ethics, something paralleled in the traditional Roman Catholic portrayal of Jesus and Mary as a divine couple. Because Wisdom and Christ are one, all believers are called to follow one ethic in their discipleship. Feminists such as Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza find this unacceptable, arguing that it is oppressive to call women to servanthood because it reinforces stereotypical behaviour of submission and self-surrender. As Sarah Coakley purports, this line of argument can lead to a simple inversion of gender hierarchy instead of addressing the inconsistencies between how power is dealt with in the Church and the nature of the call to discipleship in the way of Jesus Christ. I will argue that gender cannot prescribe certain spiritual gifts to believers, but neither need believers deny their sexed bodies, for in the one Christ-Wisdom, there are myriad gifts and roles, allowing for diverse paths of discipleship for believers, whether male or

female. Following Gavin D’Costa, I will argue that differences between believers, including sex and gender, are not finally erased but transformed in the Body of Christ-Wisdom, so they are no longer obstacles to unity and love as all work together for the good of the one Body.

Finally, I include here a few comments on terminology and translation. Throughout this text, I will be referring to Wisdom as Woman Wisdom, not Lady Wisdom, as some prefer to call her. In doing so, I wish to identify the feminine gender of the term Wisdom, in Hebrew (*Chokmah*), Greek (*Sophia*), and other languages, something which is lost in the English translation. While such gender is obviously grammatical, it gains considerable significance in the biblical passages about Wisdom, who is clearly portrayed as a woman. Also, I follow Schuessler Fiorenza in avoiding the elitist connotations of the term “Lady,” preferring to use the more universal “Woman.”<sup>2</sup> I will be using the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible unless I indicate otherwise, both because it strives towards the use of gender-inclusive language and because this version includes the Apocrypha/Deuterocanon, which I make reference to despite the latter’s absence in the Bibles of Protestants and my fellow Mennonites. I include the deuterocanonical books because not only do they provide some of the most exalted and rich imagery for Woman Wisdom, but also because at the beginning of my tradition, among the Anabaptists of the Radical Reformation, the Deuterocanon was part of Scripture, as it has remained in the Roman Catholic denomination.<sup>3</sup> Even without the use of the Deuterocanonical books, Woman Wisdom is arguably still profoundly compelling, and still worthy to be counted among the names of Jesus Christ, who bears the inclusive name above all names.

May my words be acceptable in the sight of Christ-Wisdom.

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<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet*, (New York: Continuum, 1994), 42. She writes that the term “Lady” has a “race, class, and colonial bias” because it “has been restricted to women of higher status or educational refinement until very recently. It has also functioned to symbolize ‘true womanhood’ and femininity.”

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Menno Simons quote at the end of chapter 3 below.

*CHAPTER ONE*  
*Traces of Her: Biblical Appearances of Woman Wisdom*

“But where shall wisdom be found?  
And where is the place of understanding? [...]   
God understands the way to [her]  
and [...] knows [her] place.”  
Job 28:12, 23

Woman Wisdom appears with surprising frequency upon the pages of Scripture, yet she remains elusive.<sup>1</sup> There is no monolithic story concerning Woman Wisdom, no coherent Wisdom myth, but rather poetic hints and glimpses of her, scattered among a number of biblical and deuterocanonical/apocryphal books. Thus, “the biblical picture of her is a composite one,”<sup>2</sup> one requiring us to gather the pieces and to attempt to fit them together ourselves. Fragments of personified Wisdom are found in the Old Testament books of Job and Proverbs, and in the deuterocanonical books of Wisdom of Solomon (also called Book of Wisdom), Sirach (also called Ecclesiasticus or Ben Sira), and Baruch. In the New Testament, there are few explicit mentions of Wisdom, but her influence is apparent behind the scenes in the language used for Jesus Christ.

Since Woman Wisdom is a relatively obscure biblical character, this chapter will summarize the biblical traces of Woman Wisdom in the Old Testament and Deuterocanon, followed by an overview of some of the interpretive issues posed by these passages. The New Testament material related to Wisdom will then be surveyed, along with some of the major arguments for and against Wisdom Christology among feminist scholars and others. As will become clear, the mysterious and elusive quality of Wisdom has prevented scholarly consensus

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Wisdom Was Made Flesh and Pitched Her Tent Among Us,” in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology*, ed. Maryanne Evans (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 98. Johnson asserts: “Overall, there is no other personification of such depth and magnitude in the entire scriptures of Israel.” See also Susan Cady, Marian Ronan, and Hal Taussig, *Wisdom’s Feast: Sophia in Study and Celebration* (Toronto: Harper and Row, 1989), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, “Wisdom Was Made Flesh,” 98.

on her importance and function within the Bible and Christian theology. For feminist thinkers, Wisdom's biblical legacy is complex, incorporating positive, even liberating portrayals of women alongside offensively negative ones. In addition, the New Testament writers barely mention Wisdom, but pilfer ideas and language from her, seemingly in order to replace her with (the male) Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, I invite the reader to explore what is known as Wisdom Christology, and to entertain the idea that Wisdom's substantial influence on Jesus Christ deserves recognition, and can in fact provide christological reflection with rich nuances that have been mistakenly forgotten and neglected.

### ***Wisdom Arrives on the Scene: Old Testament and Deuterocanonical Appearances***

The first appearance of Woman Wisdom in the canon is a poem or hymn in Job 28 about her inaccessibility to mortals, who, despite all their ingenuity in the mining of precious things, cannot find Wisdom, the most precious resource of all. Only God knows where she is to be found, for "she is somehow present and visible to God," and through God, to human beings.<sup>3</sup> Within the book of Job, the chapter marks the end of Job's debate with his friends over the cause of Job's suffering, and reflects his struggle with the mysteriousness and incomprehensibility of God's ways. In this briefest of introductions to Wisdom, she is hardly personified, yet it is already apparent that she is closely tied to God and of utmost value to human beings.<sup>4</sup> She is also somehow related to creation, though the precise connection remains unknown.<sup>5</sup>

Proverbs is perhaps the most important book in which Woman Wisdom appears, not least because it is part of the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant canons alike. In Proverbs,

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<sup>3</sup> Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 134.

<sup>4</sup> Sharon H. Ringe, *Wisdom's Friends: Community and Christology in the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 32-33.

<sup>5</sup> Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 135.

Woman Wisdom receives much more than a passing mention. Here, her portrait gains significant detail as she emerges to fill a striking variety of roles, even gaining a voice with which to address people directly.<sup>6</sup> In chapters 1 and 8, Wisdom is portrayed as a street preacher/teacher/prophet calling out from the city gates, inviting people to seek her out, to learn her ways of justice and righteousness, and to become her followers or children. She declares, “happy [or blessed] are those who keep my ways” (8:32), but to those who reject her guidance, she utters warnings of impending judgment (1:24). She also describes her past, informing us that she was present with God during the creation of the world: “then I was beside [God], like a master worker; and I was daily [God’s] delight, rejoicing before [God] always, rejoicing in [God’s] inhabited world and delighting in the human race” (8:30-31). Wisdom thus existed before the world was formed, and worked alongside God in the very act of creation; this lends Wisdom “a unique cosmic role.”<sup>7</sup> The term for master worker in verse 30 can alternately be read as “little child,” making Wisdom God’s child, God’s daughter at play in creation as it came to be.<sup>8</sup> In chapter 9 we find Wisdom in another role, that of hostess or householder, who, having “built her house,” now prepares a feast of meat, wine, and bread, for the “simple” so she can impart wisdom to them (vv. 1-6). Wisdom, being both teacher and that which is taught, teaches *herself* to her followers. In addition, her ways are life-giving; indeed, Wisdom is a “tree of life” (3:18), and her path leads to human flourishing for those who seek her and are loyal to her (8:17-21).<sup>9</sup> In Proverbs, Wisdom is no longer inaccessible, but makes herself known in an astonishing constellation of roles: from prophet, sage or teacher to co-creator of the world and delightful child of God, to tree of life,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. and Johnson, “Wisdom Was Made Flesh,” 98.

<sup>7</sup> Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *The Grace of Sophia: A Korean North American Women’s Christology* (Cleveland OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 106.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Joyce, “Proverbs 8 in Interpretation (1): Historical Criticism and Beyond,” in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture and Theology*, ed. David F. Ford and Graham Stanton (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 100.

<sup>9</sup> Kim, 106.

mother, hostess, and lover of the wise.<sup>10</sup> In these roles, we see a female figure at home in both private and public realms, one involved in both typical and atypical women's work, and strikingly, one affectionately close to both God and human beings.

Wisdom of Solomon builds onto what Job and Proverbs have stated about Woman Wisdom. Her praises are sung in twenty-one statements about her character, a number three times the perfect number seven, which stresses "the impossibility of adequately describing Wisdom."<sup>11</sup> In Wisdom of Solomon 7:25-30, Wisdom is described in terms that are unmistakably exalted:

For she is a breath of the power of God, a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; [...] For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of [God's] goodness. [...] in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets. [...] Compared with the light she is found to be superior, for it is succeeded by the night, but against wisdom evil does not prevail.

As in Proverbs, Wisdom is described as both teacher and that which is taught, both instructor and the contents of instruction; her teaching, furthermore, does not only grant life, but immortality (e.g. Wisd. Sol. 8:13).<sup>12</sup> She is greatly desired as a bride (8:2), and those who ask God for her, receive her (8:21). In 9:1-2, her creative power is associated with the word of God: "O God of my ancestors and Lord of mercy, [you] have made all things by your word, and by your wisdom have formed humankind." Wisdom is declared saviour as well as creator as she receives credit for God's saving works throughout the history of Israel, from the protection of Adam to the Exodus from Egypt (chapters 10-19).<sup>13</sup> Wisdom of Solomon emphasizes Wisdom's closeness to God and affirms her divinity, while reflecting on the tender care that Wisdom reserves for humankind.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 106-7.

<sup>11</sup> Ringe, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Michael E. Willett, *Wisdom Christology in the Fourth Gospel* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992), 16.



Wisdom also appears in the books of Sirach and Baruch. In Sirach 1, Wisdom is identified as the first creation of God, God's first-born child, as well as God's gift to righteous human beings, for "she is created with the faithful in the womb" (v. 14). Wisdom is also equated for the first time with the Torah and faithfulness to the Law (1:26). Wisdom essentially becomes incarnate or "concretized" in the Torah, which, like in Wisdom of Solomon, allows her a part in Israel's salvation history.<sup>14</sup> Submission to the fetters and yoke of Wisdom are said to give a person rest and joy (6:24 ff). In Sirach 24, Wisdom again speaks, telling her own story, but this time she tells of God's command that she should pitch her tent among the Israelites, and serve in the "holy tent" in Jerusalem.<sup>15</sup> There she takes root and grows into a tall and fragrant tree, producing abundant fruit; she invites all to eat of her fruit, but warns, "Those who eat of me will hunger for more, and those who drink of me will thirst for more" (24:21). In Baruch, Wisdom is once again interchangeable with Torah: "She is the book of the commandments of God, the law that endures forever" (4:1). Her dwelling place is in heaven, but God made her truths available to Israel (3:29-37). The reason given for the suffering of Israel in exile is their rejection of Wisdom, a mistake with dire consequences, as already mentioned in Proverbs.<sup>16</sup> An alternative tradition, found in the apocalyptic *Similitudes of Enoch*, goes so far as to depict Wisdom's withdrawal from the earth, for she is unable to find a home because of the rejection she faces.<sup>17</sup> In Sirach and Baruch, however, Wisdom becomes God's gift to Israel, where she makes her home, and because Wisdom is so precious and difficult to find, this is a generous gift indeed.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>15</sup> Kim, 105.

<sup>16</sup> Willett, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 20. The *Similitudes of Enoch* or *Egyptian Enoch* is part of the Old Testament pseudepigrapha; Wisdom's withdrawal is found in *I Enoch* 42.

<sup>18</sup> Celia M. Deutsch, *Lady Wisdom, Jesus, and the Sages: Metaphor and Social Context in Matthew's Gospel* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 17.

Thus far, Woman Wisdom's appearances have been explicit, if not altogether clear, since her character shifts and changes depending on the biblical book.<sup>19</sup> Despite (or perhaps because of) the abundance of references to her and the sheer variety of roles and contexts she occupies, questions inevitably remain as to her precise identity. So who is this Woman Wisdom? At one end of the spectrum is the argument that Wisdom is simply a metaphor, a personification of the concept of wisdom and nothing more. According to James D.G. Dunn, "there is no clear indication that the Wisdom language [...] has gone beyond vivid personification."<sup>20</sup> Gerhard von Rad argues that Wisdom is "the primeval world order" which organizes the natural, created world and human societies, the latter through "moral law."<sup>21</sup> By implication, Wisdom is only personified as a woman because of the accident of her grammatical femininity, which does not have a broader significance. The ambiguity of the grammatical feminine in Hebrew and Greek (among other languages) is lost in the English translation, which must distinguish more clearly between "she" and "it."<sup>22</sup> But while it is true that grammatical femininity need not connote an actual woman, Wisdom seems to be much more than a concept, given the lifelike descriptions of her words and actions in her various roles, as well as the highly exalted language used of her, especially in the later deuterocanonical books.<sup>23</sup>

Carol A. Newsom observes "a curious slippage between the literal and symbolic" in the descriptions of Woman Wisdom in Proverbs. The text seems to be advising young men on sexual conduct using personified Wisdom and Folly as respective representatives of "the proper wife"

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<sup>19</sup> Silvia Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House: Studies on the Figure of Sophia in the Bible*, trans. Linda M. Maloney and William McDonough (Collegeville MN: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 2000), 17.

<sup>20</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of Incarnation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 170.

<sup>21</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, trans. James D. Martin (London: SCM Press, 1972), 161, 159.

<sup>22</sup> Ringe, 50. Her example concerns the Word being translated as "he" or "it" in John 1, but the same issue is at stake here.

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1992), 87.

and “the woman outside the group / [...] the wife of another man.”<sup>24</sup> In one sense, then, Wisdom represents the wisdom of remaining faithful to one’s Israelite spouse, as highlighted by the description of the “capable wife” at the end of the book (Prov. 31:10-31). Claudia V. Camp likewise argues that the many roles of Wisdom are drawn from the social situation of post-exilic Israel, in which the end of the monarchy (and the temporary lack of a Temple)<sup>25</sup> resulted in a society “identified by its families and organized around the needs and concerns of the household.” As a result, women’s roles were deemed critical to the well-being of Israelite society, and women’s authority began to extend into the public realm as well, if the depictions of Wisdom and of the ideal wife are any indication.<sup>26</sup> Silvia Schroer goes so far as to propose that Wisdom is “identical and interchangeable” with *women’s wisdom* specifically, that is, the wisdom needed to ‘build’ an Israelite household, including the advising of one’s husband and the socio-cultural/religious education of one’s children.<sup>27</sup> Certainly the call to listen to one’s father’s *and mother’s* teachings (1:8; 6:20) and the heading to chapter 31, identifying its contents as King Lemuel’s advice from his mother, lend further weight to this claim.<sup>28</sup> Evidently, none of these scholars would like to draw the line too starkly between actual women and symbolic ones. Newsom asserts that, “it would be a mistake to pose the pragmatic and the allegorical as either/or alternatives.”<sup>29</sup> In Camp’s opinion, the figure of personified Wisdom both drew authority from the newfound authority of actual Israelite women while it reinforced and encouraged the

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<sup>24</sup> Carol A. Newsom, “Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9,” in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. A. Bach (New York: Routledge, 1999), 93-94. See Prov. 7:4-5, for example.

<sup>25</sup> Schroer, 32. Schroer argues that households took over some functions of monarchy and Temple, while Camp mentions the lack of a monarchy only.

<sup>26</sup> Claudia V. Camp, “Woman Wisdom as Root Metaphor: A Theological Consideration,” in *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 58 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 46, 55. Proverbs 31 describes the ideal wife participating in economic activities like buying land and selling garments she has made.

<sup>27</sup> Schroer, 24, 32, 57.

<sup>28</sup> Carole R. Fontaine, “Wisdom in Proverbs,” in *In Search of Wisdom: Essays in Memory of John G. Gammie*, eds. Leo G. Perdue, et al. (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 102.

<sup>29</sup> Newsom, 94.

broadening of female roles that was underway in Israel. The new way of organizing society was thus blessed as wise. Because of this, Wisdom's identity as a woman was crucial, and reflected "an intentionality that reaches significantly beyond the grammatical."<sup>30</sup>

It must be admitted that not all feminists agree that the association between Wisdom and Israelite women is altogether positive. Schroer identifies Sirach as a misogynistic book in which Wisdom is placed firmly under Yahweh's command, is portrayed as the object of "a grasping, possessive male lust," and is used to support a patriarchal theology which praises women not for wisdom, but for silence and submissiveness.<sup>31</sup> Susanne Heine warns against the assumption that the worship of goddesses (which could include Wisdom) necessarily reflected or even guaranteed the equal status of "real women" in ancient societies; in fact, the opposite was often the case, since goddess-worship and cultic prostitution often went hand in hand, for example. Heine compares the worship of goddesses to the Roman Catholic reverence for Mary, which has not guaranteed gender equality within the Catholic church, but has at times been used to oppress women.<sup>32</sup> Newsom and others are troubled by the exaggerated contrast between Wisdom and Folly in Proverbs, as if women are all either perfect or demonic, and none are a human mixture of the two.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the book of Proverbs is unabashedly directed towards Israelite sons alone, for the personifications of Wisdom and Folly as women/wives function to give marital/sexual advice to (heterosexual) young men, not young women. Newsom argues that the symbolism bends to its breaking point, or at least loses its intended effect, when women read these texts.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Camp, "Woman Wisdom as Root Metaphor," 47, 46.

<sup>31</sup> Schroer, 38, 94, 87, 37. Schroer contrasts the sometimes-"pornographic" lust for Wisdom in Sirach with the desire to have Wisdom as a bride in Wisdom of Solomon, arguing that the latter involves a "respectful distance."

<sup>32</sup> Susanne Heine, *Matriarchs, Goddesses, and Images of God: A Critique of a Feminist Theology*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis MN: Augsburg, 1988), 50, 53, 105.

<sup>33</sup> Newsom, 95-96.

<sup>34</sup> Fontaine, 110, and Newsom, 155.

There is however another layer to consider when exploring the character of Wisdom: she is also closely tied to the divine, but exactly how again remains uncertain. In answer to the question, “Is Sophia God?,” one can perhaps only respond, “Yes and no.”<sup>35</sup> Many scholars have focused on “providing [...] her pedigree,” arguing that much of Wisdom’s identity finds its origins in the depictions of various goddesses in the Ancient Near East.<sup>36</sup> These are mainly fertility goddesses such as Asherah, Astarte, Maat and Isis, and Wisdom adopts both their imagery and responsibilities. Like them, Wisdom is called the tree of life and is said to bestow of life and prosperity (which Maat is said to hold in her hands). Their responsibilities of ensuring the fertility of the earth and thus the balance of creation, are also transferred to Wisdom.<sup>37</sup> Having just come out of exile, the Israelites had been exposed to many foreign religions, of which devotion to Isis was the most popular, so the development of Wisdom as a quasi-goddess was likely a way of overcoming the competition between Isis and Yahweh, thus incorporating a goddess-figure into Jewish monotheism.<sup>38</sup> This association with ancient goddesses has inspired some scholars to promote viewing Wisdom as a goddess in her own right in order to restore the divine feminine to Christianity and Judaism. Susan Cady, Marian Ronan, and Hal Taussig argue that Wisdom’s appearance in the Old Testament marked the “introduction of a new divine figure” into Judaism, and for this reason, they prefer to call her Sophia in order to portray her as “a person rather than a concept.”<sup>39</sup> Yet, while Wisdom may have been influenced by goddesses such as Isis and Maat, they are merely her “literary prehistory,” and she and they are not

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<sup>35</sup> Cady et al., 28.

<sup>36</sup> Roland E. Murphy, “Wisdom and Creation,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (March 1985): 8.

<sup>37</sup> Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 338, 50.

<sup>38</sup> Willett, 28, and Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 133.

<sup>39</sup> Cady et al., 29, 16.

identical.<sup>40</sup> There was almost certainly never a cult of Woman Wisdom as an independent goddess in monotheistic Israel.<sup>41</sup> Wisdom is closely related to the God of Israel, so much so that she is either God's daughter<sup>42</sup> and thus the primary mediator between God and human beings (a role appropriated from the king),<sup>43</sup> or else, given her "functional equivalence with Yahweh," she can even be interpreted "as a powerful female symbol of this one God."<sup>44</sup> Roland E. Murphy proposes that, "Wisdom is somehow identified with the Lord. The call of Lady Wisdom is the voice of the Lord [...] One does not have to choose between God and creation [including the human realm] in Lady Wisdom."<sup>45</sup> She is mysteriously representative of both, and to reduce her to one or the other is to unravel one of the central paradoxes of her identity.

Elizabeth A. Johnson aptly summarizes the ongoing scholarly debates surrounding Wisdom's ambiguous identity:

Wisdom is the personification of cosmic order; no, she is the personification of the wisdom sought and learned in Israel's wisdom schools; no, she is a personified way of speaking about God's insight and knowledge; no, she is a hypostasis, a kind of subordinate persona who operates between the transcendent, inaccessible God and those on earth; no, she is the personification of God's own self coming toward the world, dwelling in it, active for its well-being.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps it is not necessary to choose between all of these options but, following Newsom, we can allow the literal and the figurative, as well as the human and divine, to blur and blend together when speaking about Wisdom. For Christians, there is yet another interpretive option with respect to Wisdom, as there is another figure in whom the literal, figurative, human and divine are combined: namely, Jesus the Christ. Even in the brief survey of Wisdom passages

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<sup>40</sup> Murphy, "Wisdom and Creation," 8.

<sup>41</sup> P.M. Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 90, and Dunn, 176.

<sup>42</sup> Perdue, 338.

<sup>43</sup> Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, Bible and Literature Series, 11 (Decatur GA: Almond Press, 1985), 273.

<sup>44</sup> Johnson, "Wisdom Was Made Flesh," 99.

<sup>45</sup> Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 138-139.

<sup>46</sup> "Wisdom Was Made Flesh," 99.

above, “echoes” of the New Testament portrayal of Jesus are evident. Since Wisdom came first, these echoes in fact occur in the reverse order: Isaiah 11:2, for instance, describes the suffering servant as the one upon whom “the spirit of wisdom” will “rest,” leading to the fascinating question of whether there is such a thing as a New Testament Wisdom Christology.<sup>47</sup>

### ***Woman Wisdom Behind the Scenes: New Testament Echoes***

Before discussing the arguments in favour of and against Wisdom Christology, a look at the New Testament traces of Woman Wisdom is in order. As if intensifying her hiddenness, Wisdom becomes largely an implicit presence in the New Testament, apparent only to those diligently searching for her. Her influence is strongest in the Gospels of Matthew and John, but hints of her are peppered throughout the rest of the New Testament writings as well, from several Pauline epistles to Revelation. These references to Wisdom vary from discussions of Jesus Christ as the wisdom of God to descriptions of Jesus using language obviously borrowed from passages concerning Woman Wisdom.

Celia M. Deutsch highlights a number of passages in Matthew in which Woman Wisdom and Jesus are identified, the most overt being Matthew 11:19. In answer to the complaints against his eating with outcasts, Jesus says, “Yet Wisdom is justified by her deeds,” implying that his deeds are those of Woman Wisdom, or even that he is Wisdom herself. In the Lukan parallel, the verse reads, “Yet Wisdom is justified by all her children” (7:35), thus leaving some distance between Jesus and Wisdom.<sup>48</sup> In Matthew, there is no such gap; rather, the connection between Wisdom’s and Jesus’ deeds is complete, emphasizing their common roles of public prophet, teacher/sage, and welcoming host, as well as the common reactions they receive when

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Celia M. Deutsch, “Wisdom in Matthew: Transformation of a Symbol,” *Novum Testamentum* 32 (January 1990): 33. The scripture translations are hers.

some of their hearers reject them.<sup>49</sup> One such rejection occurs when Jesus returns to his hometown in Matthew 13:54 (Mark 6:2), and the townspeople wonder, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power?” and refuse to believe his words.<sup>50</sup> Jesus’ use of parables to “proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world” (Matt. 13:35), as well as Jesus’ prayer in Matthew 11:25-27, bring to light the tension between revelation and hiddenness shared by Jesus and Wisdom, a dynamic not unrelated to their acceptance and rejection. Jesus’ use of parables and beatitudes (Matt. 5) furthermore strengthens his ties to the sages, as these are typical of wisdom discourse, and echo Wisdom’s words of blessing in Proverbs 8.<sup>51</sup> In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus invites those who are weary to take up his yoke and find rest in his teachings, an invitation nearly identical to Wisdom’s in Sirach 6 and 51. Further, Jesus’ teachings centre around the Torah, also paralleling the equation of Wisdom and the Torah in Sirach and Baruch.<sup>52</sup> In Matthew 23:34, Jesus again speaks Wisdom’s words, lamenting the rejection of the “prophets, sages and scribes” he will send, whereas in Luke 11:49, it is Wisdom who sends them.<sup>53</sup> Jesus’ maternal affection for the inhabitants of Jerusalem (Matt. 23:37) also points to Wisdom, who is likened to a mother, calling her followers her children.<sup>54</sup> In all these ways the depiction of Jesus in Matthew can be seen to incorporate aspects of Wisdom’s character, role, and even her very words, making it possible that, unlike in Luke, where Jesus and Wisdom are distinct, the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 36, and Ringe 57.

<sup>50</sup> Schroer, 122.

<sup>51</sup> Ringe, 59, and Leo D. Lefebure, *Toward a Contemporary Wisdom Christology: A Study of Karl Rahner and Norman Pittenger* (New York: University Press of America, 1988), 26, 28. Lefebure also identifies Jesus’ superiority to Solomon in Matthew 12:42 as a link to the wisdom tradition, but not to Wisdom outright.

<sup>52</sup> Deutsch, “Wisdom in Matthew,” 37-38.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 41, and Kim, 119.

<sup>54</sup> Deutsch, “Wisdom in Matthew,” 46, and *Lady Wisdom, Jesus, and the Sages*, 14. See Prov. 8:32 and Sir. 15:2.



Matthean use of Wisdom material expresses that Jesus “is not simply Sophia’s child or envoy, but her embodiment.”<sup>55</sup>

The Gospel of John contains just as many connections between Jesus and Woman Wisdom, if not more. Firstly, there is the Johannine Prologue, thought to be an altered Wisdom hymn with the ‘Word of God’ substituted for the ‘Wisdom of God.’<sup>56</sup> The association between Wisdom and Word has already been made in Wisdom of Solomon, as we have seen, but here the Wisdom connections are deepened. In John 1, it was the Word who was present with God before creation and who functioned as co-creator, just as Wisdom did in Proverbs and Sirach; it was the Word who became flesh and dwelt (literally “tabernacled” or “set up tent”) as God’s envoy among human beings, very much like Wisdom in Sirach 24; it was the Word who was associated with the Torah of Moses, like Wisdom in Sirach and Baruch;<sup>57</sup> and it was the Word who was the light, glory, and life-giving child of God who was accepted by some and rejected by others.<sup>58</sup> In other words, Wisdom’s entire identity was transferred to the Word of God, Jesus the Christ. Furthermore, this intimate identification does not end with the Prologue, as all of these themes recur throughout the book of John, along with further similarities. Michael E. Willett organizes the parallels between Jesus and Woman Wisdom into six themes: “pre-existence, descent-ascent, revelation-hiddenness, acceptance-rejection, intimacy with disciples, and glory and life.”<sup>59</sup> The pre-existence of Jesus is most starkly asserted by Jesus himself, who declares that he “is” before Abraham (John 8:58).<sup>60</sup> Jesus describes himself as being sent from above, and this descent into the flesh is balanced by the “lifting up” of the crucifixion; “Jesus ascends by way of the cross,”

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<sup>55</sup> Kim, 120.

<sup>56</sup> Ringe, 46.

<sup>57</sup> Ben Witherington III, *John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 53-55. Word and Wisdom are parallels in Wisd. Sol. 9:1-2, for example, as quoted above.

<sup>58</sup> Ringe, 50-51. Wisd. of Sol. 7 identifies all of these with Wisdom.

<sup>59</sup> Willett, 49.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 50, 52.

which could be compared to Wisdom’s descent to live in Israel (Sirach 24) and withdrawal after she is rejected (Prov. 1, *I Enoch* 42).<sup>61</sup> Jesus’ exclusive closeness to God is reflected in the closeness of Jesus and his disciples, just as Wisdom was as a daughter to God as well as a bride or mother to those devoted to her.<sup>62</sup> In addition, the disciples of both figures are called friends: Jesus calls his disciples friends instead of slaves (John 15:13-15), whereas Wisdom makes her followers into “friends of God” in Wisdom of Solomon 7:27.<sup>63</sup> Those who do not follow the commandments of Jesus are threatened with judgment just as those who reject Wisdom’s instruction.<sup>64</sup> Strikingly, all of Jesus’ “I am” sayings except for “good shepherd” could also be said of Wisdom; for instance, she too is “bread” (Sir. 24:21), a “vine” (Sir. 24:17, 19) and the “way” (Prov. 3:17; 8:32).<sup>65</sup> The imagery of Wisdom preparing a feast of bread, wine, and water in Proverbs 9, 13, 16, and Sirach 15 and 24 points to Jesus’ first miracle of turning water into wine, his statements about being living water (John 4) and the bread of life (John 6).<sup>66</sup> The “I am” statements furthermore highlight Jesus’ dual role of revealer and that which is revealed, just as Wisdom is teacher and the wisdom that is taught.<sup>67</sup> Finally, both are teachers in private and public spheres alike, equally comfortable in the streets as in the privacy of a home.<sup>68</sup> In all of these ways, Jesus’ actions, words, and very identity in the Gospel of John reference concepts and language drawn from Woman Wisdom.

The rest of the New Testament contains several passing references to Jesus Christ as Wisdom. In I Corinthians 1 and 2, Paul contrasts the Wisdom of God, i.e., the mystery of the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>63</sup> Ringe, 56.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 61. Ringe also includes “light” (Wisd. Sol. 7:26), “truth” (Prov. 8:7), “life” (Prov. 3:18; 8:38) and “even the ‘gate of the sheep’ that parallels Wisdom’s door as the way to life in Prov. 8:34-35.”

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 60. One could of course also add the Last Supper, which Jesus hosts, and which is a meal of bread and wine, according to the other Gospels.

<sup>67</sup> Willett, 81.

<sup>68</sup> Ringe, 57-58.

gospel, with human standards of wisdom, which deem the cross foolishness. Paul states, “we proclaim Christ crucified, [...] to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom [or *sophia*] of God. Christ Jesus [...] became for us wisdom [*sophia*] from God” (I. Cor. 23-25, 30). The retention of the Greek *sophia* highlights the personified quality of Jesus as the Wisdom of God.<sup>69</sup> I Corinthians 2 emphasizes the hiddenness or mysteriousness of the wisdom of the Gospel, a subject taken up again in Colossians 1 and 2 and Ephesians 3:9-11.<sup>70</sup> Colossians 1:15-20 describes Jesus’ relationship with God in virtually the same language as that of Wisdom in Wisdom of Solomon 7, and continues on the subject of Paul’s mission “to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations [...] God’s mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 1:25-26; 2:2-3). As in Wisdom of Solomon 9 and 18, we see the association between the Wisdom and Word of God, but here both names are applied to Jesus Christ, who is understood as “God’s word of wisdom.”<sup>71</sup> Other New Testament passages that echo concepts or language related to Woman Wisdom include Ephesians 1:17, where Jesus is portrayed as giving a “spirit of wisdom” to believers, recalling the “kindly spirit” of Woman Wisdom passing into holy souls in Wisdom of Solomon 1:6 and 7:27; Hebrews 1:1-3 and James 3:13-17, both of which parallel Wisdom of Solomon 7;<sup>72</sup> also, Romans 10:6-8,<sup>73</sup> Philippians 2:6-11, and I Timothy 3:16 all explain the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in terms of descent and ascent, like in the Gospel of John.<sup>74</sup> Finally, various passages in Revelation communicate that “Wisdom is given through the words and by

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<sup>69</sup> Cady et al., 33.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 36-37, and Morna D. Hooker, “Where is Wisdom to be Found? Colossians 1:15-20 (1),” in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture and Theology*, ed. David F. Ford and Graham Stanton (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 124.

<sup>71</sup> Lefebure, 37, 43, and Hooker, 121.

<sup>72</sup> Cady et al., 43, and Lefebure, 53.

<sup>73</sup> Dunn, 176.

<sup>74</sup> Schuessler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 189.

the Word.” In Revelation 5:12 and 7:12, God and Jesus Christ, the slain Lamb, are intimate with Wisdom, who dwells with them and rules with them from the divine throne, that “place of highest wisdom.”<sup>75</sup>

The above discussion, though far from exhaustive, has hopefully conveyed a sense that, to those alert to the language and concepts of Woman Wisdom, evidence for her connection to Jesus Christ can be found in descriptions of him throughout the New Testament, from the Gospels to Revelation. Granted, the link is largely an implicit one, yet the amount of material relating the two figures is too vast, and the connections between them too close, to be simply ignored. So what exactly is going on in this “strangely unacknowledged and muted”<sup>76</sup> link between Woman Wisdom and Jesus Christ? Can a case be made for a New Testament Wisdom Christology? It is to the arguments for and against such a Wisdom Christology that we now turn.

### *Woman Wisdom as Christ Incarnate: Some Scholarly Opinions*

In some ways, Wisdom Christology seems to add another layer of confusion to the discussion surrounding Woman Wisdom, and indeed scholars are in vehement disagreement over its significance. Some propose that the early church drew on the language and concepts of Woman Wisdom to articulate its experience of Jesus Christ, making the earliest Christology Wisdom Christology. This position is of particular interest to feminist theologians, who see value in the recovery of a feminine name for Jesus Christ, since he can be seen as Wisdom made flesh. Other scholars argue that the evidence is insufficient to make such a claim, and that if early Christians applied Wisdom language to Jesus Christ, it resulted in the eclipse of Woman Wisdom; Jesus

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<sup>75</sup> Tina Pippin, “Wisdom and Apocalyptic in the Apocalypse of John: Desiring Sophia,” in *In Search of Wisdom: Essays in Memory of John G. Gammie*, eds. Leo G. Perdue, et al. (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 287-289.

<sup>76</sup> Cady et al., 43.

Christ replaced her and thereby rendered her irrelevant to present-day Christianity. The symbolics of a male figure replacing a female one are understandably unacceptable to some feminists, who promote disassociating Wisdom and Jesus so as to preserve her gender. But must Wisdom Christology obscure more than it reveals, or is it possible for the two figures to shed light on each other's identities precisely *because* of their profound similarities?

Ben Witherington III states that, "the attempt to adequately express the theological significance of [Jesus'] career led early Jewish Christians to draw on the most exalted language they could find – Jewish wisdom speculation."<sup>77</sup> James D.G. Dunn likewise calls Wisdom Christology "the strongest antecedent to a full blown incarnation Christology,"<sup>78</sup> while Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza argues that the "earliest Christian theology is sophiology."<sup>79</sup> That the early church drew on Wisdom passages to help explain Jesus' life, death and resurrection is undeniable.<sup>80</sup> As we have seen, the parallels between them are too numerous to ignore, especially the important common element of rejection; in all likelihood, early Christians came to believe Jesus' life was "foreshadowed if not also foretold [...] in the story of Wisdom."<sup>81</sup> One need only look at the early Christian creeds to find examples of this. The Nicene Creed, finalized in 381 C.E., contains recognizable phrases from biblical passages about Woman Wisdom, which it applies to Jesus Christ, thereby revealing early Christian Wisdom Christology in action.<sup>82</sup> The same rhetoric can be found in the arguments against the Arian heresy, which involved the interpretation of Proverbs 8, a text universally assumed by fourth-century Christians to pertain to

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<sup>77</sup> Witherington, 51.

<sup>78</sup> Dunn, 7, 196. Dunn speaks of early Christians "*ransacking the vocabulary available to them in order that they might express as fully as possible the significance of Jesus*" (emphasis his).

<sup>79</sup> Schuessler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 134.

<sup>80</sup> Dunn, 8.

<sup>81</sup> Witherington, 57. The rejection/crucifixion of Jesus Christ had the potential to undermine the entire message of the Gospel, but, through the help of Wisdom terminology and other Old Testament concepts, it could be articulated as Christ's victory rather than his defeat.

<sup>82</sup> Oskar Skarsaune, "From the Jewish Messiah to the Creeds of the Church," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 32 (July 2008): 231-232, 235.

the pre-existence of Jesus Christ.<sup>83</sup> This does not mean, of course, that Jesus Christ was exclusively believed to be divine Wisdom incarnate; Wisdom was one of sixteen different figures from the Jewish scriptures who contributed to the biblical portrayal of Jesus Christ, from Adam to the Messiah, and from Moses to the Wisdom and Word of God. Among these, however, Wisdom is the only female figure,<sup>84</sup> and the most exalted, for “None of the other symbols they used – Son of Man, Messiah, Son of God – connotes divinity in its original context, nor does the Word, which is barely personified in the Jewish scriptures. But Wisdom does.” Wisdom’s cosmic significance was thus transferred to Jesus, a historical human being, whose own cosmic significance as the Christ could thereby be expressed in language drawn from the Jewish tradition.<sup>85</sup>

Why then is Wisdom Christology virtually unknown to many Christians today? If it was such a critical element of early Christology, why did it fall into disuse in Western Christianity? Likely at issue were the differences between Jesus Christ and Wisdom, for though they have much in common, the two figures are not identical. Three major discrepancies are the historical, bodily life of Jesus, the unique role and different theological emphasis of each figure, and the difference in their genders. The first major way in which Jesus and Wisdom differ is that in Jesus’ case, “the metaphysical has given way to the historical.”<sup>86</sup> Jesus actually entered history as a human being, and even underwent suffering and death. Conversely, Wisdom, though at first identified with actual Israelite women, later developed into a highly spiritual being in the deuterocanonical literature, one who was transported unharmed to heaven when she was

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<sup>83</sup> Joyce, 89, and Frances Young, “Proverbs 8 in Interpretation (2): Wisdom Personified,” in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture and Theology*, eds. David F. Ford and Graham Stanton (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 103.

<sup>84</sup> Casey, 81, 89.

<sup>85</sup> Johnson, “Wisdom Was Made Flesh,” 105, and Dunn, 167.

<sup>86</sup> Michael E. Willet quoted in Ringe, 51.

rejected.<sup>87</sup> This made her an appealing figure among Gnostic Christians, who made use of Wisdom Christology to bolster their argument that Jesus Christ was never fully human and never actually died on the cross, but remained solely spiritual and divine. This Gnostic interpretation of Wisdom Christology is one possible explanation for the strange lack of articulation concerning Wisdom Christology in the New Testament. The New Testament writers were simply trying to distance themselves from the Gnostic heresy.<sup>88</sup>

The second issue involves the exclusivity of each figure's claims, such as their unique relationships with God. It is difficult if not impossible to distribute these roles or titles between two figures, since, for example, Jesus Christ and Wisdom cannot *both* be God's firstborn child or primary representative on earth!<sup>89</sup> This is where Wisdom's mysteriousness puts her at a disadvantage. Wisdom's biblical claims to divinity are never stated outright, whereas John 1 is unambiguous about Jesus, the Word, being God.<sup>90</sup> Even Wisdom's life-story, the so-called Wisdom myth in which she descends from heaven, dwells on earth, and returns to heaven following her rejection, does not appear in the Bible in its entirety. As Roland E. Murphy points out, "the idea of her reascending [...] is expressed in *1 Enoch* 42," which is not included in either Protestant or Catholic canons.<sup>91</sup> There is thus no coherent or straightforward Wisdom myth in the Bible, leading to the rejection of the theory of "a single, static Jewish wisdom myth" and its application to Jesus. Rather, "scholars speak increasingly of a fluid, many-sided wisdom-complex,"<sup>92</sup> which partly explains Wisdom's increased elusiveness in the New Testament.

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<sup>87</sup> Schroer, 24,38, 120.

<sup>88</sup> Cady et al., 44.

<sup>89</sup> Norman R. Petersen, *The Gospel of John and the Sociology of Light: Language and Characterization in the Fourth Gospel* (Valley Forge PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), 123.

<sup>90</sup> Cady et al., 49. According to Ringe, Prov. 3:19 and Wisd. Sol. 7:21 "come close" to declaring Wisdom God, but do not actually do so.

<sup>91</sup> Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 146. Italics are mine, since *Enoch* is not actually a biblical book.

<sup>92</sup> Frances Taylor Gench, *Wisdom in the Christology of Matthew* (New York: University Press of America, 1997), 5.

Wisdom seems to be somehow incomplete in both Old and New Testaments, thus what appears is a partial portrait, a work-in-progress whose incarnation was not fully “worked out.”<sup>93</sup> By contrast, Jesus Christ has a tangible existence and particular, historical life-story, even if other aspects of his being are more mysterious; it would seem that Wisdom-Sophia “is displaced by a human being,” Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>94</sup>

This observation has serious consequences for the relationship between Jesus and Wisdom. If Jesus Christ absorbs the identity of Wisdom and overflows it, out-doing Wisdom in some ways, he could be seen as replacing her and thereby rendering her irrelevant. According to a number of scholars, this is precisely the relationship between them. Wisdom becomes a kind of rough draft for Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, not Sophia-Wisdom, becomes “*the exhaustive embodiment of divine wisdom; all the divine fullness dwelt in him,*” leaving no room for Wisdom. In other words, “the Christ event itself” now determined what God’s wisdom looked like.<sup>95</sup> Based on this interpretation, several scholars dismiss Wisdom as unimportant to Christology and warn against the “overuse” of Wisdom language for Christ beyond its supposedly minor role in the New Testament.<sup>96</sup> In other words, Wisdom is an interesting element of Jesus Christ’s theological “prehistory” (like the Ancient Near Eastern goddesses were for Wisdom), but ultimately has little or nothing to do with questions of Christology. According to other scholars, the central emphases of Jesus’ and Wisdom’s teachings are incompatible. The association of Wisdom and Jesus Christ threatens to distort the very message of the Gospel because wisdom literature is supposedly incurably patriarchal and elitist, concerned only with the

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<sup>93</sup> Cady et al., 31, and Robert Morgan, “Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God (2),” in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture and Theology*, ed. David F. Ford and Graham Stanton (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 29.

<sup>94</sup> Petersen, 127.

<sup>95</sup> Dunn, 195, 209, emphasis his.

<sup>96</sup> Morgan, 35-36.



sages and the king. The interests of the two figures are at serious odds, since one represents the status quo and the other its prophetic overturning.<sup>97</sup> Evidently, neither line of argument allows for the possibility of Jesus Christ reinterpreting Wisdom's role and message, but rather advocates severing all ties between them.<sup>98</sup>

The third difference between Jesus and Wisdom has to do with gender, a subject at the centre of feminist theology. Some scholars theorize that the reason Wisdom Christology faded from Western Christian consciousness was because the two figures are of 'opposite' genders. "Wisdom is portrayed in strongly feminine terms, and so it is *unlikely that this imagery would be regarded as important*, after Jesus has very strongly identified himself as the Son."<sup>99</sup> Other scholars describe the Christ-Wisdom connection as not "credible" or as excessively "awkward" because of the difference in gender.<sup>100</sup> This is also one explanation for why John 1 is about the Word rather than about Wisdom, because the Greek word *Logos* is grammatically masculine, and hence supposedly a superior metaphor for the man Jesus. The motive behind this substitution may have been innocent, or it may have been a deliberate attempt to "eclipse language pointing toward feminine imagery for God."<sup>101</sup> According to Philo, the first-century Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, the female was associated with evil, the body, emotion, and passivity, and so could not represent the divine; only the male, associated with goodness, the spiritual, rationality and action, could do so, hence Sophia-Wisdom was actually male, or at least she was subordinate to the male Word/*Logos*.<sup>102</sup> Perhaps because of Philo, the New Testament use of Wisdom language

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<sup>97</sup> Luise Schottroff paraphrased by Schuessler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 156.

<sup>98</sup> Schroer, 123, 125. Schroer mentions Schottroff and Dorothee Soelle as proponents of this idea.

<sup>99</sup> Simon J. Gathercole, *The Pre-existent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006), 196. Emphasis mine.

<sup>100</sup> A. Van Roon, "The Relation Between Christ and the Wisdom of God According to Paul," *Novum Testamentum* 16 (1974): 222, and W. Knox quoted in Johnson, *She Who Is*, 98, (respectively).

<sup>101</sup> Ringe, 47. Alternately, it may have sought to resonate with various strands of Greek philosophy in connecting Christ and the *Logos* principle. See Dunn, 171.

<sup>102</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 97-98, and Cady et al., 11.

for Jesus Christ seems to cause “the *female* nature of [... Wisdom] to be absorbed into the *male* figure of Jesus.”<sup>103</sup> The symbolism of the male Jesus taking the place of Woman Wisdom is disturbing to many feminist scholars, including Schuessler Fiorenza. In her opinion, the hesitation of New Testament writers to expressly link Wisdom and Jesus Christ allowed the divinisation of Jesus’ maleness to take place, meaning Jesus’ maleness was assumed to reflect that God is male. In an effort to revive Wisdom-Sophia’s part in the Incarnation, Schuessler Fiorenza advocates viewing Jesus as “an eminent prophet of Sophia, [...] the child of Sophia-G\*d.” Wisdom-Sophia then becomes an alternative, feminine name for God, who is beyond gender, but also for Mary, the mother of Jesus, who functions as a quasi-divine female figure within Roman Catholicism. These associations allow Wisdom her own voice and preserve her female identity.<sup>104</sup> For opposite reasons, these scholars would clearly prefer to keep some distance between the male Jesus Christ and the female Woman Wisdom.

But is Wisdom Christology really inherently patriarchal and competitive, resulting in Jesus Christ usurping the place of Wisdom and erasing her legacy? Must gender difference be an insurmountable obstacle to a meaningful Wisdom Christology? A number of feminist theologians present an alternative interpretation in which Jesus Christ does not supercede Wisdom, but in fact carries her into history through his own incarnation, thereby “expanding the space within which Sophia operates.”<sup>105</sup> Said differently, if Wisdom is a name for God and Jesus is Wisdom-God made flesh, he has not rendered her irrelevant, but has deemed her one of the most relevant and important names for and images of God. In the process, Jesus Christ reinterprets Wisdom’s identity and message, as with other Old Testament names used for Jesus.

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<sup>103</sup> Schroer, 120, and Deutsch, *Lady Wisdom, Jesus, and the Sages*, 78. Emphasis added.

<sup>104</sup> Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet*, (New York: Continuum, 1994), 153, 140, 142, 164.

<sup>105</sup> Cady et al., 46.

If it were true that the difference in genders renders Wisdom an inappropriate name for Jesus Christ, the same would have to be said of the title Messiah, since Jesus did not exactly fulfill the messianic hope for a heroic, militant king.<sup>106</sup> If this major divergence is of little consequence for Jesus being called Messiah or Christ, why should gender difference stand in the way of Wisdom Christology? Johnson writes, “Since Jesus the Christ is depicted as divine Sophia, then it is not unthinkable – it is not even unbiblical – to confess Jesus the Christ as the incarnation of God imaged in female symbol. Whoever espouses a wisdom Christology is asserting that Jesus is the human being Sophia became; that Sophia in all her fullness was in him.”<sup>107</sup> In other words, Jesus Christ and Woman Wisdom are one and the same; he and she are a single figure. Viewed this way, Wisdom Christology involves a certain mutuality between Woman Wisdom and Jesus Christ: in their intimate association, both are “transformed – the first by the saga of the incarnation, and the second by the feminine (even female) qualities by which his divine identity is defined.”<sup>108</sup> She provides him with the cosmic and exalted language needed to express his relationship with God, while he embodies her words and actions in the realm of human history.<sup>109</sup> Thus, the recovery or rediscovery of Wisdom Christology indeed seems to have the capacity to point us toward the “creative, redeeming paradox of Jesus-Sophia,” Woman Wisdom made flesh in a male human being,<sup>110</sup> God’s Wisdom expressed on earth through God’s Word.

Having thus briefly glimpsed Wisdom’s place within the Scriptures, tasted the major issues surrounding her identity, and overheard several scholarly debates underway about her in

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<sup>106</sup> Schroer, 123, 125. Schroer argues against Schottroff and Soelle that Wisdom Christology emphasizes the prophetic threads *already present* in wisdom literature. I agree with her here.

<sup>107</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 99.

<sup>108</sup> Ringe, 62.

<sup>109</sup> Cady et al., 46, Witherington, 56, and Ringe, 51.

<sup>110</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Redeeming the Name of Christ – Christology,” in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 128.

both feminist circles and beyond, I hope the reader feels somewhat equipped to continue, and, more importantly, feels it is worthwhile! Though much more could be said about every one of the issues identified, I will leave that to more capable scholars, and turn to three key themes to which Wisdom Christology speaks, which I will deal with in detail in each of the chapters that follow. These are: the mystery of the Incarnation, the gender of Jesus Christ, and gender in the Body of Christ, the Church. Though these may appear to be somewhat ordinary christological issues, each is transformed when framed in terms of Wisdom-Sophia. Therefore, having laid the biblical and conceptual foundation for these three interrelated discussions, let us accept Wisdom's invitation into her house; let us be her guests, and see what she has to teach us about Jesus, our Christ.

*CHAPTER TWO*  
*Only God Knows the Way to Her:*  
*Wisdom Christology and the Mystery of the Incarnation*

“I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love,  
so that they may [...] have the knowledge of God’s mystery,  
that is, Christ himself,  
in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”  
Colossians 2:2-3

In chapter one, I have introduced Woman Wisdom, that most elusive of biblical characters, and raised some of the significant arguments in favour of Wisdom Christology in general, and a specific Wisdom Christology in which Jesus Christ and Wisdom mutually clarify one another’s identities, actions, and sayings. In short, I have argued that God’s Wisdom, she who existed with God before creation, was made flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus, the Christ. Yet not all has become clear, nor should it, considering both of these figures, and the God to whom they are so intimately connected, occupy the space between hiddenness and revelation. Therein lies the key to the mysteriousness of Wisdom: within the Wisdom Christology promoted here, Wisdom’s elusive identity can serve to remind us of the mysteriousness of the Incarnation, thus providing an important corrective to overly humanistic or literalized Christologies.

This chapter will take a more theological turn than chapter one, which focused largely on biblical scholarship. In reference to the work of Karl Rahner, Gordon D. Kaufman, and Sallie McFague, among others, I will firstly discuss the theme of mystery as it relates to Christology and the mystery of the Incarnation, that incomprehensible coming-together of divinity and humanity. This will be followed by an exploration of the issue of the language of theological and christological mystery, especially as it relates to analogy and metaphor as tools for describing the indescribable, even as it enters human history. Throughout these discussions, Woman Wisdom will make her appearances, drawing our attention to the ways in which we misunderstand God,

in which we try to fully explain and comprehend a God who is beyond all human concepts and languages, yet who became one of us in Jesus Christ. What, if anything, does Woman Wisdom have to teach us about that mystery at the centre of our faith: namely, the incarnation of our transcendent God, who came near to us in human form? Let us explore what insights she can help bring to light.

### ***Mystery Drawing Near: Hidden Revelation, Incarnation, and Wisdom***

As already mentioned, Woman Wisdom and Jesus Christ have much in common, but they are not identical. Not only are their genders apparently different, but Wisdom seems much more mysterious than Jesus Christ, not least because her connections to history appear less definite and tangible than his. What then is the purpose of forging ties between Jesus Christ and this baffling Wisdom figure? Would Christology not remain simpler and clearer without her? It likely would, but certainly over-simplification is a looming danger in Christology. Among more orthodox Christians, this can take the form of literalizing the doctrines concerning Jesus Christ to the point of idolizing them; stated differently, “The use of manuals that explain[...] Christ in deductive logic [can give] the impression that we [know] Christ thoroughly and definitively.”<sup>1</sup> Because of the careful philosophical arguments of classical doctrines, the illusion that Christ can be fully explained and grasped can arise. Other Christians insist on the historical literalness of every statement in the Bible, a (Protestant) variation on the literalizing of doctrines. Among more liberal Christians, there is the potential to over-humanize Christ. Because of the Western cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 11. Johnson is referring to the state of Christology in Rahner’s time, which is why he felt it important to reintroduce mystery into it.

emphasis on human rationality and empirical evidence,<sup>2</sup> some Christians are suspicious of the claims that Jesus Christ is divine, preferring to paint him instead as a prophet, a virtuous human being and moral example, but no more an incarnation of God than the rest of us.<sup>3</sup> Both of these, I would argue, are in fact idolatrous Christologies, for they present a view of Christ devoid of mystery, and thus distorted. As William C. Placher states, “Transcendence that fits our categories has been domesticated.”<sup>4</sup>

Because of these dangers, Denis Edwards sees precisely the mysterious and indefinite quality of Wisdom as positive for Christology, as it breaks apart our sense of having grasped and understood Christ in some complete way. He argues,

It seems to me that a Wisdom Christology is not only faithful to the biblical origins of a theology of pre-existence, but can point us in the direction of a less concrete imaginative grasp of the pre-existing One. It can involve a helpful “negative theology” of the imagination. This great tradition of divine incomprehensibility must be applied to the pre-existence of Christ, and I believe that a Sophia Christology can help preserve the “unknowing” in our approach to the Second Person of the Trinity better than a Son of God Christology.<sup>5</sup>

While I disagree with Edwards that there needs to be a choice between the two Christologies, or even that they can be distinguished or disentangled at all, his point is an important one: the addition of Wisdom Christology to the Christian imagination can remind us of the mysteriousness of God, even – or perhaps especially – God incarnate in Jesus the Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 3. Placher traces the roots of this back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century (the beginning of modernity), when “thinkers grew more confident about human capacities – about their ability to understand God and God’s role in the world and to contribute to human salvation – and narrowed their understanding of what counted as reasonable articulation of and argument for faith. That combination [...] led theology astray.”

<sup>3</sup> For instance, see Gordon D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 144. There are those in my own tradition of Mennonites who promote this kind of Christology, and it is generally the view of Jesus held in secular Western society (insofar as it pays any attention to Christology).

<sup>4</sup> Placher, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Denis Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology*, Ecology and Justice Series (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 59.

Twentieth-century Catholic theologian Karl Rahner built his thought around the concept of the mystery of God. Rahner argues against the view that mystery is a peripheral aspect of God's character as understood by human beings, "a sort of regrettably permanent limitation of our blessed comprehension of God." Instead, God's mystery envelops everything we know about God, and is the very ground of human faith and devotion to God. Even revelation is but the revelation of God's (unsolved and unsolvable) mystery, meaning that "the supreme act of knowledge is not the abolition or diminution of the mystery but its final assertion, its eternal and total immediacy."<sup>6</sup> In biblical terms, this means that when humans encounter God, God is not perceived face to face, but is hidden in cloud, fire, or whirlwind. God is simultaneously revealed or active in human history *and* hidden or shrouded in the mystery of divinity. To know God is to know the One who surpasses human capabilities for understanding and reasoning, the one known only as "I Am," who exists in "the nameless region beyond all categories." Yet God *is* revealed and known, as the cloud, fire and whirlwind attest; these 'disguises' simultaneously lend certainty to God's presence while veiling God's face from human eyes.<sup>7</sup> In the words of Samuel E. Balentine, "the experience of God's hiddenness, just as the experience of his presence, is an integral part of [...] faith. Both experiences derive from the nature of God [...]"<sup>8</sup> Faith in God is born at this juncture between presence and absence,<sup>9</sup> thus God's revelation is the revelation of God as unalterably hidden, eternally mysterious.

Because of the mystery of God, Rahner argues, faith does not consist primarily of *knowledge* of God, but of *love* of God, because love is beyond knowledge, or rather, is

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," in *Theological Investigations IV: More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 41.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Elliot Friedman, *The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery* (Toronto: Little, Brown, and Co., 1995), 18.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel E. Balentine, *The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1983), 124.

<sup>9</sup> James L. Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment: Israelite Traditions of God as an Oppressive Presence*, Overtures to Biblical Theology Series (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 64, n. 18.



knowledge, perfected.<sup>10</sup> James K.A. Smith likewise speaks of faith as “a *different* knowing, a non-objectifying, non-violent ‘relation’ with the other [...], a knowledge *which is not comprehension*.”<sup>11</sup> This is a *relational* knowing such as that which exists in relationships between people. To confess to knowing someone is not to say one has thoroughly analyzed the person, but that one is familiar with him or her and has related to him or her in one way or another. In the same way, the goal of faith is not to finally know God completely through quasi-scientific analysis, but to draw near to God, who draws near to us, yet remains ever-mysterious. Within this frame of reference, God’s revelation does not impart more and more knowledge to believers, but contains “the radical possibility of the absolute proximity of the mystery, which is not eliminated by its proximity, but really presented as mystery.” It is “the *nearness* of the *abiding* mystery.”<sup>12</sup> Thus Rahner asserts, “the climax of our knowledge of God is knowledge of our ignorance.”<sup>13</sup>

Though Rahner does not express the divine mystery in terms of Wisdom, I believe the same tension between hiddenness and revelation can be traced in her biblical portrayal as well. Woman Wisdom appears to wear at least two different masks in the Scriptures: she is, on one hand, the utterly hidden Wisdom of Job 28, whom Job cannot access directly, and of whom he declares that only God knows the way to her (v. 23). On the other hand, she is the public prophet-preacher of Proverbs, who stands at the city gates declaring her message for all to hear, who opens her home to the simple and makes her teachings available to anyone who asks. Like God, Wisdom is both hidden and revealed, both inaccessible and available, knowable and yet unfathomable. In other words, though God and God alone makes Wisdom known to human

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<sup>10</sup> Rahner, “The Concept of Mystery,” 42-43.

<sup>11</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation*, Radical Orthodoxy Series (New York: Routledge, 2002), 133. Emphasis his.

<sup>12</sup> Rahner, “The Concept of Mystery,” 55-56.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

beings, Wisdom is not available in the complete way that God knows her, but is only available in a limited form, in a form which human beings can comprehend. Thus human wisdom is always but a shadow of God's Wisdom.<sup>14</sup> Though Wisdom is known through God's gift of revelation, human beings can never exhaust her supply of secrets, since she holds all the mysteries of the cosmos and of the divine realm, all the Wisdom of God.<sup>15</sup> Those who wish to be wise, then, cannot find Wisdom on their own, but only through prayer, as in Wisdom of Solomon 7:7: "Therefore I prayed, and understanding was given me; I called on God, and the spirit of wisdom came to me."<sup>16</sup> This is why Proverbs and Job emphasize again and again that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom; there is no other source for true Wisdom, yet Wisdom, like God, remains mysterious to us even in her disclosure.

What about the relationship between Christ and mystery? Rahner understands the Incarnation of Jesus Christ as the ultimate revelation of God's mystery, God drawing utterly near to humankind in order to communicate God's own self in human form.<sup>17</sup> Even in Jesus Christ, God is not only revealed, but also *remains hidden*.<sup>18</sup> This is what Colossians 2:2-3, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, also articulates. It explains faith as knowledge of Christ, who is God's mystery, and "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Those who believe and proclaim the gospel are thus privy to Christ, God's mysterious Wisdom revealed, yet not revealed in full, for there is a sense in which "all the treasures of wisdom are still hidden in

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<sup>14</sup> Markus Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 14.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 32, 34-36, 60. Bockmuehl divides the mysteries of Wisdom into "cosmological" and "eschatological" mysteries, arguing that Job hears about the cosmological secrets (of the natural world), while apocalyptic literature is more concerned with the eschatological secrets (of future events, including the Messiah).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>18</sup> William Hordern, *Speaking of God: The Nature and Purpose of Theological Language* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1964), 124.

Christ,” and their full disclosure must wait until Christ’s return at the end of the age.<sup>19</sup> This corresponds with Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 13:12: “now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.”<sup>20</sup> Evidently, Jesus Christ does not unravel the mystery for us once and for all, but allows us the *greatest proximity* to God’s holy mystery;<sup>21</sup> Jesus Christ is the mystery drawing utterly near to us, thus the tension between hiddenness and revelation remains. According to Rahner, Jesus Christ is “the *out-spoken* mystery,” the “abbreviated Word of God,” who became human not in order to convey everything about God’s being, but to exemplify what it means to live in accordance with a deep love for God’s mystery. This is our part in God’s holy mystery, and what it means to be truly human: to be devoted to living in accordance with God’s will, not to know everything about God, and thereby reduce God to an object we can comprehend. Faith is love, “loving surrender to the enduring mystery,” not a grasping knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

This leads Rahner to assert that each human being, in emulation of Jesus Christ, is also to be the “code-word for God,” also “the articulate mystery of God,” as our true selves are intrinsically oriented towards our mysterious Creator.<sup>23</sup> We ourselves are lesser mysteries that point towards the ultimate mystery of God. This orientation towards God’s mystery is the most fundamental aspect of human existence, yet it is also extraordinary, a pure gift from God; it is what Rahner terms the “supernatural existential.” Though it is part of the core of every person’s being, “it does not cease to be **supernatural**.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, God’s creation is already graced,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 146, 189.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>21</sup> Rahner, “The Concept of Mystery,” 69.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 69, 116, and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Life and Thought*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 133.

<sup>23</sup> Karl Rahner, “On the Theology of the Incarnation,” in *Theological Investigations IV: More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 116-117.

<sup>24</sup> Titus Guenther, *Rahner and Metz: Transcendental Theology as Political Theology* (New York: University Press of America, 1994), 156, 155. Emphasis his.

therefore human beings are made to be oriented towards God in faith. Rahner explains it as follows:

when [a person] is summoned by the message of faith given by the visible Church, it is not the first time that he [or she] comes into spiritual contact with the reality preached by the Church [....] The call only makes him [or her] consciously aware of [...] the grace which already encompassed him [or her] inarticulately but really as an element of his [or her] spiritual existence. The preaching is the express awakening of what is already present in the depths of [the human] being, not by nature, but by grace. But it is a grace that always surrounds [each person], even the sinner and the unbeliever, as the inescapable setting of his [or her] existence.<sup>25</sup>

For Rahner, then, the Incarnation communicates that human beings need not access some other dimension in order to come into contact with God's ultimate mystery, for it constantly breaks into human history. God will even go so far as to become a human being, to enter the realm of the finite, in order to awaken in us the built-in propensity towards the mystery of God, to draw us beyond our finitude, nearer to Godself.

Our self-transcendence as human beings therefore takes place within human history as well. Since the Incarnation awakens in us an awareness of God's mystery in other human beings, the way we draw nearer to God's mystery is by drawing nearer to one another as "code-words" for God's mystery. As Smith's idea of relational knowing suggests, human love can thus convey something of the proper attitude towards God's mystery, for "in really personal love, is there not an acceptance of what is not comprehended, an acceptance of what we have not ourselves perceived and consequently not mastered in the other person, the person who is loved?"<sup>26</sup> Titus Guenther explains it as follows: "the notion that the transcendental subject can experience the absolute mystery as a close and loving being via loving encounters with other free subjects in history is finally derived from God's incarnate revelation in the life and ministry of Jesus of

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<sup>25</sup> Karl Rahner, "Nature and Grace," in *Theological Investigations IV: More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 181.

<sup>26</sup> Rahner quoted in Vorgrimler, 133-134. Rahner continues, "Is not personal love a trusting surrender without reassurance to the other person, precisely in so far as the latter is and remains free and incalculable?"

Nazareth.” In other words, God’s mystery, which is the mystery of Jesus Christ, “is ‘knowable’ only in the ‘doing’ of human love and freedom in concrete social history.”<sup>27</sup> Jesus Christ shows that the acceptance of the mystery takes believers beyond all their knowledge only to return them to their true, mystery-infused selves in relation with each other within human history. God’s mystery thus reveals that God has been at the core of historical, human existence all along. Rahner writes that the mystery “has always been familiar to us, and we have always loved it. Nothing is more familiar and obvious to the alerted spirit than the silent question which hovers above all that it has attained and mastered – the challenging question, humbly and lovingly accepted, which alone makes it wise.”<sup>28</sup> To deny this question at the core of our beings is, for Rahner, the definition of sin, for it is to reject the gift and deny our truest selves; as a consequence, those who reject the mystery “must ever bear the absence of the self-gift of God which [they] refused.”<sup>29</sup>

While Rahner’s explanation of the Incarnation is a valuable exploration of the concept of mystery, one must ask whether his view of mystery goes quite far enough in establishing the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. In his discussion of the Incarnation, Rahner slips quickly into anthropology, describing Jesus Christ as essentially the most virtuous of human beings; the uniqueness of Jesus Christ consists mainly in his “actualization of human reality,” his ability to live a fulfilled human life, which the rest of us are unable to do given that the “rest of us are all farther from God.”<sup>30</sup> This way of defining the humanity of Jesus Christ begins to erode the differences between Jesus Christ and other human beings, making Jesus Christ into the perfect,

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<sup>27</sup> Guenther, 158, 160, 161, Leo D. Lefebure, *Toward a Contemporary Wisdom Christology: A Study of Karl Rahner and Norman Pittenger* (New York: University Press of America, 1988), 76, 87, and Vorgrimler, 17. Vorgrimler states, “The God whom from everyday experiences we suspect to be the deepest mystery of human life here [in Jesus Christ] assumes in our history the particular human countenance of love which shares in suffering.”

<sup>28</sup> Rahner, “The Concept of Mystery,” 57.

<sup>29</sup> Guenther, 156.

<sup>30</sup> Rahner, “On the Theology of the Incarnation,” 110-111.

exemplary human being, and little more. Rahner is not unaware of this issue; he states, “It might be imagined that this God-becoming-[hu]man takes place as often as [humans] come into existence and that the incarnation is not a unique miracle,” but goes on to say that Jesus Christ possessed a closeness to God “which is in fact provided for *each* [person] in grace.” Grace, as we have already seen, infuses creation, according to Rahner; as the “supernatural existential,” it is already present in human reality.<sup>31</sup> We too are each a “code-word for God” or “the articulate mystery of God,” according to Rahner, which suggests that Jesus Christ is one of us.<sup>32</sup> Though it is true that Jesus Christ is an exemplary human being, and the model for the discipleship of believers, nevertheless the difference between Christ and the rest of humanity is more than a matter of degrees of human righteousness, which Rahner seems to imply at times. Jesus Christ is not only fully human, but fully divine as well, and thus, while his human life models human righteousness, the divine mystery remains undiluted in him as well, something Rahner admits at other points. Though Jesus Christ is human like us, we nevertheless do not bear an easy, natural resemblance to him; I would say that the unique role of Jesus Christ is to *impart the mystery to us*, not merely return us to what we already possess as human beings. The mystery is more counter-intuitive than Rahner acknowledges.

Rahner himself does not stray too far from an orthodox definition of the Incarnation, however his position paves the way for the more extreme position of Gordon D. Kaufman. Kaufman argues that within Christianity, there is a “naïve certainty” that believers are privy to ‘objective reality’ concerning Jesus Christ, a belief which manifests itself in the extremely close

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>32</sup> Rahner, “On the Theology of the Incarnation,” 116-117.

association between God and Jesus of Nazareth, to the point that Jesus' human existence becomes idolized.<sup>33</sup> Because of this, Kaufman sees

serious problems connected with giving decisive normative significance to the symbol of Christ. In part, these derive from the fact that this symbol has traditionally been understood to refer almost exclusively to the man Jesus of Nazareth [...] Within the Christian categorical scheme, Christ is not ultimate, God alone is; and we must be careful, therefore, that the symbol 'Christ' is not employed in an idolatrous way.<sup>34</sup>

Elsewhere, he explains it in terms of separating the "mythic" and the "historical" aspects of the New Testament portrayal of Jesus Christ, in an effort to see Jesus Christ primarily as a "historical figure whom we can still discern behind the mythic picture." In other words, Kaufman sees the historical (human) life of Jesus of Nazareth as far more important than the theological names for and narratives about him. What can be historically confirmed is the most reliable when it comes to Jesus Christ, according to Kaufman, meaning that "the metaphysics and myth should be disciplined and corrected by the historical facts."<sup>35</sup>

I agree with Kaufman's critique of the certainty with which some Christians approach the divine, especially the divine in Christ, but there are a number of problems with Kaufman's solution to that problem. Because of the danger of idolizing Jesus of Nazareth, Kaufman essentially severs the connection between Jesus and God, reducing him to a human being by clinging to the historical and denigrating the so-called mythical aspects of his identity. In other words, Kaufman denies the uniqueness of Christ by measuring the biblical narrative according to a present-day, demythologized concept of history, history made up of "facts" and proven with "evidence," divorced from metaphor and therefore from mystery. I will return to this dichotomy later in this chapter in reference to the theology of Sallie McFague. For now, suffice it to say that

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<sup>33</sup> Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 55.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-93.

<sup>35</sup> Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination*, 136, 139, 142.

what I am advocating is the inverse of Kaufman's proposal: in order to prevent Jesus of Nazareth from becoming idolized, believers must not let go of the belief that he is God incarnate, but delve deeper into that claim, and retrieve the mystery therein. Kaufman advocates a narrowing of the significance of Jesus, but I suggest a broadening of Jesus as the inclusive Christ. The problem is not that Jesus is perceived as the Christ or as divine, but that we have misunderstood what that means, and have mistaken what we know and understand about him with who he really is, taking it for granted that we thereby can explain God in some complete way. Kaufman's impulse to concentrate on what can be historically 'proven' about Jesus only encourages the misconception that what can be understood about Jesus must be what is most important about him, instead of the whole of his identity.

The problem as I see it is that what is comprehensible about Jesus, what is understandable in his revelation, has been confused with the whole of his being; in short, we have tried to solve the unsolvable mystery of Jesus Christ. Thus, in our haste, we have collapsed the full humanity and full divinity of Jesus Christ into our limited knowledge of him, and have assumed we thereby know all about God. But Jesus Christ is not strictly human or strictly divine. In Jesus Christ, Rahner reminds us, human beings receive "God's irreversible offer of God's own self to humankind" while *at the same time* glimpsing the unflinching acceptance of this offer by a human being.<sup>36</sup> This is what the classical doctrine of Jesus Christ's full humanity and full divinity attempts to convey; it is an attempt to "protect the mystery of divine greatness, which acted compassionately for the world's salvation," but, like any attempt to explain the unknowable, it is not immune to the risk of "tam[ing] the unknown God,"<sup>37</sup> and thereby violating

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<sup>36</sup> Lefebure, 93, and Rahner, "On the Theology of the Incarnation," 120. Rahner describes Jesus Christ as the locus of "the self-utterance of God's Word and its acceptance."

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1992), 107.



the otherness of God's transcendence.<sup>38</sup> This problem does not lead Rahner to advocate a move away from symbolism toward "facts," but rather to argue that the mystery of Jesus Christ cannot be denied. He defines "the human nature of Jesus as the *real symbol* of the Logos, its self-expression *in something other than itself*."<sup>39</sup> In Christ, Smith states, "the Infinite is known by means of a finite appearance, without losing its infinitude [...] an appearing which is not an appropriation, a giving which also remains a withholding – neither betraying itself nor slipping away."<sup>40</sup> In other words, there must remain a clear, if inexplicable, distinction between the human and divine in Jesus Christ, for in him, the lesser mystery of humanity and the infinite mystery of God meet in one being *without losing their distinctiveness*: that is the mystery of the Incarnation.<sup>41</sup>

This is why Rahner calls Jesus the *abbreviation* of God's Word: because though God enters human history, God is not confined to it, and so always overflows it.<sup>42</sup> It would be idolatrous to reduce God to the man Jesus, and to worship this human being who lived in first-century Palestine, as is the tendency in the quests for the historical Jesus, yet to worship God-in-Christ is the foundation of the Christian faith, and cannot be cast aside as Kaufman advocates, at least not without serious consequences.<sup>43</sup> Christians must remember that there is more to Jesus Christ than meets the eye, that he embodies the mystery of God, but does not thereby contain or limit it, for it cannot be fully contained, not even in him. In Jesus Christ, the mystery of God met and continues to meet humanity in an unprecedented way, a way that overwhelms us and carries us beyond ourselves, beyond all that we assumed we knew about God, for "the one who can be

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<sup>38</sup> Smith, 127.

<sup>39</sup> Lefebure, 87. Emphasis added.

<sup>40</sup> Smith, 166.

<sup>41</sup> Lefebure, 92.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>43</sup> Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, 388, and Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 25.

possessed and controlled, the one who can be seen through and planned for, is not God.”<sup>44</sup> Said differently, “If you have understood, then this is not God.” When it comes to God, we must maintain a kind of “agnosticism of definition.”<sup>45</sup> This applies to Christ as well, or perhaps especially: the Word of God, though audible, remains incomprehensible to us, and we must continually fight the urge to reject the Word simply because we do not comprehend it, or worse, to mould it into something we do comprehend, such as an ordinary, albeit virtuous, human being, and call that our Saviour.<sup>46</sup> Our fulfillment and self-transcendence rests upon “whether or not [we] love[...] the little island of [our] so-called knowledge better than the ocean of the infinite mystery.”<sup>47</sup> The meeting between human beings and God in Jesus Christ does not confirm everything human beings assume they know about God, nor even about ourselves, therefore to embrace the mystery of God requires us to embrace a truth “*against* appearances,” making it “deeply unsettling.”<sup>48</sup> It requires us, in Rahner’s terms, “to leave the tiny house of [our] ostensibly clear self-possession, to advance into the trackless spaces, even in the night.”<sup>49</sup>

What then does all of this have to do with Wisdom? We have seen that Christians have an age-old, but delicate, balance to maintain in speaking christologically, for if God is collapsed into what is knowable of Jesus Christ, a whole host of problems arise. This dynamic, however, can be traced back to the issue of hiddenness and revelation: if Jesus Christ ceases to point to the holy mystery of God, or ceases to retain an element of hiddenness, he becomes merely a virtuous human being, meaning God is reduced to human comprehension. Woman Wisdom provides one

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<sup>44</sup> Vorgrimler, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 108. The former quotation is Johnson quoting Augustine of Hippo.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, and Rahner, “On the Theology of the Incarnation,” 106. Rahner calls the Incarnation “the tangible destiny of the incomprehensible Word.”

<sup>47</sup> Rahner, “The Concept of Mystery,” 57.

<sup>48</sup> Vorgrimler, 16, and Lefebure, 79.

<sup>49</sup> Rahner, “The Concept of Mystery,” 58.

way of redressing this imbalance between hiddenness and revelation, mystery and understanding. As we have seen, she too occupies that space between hiddenness and availability, for the “experience of Wisdom herself is a dialectic of disclosure and concealment expressed in the clash between Proverbs 8 and Job 28.”<sup>50</sup> Like Jesus Christ, she too is encountered in everyday human experience, and her message concerns wise living, living according to her ways, i.e., in loving surrender to God’s mystery. This is not a matter of elite intellectual knowledge, but about the experience of God in the midst of daily life.<sup>51</sup> Leo Lefebure writes,

Since the poems [about Woman Wisdom] are embedded in a collection of proverbs dealing with various experiences of everyday life, [...] the call of Lady Wisdom is evidently mediated in and through the experiences of ordinary life. [...] In and through the multiple decisions of human life, [...] we are making one fundamental decision to accept or reject Lady Wisdom.<sup>52</sup>

Like Rahner’s supernatural transcendental, Wisdom is seen to permeate the entirety of human life, yet she comes from God as a gift and following in her ways orients human beings towards God’s mystery. Wisdom is ultimately available only to God, which is why human wisdom begins with fearing God. In Jesus Christ, Woman Wisdom meets human beings within the context of human history, as she did before, for example, in Wisdom of Solomon 10-19, where her saving actions throughout Israel’s history are recounted.<sup>53</sup> In entering history, Woman Wisdom provides human beings with an opportunity to draw near to and encounter God’s transcendent mystery within our context “in such a way that divine transcendence is not compromised.”<sup>54</sup> It is therefore no accident that the human relationship to Wisdom is described in intimate, romantic terms. In Wisdom, we are given the opportunity to lovingly surrender to our mysterious God, but

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<sup>50</sup> Lefebure, 117.

<sup>51</sup> Silvia Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House: Studies on the Figure of Sophia in the Bible*, trans. Linda M. Maloney and William McDonough (Collegeville MN: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 2000), 70.

<sup>52</sup> Lefebure, 84.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>54</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 91.

at the same time, this romantic language draws our attention to the experience of glimpses of Woman Wisdom in one another, including wise women.<sup>55</sup> This occurs not because we bear a natural resemblance to Christ-Wisdom simply as human beings, but as we follow in the strange and mysterious ways of Wisdom in daily life.

Woman Wisdom's connections to Jesus Christ serve above all to emphasize his mysteriousness, his cosmic significance, his intimacy with the Divine, for the Wisdom-Word was in the beginning with God, helping God in the work of creation, existing and active in the world long prior to the birth of the historical Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>56</sup> We cannot sever the historical from the 'mythical' here, because it is the mythical that provides the cosmic, eschatological significance of the historical, in this case. We cannot isolate that which we understand about Jesus Christ and slough off all other claims about him. It would be unthinkable to simply collapse human wisdom and Woman Wisdom into one, even when it comes to discussing the Incarnation, for Woman Wisdom is *and is not* like human wisdom; at times we can understand an echo of God's Wisdom, but there always remains a distance there, of which Job, Ecclesiastes (or Qoheleth), and some Psalms are especially cognizant. In these passages, the observation that the wicked prosper while the righteous suffer leads to difficult questions about God's hiddenness and the reality that exists under the surface of what we can perceive and know, the reality of Wisdom that clashes with human wisdom and its careful calculations. These books recognize that "humans experience Wisdom constantly but fail to comprehend her."<sup>57</sup>

Woman Wisdom constantly surprises us, escapes and transcends whatever categories we attempt to place her in; as we have seen in chapter 1, she occupies the point at which the human

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<sup>55</sup> Schroer, 57. Schroer writes, "The interchangeability of wife and *Hokma* in metaphorical usage" means "that the (wise) wife was in fact regarded and experienced as the representative or incarnation of Sophia."

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 118, and Lefebure, 100-101.

<sup>57</sup> Lefebure, 84.

and divine, the literal and the figurative meet.<sup>58</sup> She is an enigmatic, bewildering character, but this need not lead us to despair, as her mysterious qualities awaken human curiosity like an insatiable hunger or unquenchable thirst (Sirach 24:21). We have seen that even Wisdom's portrait in the Bible seems fragmented, perhaps even unfinished; this, in part, has been the cause of Wisdom's neglect in Western Christianity.<sup>59</sup> Yet she has not been completely neglected: various mystics, most famously Hildegard of Bingen and Gregory of Nyssa, have found Wisdom a fitting name for the Divine, which indicates that Wisdom is understood and appreciated within the branch of the Church that has historically been especially aware of the mystery of God.<sup>60</sup> Thus, because she represents the profoundest of mysteries, Wisdom reminds us that Jesus Christ, though fully human, is not fully decipherable to us as humans, but overflows human history and overwhelms the human mind: how else could a crucifixion represent God's Wisdom most clearly, as in 1 Corinthians?<sup>61</sup> It is not human wisdom that allows us access to Woman Wisdom, but rather humility and devotion to follow her way, a way that may seem absolute folly by human standards because it is shrouded in an unsolvable mystery. Not only in spite of, but precisely *because* she has been forgotten, the unfamiliar name of Woman Wisdom now has the potential to startle us out of our delusion that we have solved the mystery of Jesus Christ; instead, she can remind us of the vast depth of the mystery of the Incarnation.<sup>62</sup> In this way, when we discover that Woman Wisdom is actually hidden in Christ, as Paul says in Colossians, Wisdom widens our concept of Christ, and, lest we think we have figured God out using mere human wisdom, she can teach us anew that all Wisdom comes from God, that our call is to love

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<sup>58</sup> See page 16 above.

<sup>59</sup> Cady et al., 31, 46.

<sup>60</sup> Beverly J. Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 53, and Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 165.

<sup>61</sup> Lefebure, 117.

<sup>62</sup> Cady et al., 46.

God's Wisdom more than our own, and that "to think oneself wise is worse than being a fool" (Prov. 26:12).<sup>63</sup>

### *The Wisdom of Mixed Metaphors: Language and Christological Mystery*

There remains one key aspect of mystery that I have left unexplored, namely the complex relationship between language and the mystery of the Incarnation. This topic is particularly relevant for my discussion of Woman Wisdom, for there are some who dismiss her on the grounds that she is 'merely a metaphor.' This argument brings to our attention that part of the forgetfulness of God's mystery stems from a misunderstanding of the true nature of language, including religious or theological language. Traditionally, theological language has been defined as analogical, meaning that it relies on "a relationship between two objects" which is "both a relationship of difference and also a relationship of similarity. In the case of theology the two 'objects' are God and aspects of [...] creation."<sup>64</sup> Rahner's theology works within this definition of theological language as analogical or symbolic. Sallie McFague, however, prefers to speak of metaphor, which emphasizes the use of new and surprising language for God.<sup>65</sup> In this section, I will give my own account of metaphor, which lies somewhere between the positions of Rahner and McFague. In doing so, I hope to explore the relationships between language, the divine mystery, and human history, which will in turn help clarify the relationship between Jesus Christ and Woman Wisdom, and address the question of whether she is worthy to be counted among the divine names.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>64</sup> Graham Ward, *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Studies in Literature and Religion Series (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 5. This definition of analogy originated with Thomas Aquinas.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 8.

Rahner describes theological language as constantly making “a statement into the mystery.”<sup>66</sup> If we are to speak about God at all, we must rely on that which we understand to attempt to describe the incomprehensible, which is to say, we must use terms drawn from our human realm and understanding, to describe God, such as the names Father and Son. There remains a distance between the meaning of the words in relation to created things/beings (human fathers and sons) and in relation to God (the Father and the Son), nevertheless the use of the same word for both suggests that the two are “somehow related,” that something about human fathers and sons resembles the relationship between the Father and the Son. The two uses are not identical, for that would make the statement a literal one.<sup>67</sup> Because of this dynamic of affirmation and negation, Rahner states that every theological statement must, at its core, be paradoxical, a “dialectical and dipolar” statement.<sup>68</sup> Only this way can it preserve the mystery: it must both reveal and hide the mystery from our gaze.

But what about revealed language for God? Surely biblical language captures more of God, making God more comprehensible to us, does it not? Rahner seems to think so, as he differentiates “really genuine symbols (‘symbolic realities’) from merely arbitrary ‘signs’, ‘signals’ and ‘codes’ (‘symbolic representations’).” In other words, there are true, real symbols and there are other, lesser symbols according to Rahner.<sup>69</sup> Elsewhere, he categorizes words themselves as “primordial words,” which are “gifts of God,” evoking the mystery and transcendence at the limits (and yet the centre) of human experience, while others are only “utilitarian words,” human words which describe ordinary objects and experiences. These can

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<sup>66</sup> Rahner quoted in Lefebure, 103.

<sup>67</sup> Placher, 28-29. Placher writes, “While the predicates we apply to God are somehow connected to the way we use the same words of other things, we cannot understand what the connection is.”

<sup>68</sup> Rahner quoted in Lefebure, 106.

<sup>69</sup> Karl Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” in *Theological Investigations IV: More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 225.

also be senses of the same word, such as water, which has a “primordial” sense as well as a “utilitarian” sense.<sup>70</sup> By “genuine symbols” and “primordial words,” Rahner means analogies, established biblical/theological/doctrinal terms, which for him reveal more about reality than mere utilitarian words or ordinary metaphors or signs. The former “brings the reality it signifies to us, makes it ‘present’, realizes it and places it before us,” whereas the latter is just a form of speech.<sup>71</sup> But this distinction does not signify for Rahner that analogies are immune to misunderstanding and idolatry, especially if their dialectical and paradoxical nature is overlooked.<sup>72</sup>

As already mentioned, McFague prefers to speak of theological metaphors rather than symbols, for she sees metaphors as much more dynamic than symbols, which according to her literalize comparisons between words. She asserts that theological language cannot be deemed superior to ordinary language, for “all language is construction,” a product of human history and culture, including language about God.<sup>73</sup> When we speak about God, then, “our only alternatives are to speak in halting, inadequate words or to remain silent.”<sup>74</sup> Metaphors, including theological ones, “always contain the whisper, ‘it is *and it is not*.’”<sup>75</sup> If the latter is forgotten, as it all-too-often is, we mistake our clumsy statements for the reality of God, and end up worshipping the idols of our own words, as if they were objective expressions of the divine.<sup>76</sup> According to McFague, metaphor functions “by replacing the old and outworn with the new,” drawing parallels between “the known and the unknown” in order to “shock or surprise,” and effect

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<sup>70</sup> Rahner quoted in Lefebure, 109.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>73</sup> Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 59.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 13. Emphasis hers.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 2.



transformation through its newness and imaginativeness,<sup>77</sup> whereas analogies like the terms Father and Son are constants of the Christian tradition, and therefore lack newness and the ability to surprise. In speaking of metaphor instead of analogy, McFague therefore affirms the value of using new, contemporary metaphors for God instead of remaining bound to traditional terms. She writes that analogical or “Symbolic statements [...] are not so much a way of knowing and speaking as they are sedimentation and solidification of metaphor. [...] The tension of the metaphor is absorbed in the harmony of the symbol.”<sup>78</sup> In speaking of metaphor instead of analogy, McFague wishes to draw attention to the risk of idolatry inherent in all metaphors. She calls metaphor “both our burden and our glory,” for it allows us to say something about and to God, while always allowing the possibility of misunderstanding and idolatry.<sup>79</sup>

As we have seen, however, Rahner’s concept of analogy or primordial words does in fact preserve this same dynamic of affirmation and negation, of ‘is and is not,’ so Rahner and McFague actually agree here. But McFague still disagrees that analogy is superior to metaphor for two reasons. Firstly, she does not advocate a “return to the traditional sacramental universe” with its view that symbols or images are true insofar as they “participate in a transcendent reality.” She relegates such a mentality to the late-medieval period, believing it to be irreconcilable with a post-Enlightenment worldview.<sup>80</sup> Secondly, McFague does not differentiate between “primordial” and ordinary words, for she posits that “metaphor *is* ordinary language.” All language is indirect and functions by making comparisons, so the strength of religious metaphors, according to McFague, is that they are so similar to our ordinary ways of thinking, not that they refer to a separate order of reality. While metaphors are in continuity with ordinary

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<sup>77</sup> Ward, *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory*, 8.

<sup>78</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 16.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, 10.

human thought, however, good metaphors are those that make “unconventional and surprising” comparisons.<sup>81</sup>

Aspects of both Rahner’s and McFague’s positions resonate with my own view of metaphor. They are both right in emphasizing that theological language must retain the tension between affirmation and negation, between naming God and recognizing the humbleness of language even as we do so. Because the mystery is not cast aside in God’s revelation, neither can we cast aside metaphor in our speech about and to God. Thus, as was the case with Rahner’s discussion of God’s mystery, we might say that the revelation of God is not the undoing of metaphor: it is the *metaphor drawing near*.

The biblical metaphors for God function this way, for they bring God close to us in human language, in imagery taken from our own realm, such as Woman Wisdom, and thus translate God’s mystery into language we can grasp, albeit feebly, since, on a far greater scale than usual, something is lost in translation. I would say with McFague, then, that all language is human construction, not God’s, as Rahner argues, for God is ultimately unnameable. This is the same God who told Moses that the divine name was simply “I am who I am,” and whose unutterable name requires the circumlocution “*Adonai*” or LORD, in the Jewish tradition, as evident in many translations of the Old Testament.<sup>82</sup> But this does not mean that we cease to speak of God, for *Adonai* is not the only circumlocution we use for God, but is one of a striking array of metaphors. The Bible portrays God in anthropomorphic imagery, such as Shepherd, Warrior, Mother, Husband, and Woman Wisdom, but also in images from nature, such as Rock or Mother Bear.<sup>83</sup> The sheer variety of images for God tells us that no one image of God is adequate for describing God, hence “pluriform speech is not only legitimate but religiously

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>82</sup> Ramshaw, 20.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 97, 103.

necessary for a proper discourse about the mystery of God.” The interplay and contradictions between images are what coax our imaginations to their limits, forming a creative tension.<sup>84</sup> Each image is appropriate and inappropriate as a descriptor for God, yet even in combination, they cannot exhaust God’s mystery.<sup>85</sup> This is what we can learn from “the Hebrew poet[s, who] piled up and threw away metaphors of God, in the hope of both overwhelming the imagination with the divine richness and undercutting any idolatrous inclination to absolutize images.”<sup>86</sup>

If the Bible draws from ordinary, human language to explain God, then I agree with McFague that metaphor is an aspect of ordinary human speech, not something reserved for the other-worldly. Theological language is much like other human language, then, meaning that we should not feel limited to certain metaphors for God because they are holy and other metaphors are not, as Rahner implies in making analogy superior to metaphor. McFague allows for more freedom in giving God new names. Because God’s mystery is so wide, we are free to add new images of God as the Spirit moves us to give voice to our experiences of God, as long as we remember that our freedom to call God “every name” must go along with calling God “the nameless One.”<sup>87</sup> But, whereas Rahner contrasts theological and ordinary language too much, McFague does not allow for enough variance between them, for they are not indecipherable; theological language is different from ordinary speech in that it is speech about God. I would say all theological language has a “primordial” sense *and* a “utilitarian” sense, for it is all human language, but it is language *transformed and taken up into God* in order to point to the divine mystery. Smith speaks of every metaphor about God as having the potential to be either an icon

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<sup>84</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 38.

<sup>85</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 112, 120.

<sup>86</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 43.

<sup>87</sup> Gail Ramshaw, *God Beyond Gender: Feminist Christian God-Language* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 96, and Dionysius quoted in Mark S. Burrows, “Naming the God Beyond Names: Wisdom from the Tradition on the Old Problem of God-Language,” *Modern Theology* 9 (1993): 41.

or an idol, i.e., it can either “point beyond itself” into the mystery, or it can “reduc[e...] its referent to that encompassed by the concept” and thereby undo the mystery by overshadowing it.<sup>88</sup> As icons, metaphors can “grant[...] access to things, but at the same time leave[...] them in their transcendence.”<sup>89</sup> Though theology makes use of ordinary language, such language is sanctified when used by God as an icon. Herein lies the means of legitimate naming of God: ultimately, it is the Spirit who must guide our naming, and who makes it possible that our metaphors for God, whether biblical or not, remain icons and not idols. It is only because God “has accepted the homage of human voices, and has wished us to rejoice in praising [...God] with our words” that God makes it possible for us to speak of and to God at all.<sup>90</sup> God therefore teaches us “how (not) to speak of God,” that is, how to speak in appropriate paradoxes and metaphors so as to preserve God’s holy and transcendent mystery.<sup>91</sup>

What then of the name Jesus Christ? It is tempting for Christians to assume that in taking on human flesh in Jesus Christ, God also definitively took on the name Jesus Christ, and in a sense, that is true.<sup>92</sup> In Philippians, for instance, we read that God “highly exalted” Jesus Christ and “gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (2:9-11). However, if it is the case that revelation is the metaphor drawing near, then the revelation of God in Jesus Christ does not effect the abolishment of metaphorical names for God, but is the *clearest example of the metaphor drawing near*. Just as the Incarnation did not render God fully comprehensible to human beings, neither did it render God directly nameable; the mystery and the metaphor must both remain intact, even (especially) when

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<sup>88</sup> Smith, 92-93.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>90</sup> Augustine of Hippo quoted in Ibid., 115.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>92</sup> Burrows, 45.

speaking about Jesus Christ. And yet, Jesus Christ makes possible our naming of God because he is the measure for all of our metaphors. As the Word remained “hidden, though also present for us” when it became flesh, so it *remains hidden* in our words *even as they allow us access* to the Word<sup>93</sup> as they are taken up and sanctified in Christ. In Jesus Christ, a metaphor for God takes on human form, becomes flesh within a concrete, ordinary, historical, human context; God becomes what God is not, i.e., human, in order to point us towards God’s mystery. Jesus Christ is thus the “*indirect* communication” of God.<sup>94</sup> This is also what Rahner means in calling Jesus Christ “the *out-spoken* mystery,” the “abbreviated Word of God,” and the “*real symbol* of the Logos.”<sup>95</sup> Likewise, Karl Barth speaks of believers as “speakers of the Word of God as it becomes a word spoken by them in the form of their human word,” the latter being, “Like a window, a transparent word; or like a mirror, a reflecting word.”<sup>96</sup> Rahner believes theological language “bears a special relation to Christology, for the principle of the union of the human and the divine in Christ is analogically true of the human word of revelation.”<sup>97</sup> In revelation, especially in the revelation of Jesus Christ, the human and the divine therefore come together as the human is made able to carry the mystery of the divine, even though it cannot grasp it of its own power.

Jesus Christ can thus be seen as one of the many names we use for God. His is one of the anthropomorphic names, like Woman Wisdom. For McFague, this means that Jesus Christ is *and is not* God’s name, for our God is not a human being, yet in Jesus Christ, we continue to learn much about our God. Like the other anthropomorphic names, this one must be affirmed and negated: “God is lover, mother, father[, Jesus Christ]; God is not lover, mother, father[, Jesus

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<sup>93</sup> John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1997), 93.

<sup>94</sup> Soren Kierkegaard quoted in Don Cupitt, *Christ and the Hiddenness of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 207.

<sup>95</sup> Rahner, “The Concept of Mystery,” 69; “On the Theology of the Incarnation,” 116, and Lefebure, 87.

<sup>96</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.2: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963), 744, 764.

<sup>97</sup> Lefebure, 114.

Christ].”<sup>98</sup> McFague argues that Jesus Christ is “a ‘parable’ of God,” an “extended metaphor” about the Kingdom of God and the role of human beings within it. For her, “A metaphor is not an ornament or illustration, but says what cannot be said any other way.”<sup>99</sup> Metaphors function “in the region of dissimilarity,” because effective metaphors “shock, they bring unlikes together, they upset conventions, they involve tensions, and they are implicitly revolutionary.”<sup>100</sup> These dynamic descriptions certainly capture something of the radical, perplexing ministry, political martyrdom, and mysterious resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Yet there is something unique about this particular metaphor that McFague underemphasizes. Yes, it is an anthropomorphic image, but its uniqueness goes further than this, beyond the human imagination, for Jesus Christ becomes a flesh-and-blood human being. Gail Ramshaw states, “The new thing in Christianity is not anthropomorphisms for God, but the incarnation of God within humanity.”<sup>101</sup> Jesus Christ is in fact the metaphor drawing near in human form, for he is an anthropomorphism, an icon, a sign, and yet overflows that designation. Beyond McFague’s statement that Jesus Christ is and is not God, I would say that *he is and is not a metaphor for God*. In his humanity, Jesus represents God in non-divine form, he is divinity “infleshed [...] and thus signaling beyond” himself; he is “an immanent sign of transcendence,” for his divinity “cannot be reduced to this body.”<sup>102</sup> But he really is embodied divinity. Jesus Christ is in actuality God, is God’s very self revealed, but revealed as hidden mystery. McFague downplays the full divinity of Christ too much because she, like Kaufman, cannot accept the symbolic as the mingling of history and metaphor, something I will return to below. We could say, then, that Jesus Christ is such a vivid metaphor

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<sup>98</sup> Ramshaw, 108-109, and McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 19.

<sup>99</sup> Burrows 45, and McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 50.

<sup>100</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 17.

<sup>101</sup> Ramshaw, 108-109.

<sup>102</sup> Smith, 123.

for God that he becomes a living, human metaphor, thereby becoming the foundation and ultimate measure for all our naming of God.

While for Christians, the metaphor of Jesus Christ is most important, is the metaphor of all metaphors, it cannot be the only one, for it does not make all other metaphors irrelevant because *it is an inclusive metaphor*. The danger of the metaphor of Jesus Christ is for it to “limit our image of God,” solidifying God into “a man who lived a long time ago,” a person we think we understand completely. Christianity is always vulnerable to this idolization of Jesus of Nazareth,<sup>103</sup> despite the fact that Jesus himself exemplified surprising new ways of imaging God. During his ministry, Jesus spoke of God using a wide variety of images: as “A woman searching for her lost money, a shepherd looking for his lost sheep, a bakerwoman kneading dough, a travelling businessman,” and so on. This imagery has been overshadowed by the sense that Jesus called God “*Abba*” or Father almost exclusively, in order to highlight his status as the Son, which is simply not the case.<sup>104</sup> In Jesus’ speech about and to God, we see all this variety *in addition* to the claim that those who have seen Jesus have seen the Father. So while Jesus Christ is not the only name for God, it is one, and a very complex, multi-faceted one indeed.<sup>105</sup>

As he is and is not a metaphor for God, as he is the Word of God and yet a flesh-and-blood, historical human being, Jesus Christ undoubtedly complicates the issue of metaphor as he complicated the issue of mystery, for both aspects must be taken into account. He must be seen as a living metaphor, a coming together of human history and metaphorical-theological language. Part of the argument against Wisdom Christology unfolds along these lines, for Woman Wisdom is seen as merely a metaphor, an “imaginary woman,” whereas Jesus Christ is “a historical, if

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<sup>103</sup> Ramshaw, 98-99, and Burrows, 43.

<sup>104</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 80. This issue will come up again in the next chapter.

<sup>105</sup> Ramshaw, 98.

exalted, male.”<sup>106</sup> At the heart of such an argument is a privileging of the historical over the metaphorical, an assumption that literal truths outweigh metaphors, that objective or literal language is more exact and therefore superior to metaphorical language. So-called facts are more important than “only [...] symbol,” especially with regard to history,<sup>107</sup> as we saw in Kaufman’s Christology.

Interestingly, this privileging of history over metaphor is common to both those who interpret Jesus Christ as the literal Son of God and those who interpret Jesus Christ as merely a virtuous human being. The former make the mistake of reading a literal (i.e., historically ‘true’) father-son relationship into the metaphorical names Father and Son used for the first and second persons of the Trinity. The metaphor is taken too far, and thereby distorts the mystery of the Incarnation to which it points, implying some kind of sexual procreation of Jesus Christ. In reality, “Physical procreation by God is a conception as alien to Judaism as it is to Christianity.” Our God “is not like Zeus, who occupied himself pre-eminently with begetting physical descendants.”<sup>108</sup> The names Father and Son are therefore *metaphors* meant to indicate that which cannot be comprehended nor explained. Alternately, there are those who disparage metaphors to the point of discarding them, instead attempting to get behind them to uncover the ‘reality of historical facts.’ Kaufman’s view provides an instance of this, for he argues that “Jesus can be seen primarily as a figure in a *mythic* story, or primarily as a figure in *history*. [...] We must make a choice between these alternatives since in modern thought myth and history have been differentiated from each other.” He goes on to define myth as referring to “*another world*,” while

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<sup>106</sup> Celia M. Deutsch, *Lady Wisdom, Jesus, and the Sages: Metaphor and Social Context in Matthew’s Gospel* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 1.

<sup>107</sup> Janet Morley, “I Desire Her with My Whole Heart,” in *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, ed. Ann Loades (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 163, McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 4-5, and Sara Maitland, “Ways of Relating,” in *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, ed. Ann Loades (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 151.

<sup>108</sup> Susanne Heine, *Matriarchs, Goddesses, and Images of God: A Critique of a Feminist Theology*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis MN: Augsburg, 1988), 137.



history refers to “what actually happened *in this world*.”<sup>109</sup> In this case, the mythical or metaphorical language is dismissed as irrelevant, while the events they describe are deemed valuable as long as they are described ‘objectively.’ Neither the literalizing nor the demythologizing option ultimately makes room for the mystery of the Incarnation, but reduces Jesus Christ to that someone who can be understood straightforwardly in human terms and concepts.

In theology, *there can be no privileging of history over metaphor*, for metaphor is all we have to describe God. It is not possible to “translate analogical [or metaphorical] language into another type of language ‘which it really means.’” Metaphor carries all that we can humanly know about God’s mystery, therefore to dismiss it as irrelevant is to cut ourselves off from all speech about God. The truths of theological metaphors are in fact *more* profound than objective or literal language, for they go beyond the literal, and thus are capable of “bring[ing] us to the experience of mystery and open[ing] us to unfathomable depths of reality.”<sup>110</sup> As Christians, we cannot believe that “in order for images to be true they must be literal,” for there can be no literal images of God that are not idols.<sup>111</sup> When theological imagery is dismissed as “mere metaphor” and separated from historical experience, reality is reduced to what can be understood and named directly. This means choosing scientific, observational, disenchanting knowledge over the startlingly unfamiliar and vast reality beyond human knowledge. In other words, it means choosing the safety of knowledge over the risk of love. Theological metaphors have the ability, through the moving of the Spirit, to “call us out of the little house of our homely, close-hugged truths into the strangeness of the night that is our real home.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination*, 139. Emphasis his.

<sup>110</sup> Lefebure, 106, 109, and Morley, 163.

<sup>111</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 32.

<sup>112</sup> Rahner quoted in Lefebure, 110-111, and Rahner, “The Concept of Mystery,” 43, 57.

This issue is especially relevant to christological speech, for, as already mentioned, to starkly divide metaphor and history in the case of Jesus Christ would make him *either* God or human, not *both*. Furthermore, it would privilege what we can know and understand of Jesus Christ over that which remains a mystery in him. But what we know about Jesus as a historical person is not more certain than that which is divine about him; what we understand and can describe is not more real than that which is beyond our thoughts and words, meaning that which requires metaphor to articulate. The revelation of Jesus Christ took place in historical events *as well as* in the parables and metaphors of his preaching, and now, his revelation is available to us through biblical metaphors written by his followers, as well as through the Spirit-infused historical church, the Body of Christ.<sup>113</sup> Metaphor and history are thoroughly and inseparably enmeshed, because symbols and metaphors arise in history, in response to certain events or experiences in the lives of concrete individuals and communities,<sup>114</sup> and because God moves in human history, taking up our words and sanctifying them to make them acceptable metaphors for the divine. In Jesus Christ's own ministry, he called himself a variety of names, meaning that we are free to call him a variety of names as well. Jesus called himself "the Way, the Truth, the Resurrection, the Vine," and yes, he even went so far as to call himself Wisdom.<sup>115</sup>

So what is the precise relationship between Jesus Christ and the other metaphors and images for God, particularly that of Wisdom? I have established already that the name Jesus Christ does not replace the other names for God, but rather *includes them*, enfolding them in the wideness of the mystery of the Incarnation. In this way too, Wisdom is hidden in Christ; her name, among others, is included in his. Since the mystery of God remains intact in Jesus Christ,

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<sup>113</sup> Johnson, 105. Johnson speaks of "God's self-revelation through powerful acts and inspired words in history."

<sup>114</sup> Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1969), 420.

<sup>115</sup> Maitland, 155.

so does the need for many names for God. Therefore, not only are the existing names of God reinterpreted to be included and encompassed in the name of Jesus Christ, but a diverse new set of names is also developed to describe the mystery of the Incarnation. One of the existing, reinterpreted names is Woman Wisdom, which is not a better or worse name for God, but simply one which carries different connotations and communicates a different facet of God's mystery. It has been argued that Woman Wisdom is an inferior name for God because she apparently never enters history, as Christ does, but as we have seen, this is to falsely divide metaphor from history. This is to assume that before the historical life of Jesus of Nazareth, *God* never entered history! In fact, God's mystery permeates history, as the salvation history of Israel testifies, and the metaphorical names we use for God serve to articulate our historical experiences of God's mystery, using human language, which is also bound to its historical origins, yet not beyond sanctification. Thus, what is unique about Jesus Christ is not that he brought God into history, for God has permeated history since the beginning of time, but that in Jesus Christ, God entered history *as a human being*. This is what had never occurred before, this particular mixing of metaphors, this particular mixing of divine mystery with human mystery. As with any mixed metaphor, Jesus Christ can be a particularly striking name for God, one which opens our eyes to the way God's mystery mingles with our own history and our own humanity as God's creatures. But Woman Wisdom draws our attention to the same truth, for as we have seen, her character merges not only with the act of creation (Prov. and Sir.), or with the major events of Israel's salvation history (Wisd. of Sol. 10-19); it also merges with the with the actual wise women and men of Israel, so that Wisdom essentially becomes incarnate, or hidden in the everyday, lived wisdom of the Israelite people.<sup>116</sup> Woman Wisdom enters history insofar as her name points truthfully to the divine, insofar as the community can glimpse God's mystery through her iconic

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<sup>116</sup> Schroer, 57.

face – insofar as we realize that she is hidden and yet revealed and sanctified in the name of Jesus Christ. In this way, we see that ties to history are central to the identities of both Woman Wisdom and Jesus Christ.

But we cannot allow these ties to history to overtake our respect and need for metaphor, as this would rob Jesus Christ of his mystery. If we cease to allow the Spirit to renew our language for Jesus Christ, to describe him in new ways that speak to our experience along with the old ways, we are in effect limiting his mystery, and taking steps towards absolutizing and literalizing certain names for Jesus Christ. We are, in short, making the name of Jesus Christ a dead metaphor, one that ceases to point beyond itself into mystery, ceases to operate as an icon, and is instead an idol. In adding the name of Woman Wisdom to Christology, in realizing that she is hidden in Jesus Christ, as Paul states in Colossians, we can take steps towards dislodging the mystery of the Incarnation from the limits we have imposed upon it linguistically. We can stir up the metaphor of Jesus Christ, ensuring it remains a thoroughly mixed metaphor, a metaphor that is very much alive, even life-giving. For as the mystic tradition informs us, it is the mixed metaphors like Julian of Norwich’s “‘mother’ Jesus” or the description of Jesus Christ as fruit of “the father’s womb” that jar our imaginations most profoundly,<sup>117</sup> and the metaphor of Jesus Christ as Woman Wisdom certainly has the potential to do the same.

It is surprising how much controversy has confronted present-day efforts to revive Woman Wisdom as a divine name; she is, after all, a biblical figure! But perhaps this only speaks to how provocative and shocking her potential as a metaphor is, how she can point us towards the very depths of the divine mystery, and provoke our awe for God. However, like any theological metaphor, this one too has its dangers. It must not be forgotten that Woman Wisdom

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<sup>117</sup> Burrows, 44.

too is open to the risk of being idolized and literalized.<sup>118</sup> Does this mean we should continue to neglect her, or deem her irrelevant or unworthy in some way? Certainly not, for who are we to assume that we comprehend her sufficiently to dismiss her from the list of biblical metaphors for God and for Jesus Christ? If even Jesus Christ used Wisdom language to speak of God and of himself, why do we hesitate to do the same? In the face of these questions, we must at least allow for the possibility that Wisdom's ties to Jesus Christ can lift her from obscurity and resurrect her crucial power to point to the mystery of Jesus Christ. Through the juxtaposition of Woman Wisdom and Jesus Christ, through their working together, through the mingling of their (metaphorical) names, we can glimpse the life-giving tension between the hiddenness and the revelation of God, that divine mystery which effects our faith born of love, not knowledge.

This chapter has been an exercise in speaking into the divine mystery, in speaking indirectly and metaphorically of God. Woman Wisdom, as we have seen, can open our eyes to the fruitful balance between hiddenness and revelation in all our encounters with God. She can point out the goodness of God's mystery, the way it constantly eludes our grasp, and thus provokes our wonder and praise. She teaches us that even in our encounters with God, even in coming face to face with Jesus Christ in the Incarnation, we do not comprehend God fully, for the Incarnation is not the solving of the mystery of God, but our ultimate proximity to God as unsolvable mystery. And she lets us know that even when we speak of God, we do not know what we are saying, but must rely on metaphor to point towards God's mystery, even in using the name Jesus Christ. She leads us to examine the wisdom of our words in describing God, to see their true nature, which has just as much potential to obscure God and get in the way of our praise as to allow us to name our Creator fittingly as the Spirit makes them holy and worthy.

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<sup>118</sup> Ramshaw, 99.

Most importantly, Wisdom draws us out of the petrified images of Jesus Christ that we cling to and, through the mixing of her metaphor with that of Jesus Christ, restores to us a sense of the mystery of the Incarnation, and the centrality of divine ineffability in the identity of Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God made flesh. In the mixing of these two metaphors we discover that our Saviour is in fact the Word whom our words cannot describe and the Wisdom who renders human ingenuity utter foolishness.

An unspoken undercurrent throughout this chapter has been the controversial issue of gender. Among feminist theologians, the recovery of a sense of God's mystery, the mystery of Jesus Christ, and the name of Woman Wisdom most often stems from a desire to free theological concepts and language from the primarily male images and names that have been favoured throughout Christian history. The maleness of Jesus Christ is arguably one of the most literalized and therefore idolized aspects of his incarnate humanity. In Woman Wisdom, many feminist theologians find a valuable biblical source of gender-inclusive language for God. The next chapter will focus on the issue of gender, particularly as it affects the portrayal of Jesus Christ within the Wisdom Christology I am forging here.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### *Woman Wisdom Made Flesh: Complicating the Gender of Jesus Christ*

“...the Son of Man came eating and drinking,  
and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard,  
a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’  
Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”  
Luke 11:19

In chapter 1, I raised some of the main objections to Wisdom Christology, including several based on the difference in gender between Jesus Christ and Woman Wisdom. A number of scholars argue that because Jesus Christ was a historical man and is the Son of God, Woman Wisdom faded into the background, an unimportant or incredible Christ-figure, simply because of her gender.<sup>1</sup> Yet in the above quotation from Luke, Jesus identifies himself with Wisdom, calling his actions her actions, making the two of them essentially indecipherable. What is going on here, especially regarding gender? Behind the argument that Woman Wisdom is unimportant lies the assumption that the maleness of Jesus Christ is a given aspect of his being, something certain and unmysterious, and something which easily colours our view of God, whom we therefore view as male. This assumption has been questioned in much recent theology, particularly feminist theology. These theologians ask: if Jesus Christ is fully divine as well as fully human, how can we be certain that he is male, since God is ultimately beyond gender? Furthermore, given recent distinctions between sex and gender, is Jesus’ male gender as easy to determine as his biological maleness?

In this chapter, I wish to outline some recent discussions that at the very least complicate the seemingly straightforward maleness of Jesus Christ, and to evaluate the assumptions behind them. Firstly, I will argue that because Jesus Christ is divine, it is appropriate to use male or female images for him; this is not something new for theology, but is apparent throughout

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<sup>1</sup> See page 27 above.

Christian history. This does not mean, however, that the Jesus of history can be forgotten. Secondly, then, though Jesus of Nazareth was a flesh-and-blood, historical man, i.e., biologically of the male sex, this does not mean he adhered to the strict gender codes of patriarchal maleness of his cultural/social context. Jesus' attitude towards the women in his life does not exemplify patriarchal assumptions, but an alternative to them. Thirdly, if the maleness of Jesus Christ is not set in stone, neither is Wisdom's, for as we have seen, these two figures are described in much the same way, without distinguishing them by gender. If these arguments prove convincing, perhaps it is not completely unthinkable to associate Woman Wisdom, a female figure, with Jesus the Christ.

### ***Christ Beyond Male or Female: The Fluid Gender of the Christ***

Elizabeth A. Johnson argues that “of all the doctrines of the church Christology is the one most used to suppress and exclude women,” because the maleness of Jesus of Nazareth is assumed to reflect that God is somehow male. “If Jesus is a man, so uncritical reasoning goes, and as such the revelation of God, then this must point to maleness as an essential characteristic of divine being itself. It indicates, if not an identification, then at the very least more of an affinity between maleness and divinity than is the case with femaleness.”<sup>2</sup> The controversies in the 1970's and 80's over female depictions of Christ crucified (the first of which was entitled *Christa*) testify to the enduring fixation on Jesus Christ's maleness, as opposed to any other aspect of his earthly life. These female crucifixes were labelled unacceptable because the artists were “totally changing the symbol.” Teresa Berger writes, “we have become so accustomed to a Black Christ figure or a Campesino on the cross or a Chinese Holy Family as legitimate forms of the

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 151-152.



inculturation of the Gospel – while a female Christ child in the manger or a woman on the cross appear to many of us as incomprehensible or unacceptable.”<sup>3</sup> Femaleness is simply incompatible with the Christ symbol in the eyes of many.

Despite how common this opinion is, it possesses some major flaws, for Jesus’ maleness, an aspect of his humanity, is idolized: it is carried into the divine realm and applied to God who is altogether beyond gender, beyond femaleness *and* beyond maleness. To call God male is in fact to trespass on the mystery of the divine. Insofar as Jesus Christ is divine – and the Church confesses that he is fully divine as well as fully human – then he is beyond gender as well. Yet the Church has not historically understood the maleness of Jesus Christ in this way, but has granted it an altogether different significance. Rosemary Radford Ruether argues that since at least the time of Thomas Aquinas, Aristotelian concepts of biology have crept into Christian theology, lending weight to the argument that the female is a “‘defective’ male, [...] inferior in body, intelligence and in moral self-control.”<sup>4</sup> This idea that the female is the “inferior or complementary ‘other’” to the normative, superior male has persisted,<sup>5</sup> leading Aquinas to argue, on the basis of this hierarchical anthropology, that “the maleness of Christ was an ontological necessity [...] In order for Christ to represent generic humanity, he must be male, because only the male has the fullness of human nature. The female cannot represent the human species either for herself or generically.”<sup>6</sup> Because a male body was “chosen by the Son of God himself for the enfleshment of the incarnation,” the idea that men are superior to women has been influential within Christianity, with devastating consequences both for the Church and wider society. To

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<sup>3</sup> Julie Clague, “Symbolism and the Power of Art: Female Representations of Christ Crucified,” in *Bodies in Question: Gender, Religion, Text*, ed. Darlene Bird and Yvonne Sherwood (Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2005), 32, 46. Clague quotes Berger on page 46.

<sup>4</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “The Liberation of Christology from Patriarchy,” in *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, ed. Ann Loades (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 140.

<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 47.

<sup>6</sup> Ruether, “The Liberation of Christology,” 140.

name the most blatant example, though we have moved beyond the faulty biology of Aristotle, the claim that men are more “christomorphic” than women continues to comprise the core of the argument against the official ordination of women in the Roman Catholic church. Unable to represent Christ with sufficient (sexual) accuracy, women are deemed “unsuited to carry out christic and especially eucharistic actions publicly due to their sexual difference from his [Jesus’] maleness.”<sup>7</sup> Others argue that because Christ is the initiator of the relationship between himself and the Church, his Bride, therefore priests must be male, for the female represents receptiveness, not the power to initiate.<sup>8</sup> In these ways, among others, the maleness of Jesus Christ has been and continues to be theologized as a central and unchangeable fact in the identity of the Saviour, and has been used to prevent women from fully representing Christ.

This disparagement of the female also likely accounts for at least part of the reason why Wisdom all but disappeared from Western Christianity. As we saw in chapter 1, Woman Wisdom is largely only implicitly present in New Testament Christology, and difficult to find if one is unfamiliar with her; it appears as though Jesus Christ replaces her.<sup>9</sup> In response to the question, “‘If Christ is the Wisdom of God, why is he called a son and not a daughter?’” even in the middle ages, most theologians argued that “‘the name of son was ‘more honorable.’”<sup>10</sup> In so doing, they followed the reasoning of Philo, who, in his discomfort with the association of the female with the divine, stated that Wisdom was actually ‘male’ in nature.<sup>11</sup> Joan Chamberlain Engelsman explains that, “Although many of the attributes of Sophia were retained in Christology, direct access to the feminine dimension of the divine was effectively barred by the

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<sup>7</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 152-153.

<sup>8</sup> Michele M. Schumacher, “The Unity of the Two: Toward a New Feminist Sacramentality of the Body,” in *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, ed. Schumacher (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 225, 229.

<sup>9</sup> See page 26 above.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1987), 43.

<sup>11</sup> See page 27 above.

maleness of Jesus.”<sup>12</sup> Thus the maleness of Jesus Christ has even been used to erode, if not completely undermine, the power and influence of a significant female biblical figure as well.

In the face of such blatant abuse of the maleness of Jesus Christ, how are feminist Christians to respond? Given that the maleness of Jesus Christ can be used to exclude women in this way, even Woman Wisdom, some feminists see it as an insurmountable problem for Christianity. This is especially true for women who “have had problems in being able to personally identify with a male, or connect with male symbols at the deepest level; women have struggled with the whole notion of needing to be ‘saved’ or defined by a man.”<sup>13</sup> On the basis of these issues, post-Christian feminists reject the Christian tradition altogether, claiming that it is irredeemably misogynist and sexist, based centrally upon “female sinfulness and male salvific efficacy.”<sup>14</sup> But has misogyny really been central to Christology for much of Christian history, as claimed by many feminists? Even a brief survey of the concept of Christ’s gender throughout Christian history soon reveals that this strict adherence to Christ’s maleness has not in fact been constant, particularly in late medieval mysticism. Christ was not always regarded as the quintessential man, but one whose gender was more fluid.

Gender fluidity has recurred in the Christology of different eras, beginning in the patristic era with the thought of Gregory of Nyssa. He described his prayers as the “active courting of Christ as ‘Sophia’” as well as the “passive reception of embraces of Christ as the bridegroom.”<sup>15</sup> Here the gender of Christ (as well as the gender of Gregory) is not fixed, but changeable, as the lines between male and female become blurred. Likewise, the eleventh-century mystic Hildegard

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<sup>12</sup> Joan Chamberlain Engelsman, *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), 95.

<sup>13</sup> Sondra Stalcup, “What About Jesus? Christology and the Challenges of Women,” in *Setting the Table: Women in Theological Conversation*, ed. Rita Nakashima Brock et al. (St. Louis MO: Chalice Press, 1995), 126, 125.

<sup>14</sup> Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus*, 45, 44.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology Series (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2002), 165.

of Bingen presents Jesus Christ as both “bridegroom and bride: bridegroom in his divinity, bride in his humanity.”<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, medieval Christology clearly described Christ as truly androgynous, even bodily so, on the basis of the wound in Christ’s side being a vagina, “opening to give birth to the Church, a place where the waters break and the blood flows.” This meant that Jesus Christ’s body had the marks of both femaleness and maleness.<sup>17</sup> The fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich also famously describes Christ as her mother, comparing the Eucharist to breastfeeding, but retaining male pronouns for Jesus. She writes, “The mother may give her child sucken her milk, but our precious mother Jesu, he may feed us with himself, and doth full courteously and full tenderly with the blessed sacrament, that is precious food of very life.”<sup>18</sup> This imagery is not unique to Julian, for others also viewed “Jesus’ breast [as] the wound, and the blood that spills forth from it [as...] the milk of salvation to those who drink from it.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Augustine mixes male and female imagery, stating that “‘The Word was made flesh’ so that our infant condition might come to suck milk from your wisdom by which you created all things.”<sup>20</sup> These believers of various eras have had no trouble blurring the gender of Jesus Christ, being much more concerned with the concepts of “feeding, suffering and salvation [...] than genital sexuality.”<sup>21</sup>

As evident from these few examples, then, many theologians and mystics have been quite comfortable with thinking of Jesus Christ as female, even as Woman Wisdom, for Wisdom did

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 182-3.

<sup>17</sup> Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology Series (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2005), 140.

<sup>18</sup> Julian of Norwich, “From A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7<sup>th</sup> Ed., ed. M.H. Abrams et al. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2001), 281. See also Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Womanguides: Readings Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 110.

<sup>19</sup> Gavin D’Costa, *Sexing the Trinity: Gender, Culture, and the Divine* (London: SCM Press, 2000), 73.

<sup>20</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation*, Radical Orthodoxy Series (New York: Routledge, 2002), 125.

<sup>21</sup> D’Costa, 73.

not disappear completely from Western Christian consciousness. Biblical texts concerned with Wisdom remained central in patristic and medieval theology, in which they were interpreted in terms of Christology, natural theology, ecclesiology, and Mariology.<sup>22</sup> Hildegard of Bingen's thought provides perhaps the richest example of medieval Wisdom theology. She builds her theology on four interconnected female figures: Eve, Mary, *Ecclesia*/Mother Church, and a figure she calls *Sapientia* or *Caritas*, "holy Wisdom and Love divine."<sup>23</sup> Hildegard had visions of this Wisdom figure as Bride of God, clothed with Creation itself, one who is the awe-inspiring "epiphany of the Creator's love." At the same time, Wisdom is the mother of humanity who, according to Hildegard, "clothes her children with righteousness," a concept derived from the description of the ideal wife and mother in Proverbs 31. Wisdom is therefore also the ethical guide for humanity, the one who grants them righteousness, and "the love that summons us to work" in emulation of her, the master builder of creation (Prov. 8) and the one who is constantly at work, spinning and weaving garments (Prov. 31).<sup>24</sup> Hildegard carries the imagery of clothing into her discussion of Eve and Mary as well, using it as a metaphor for motherhood. For Hildegard, Wisdom is a divine prefiguring of Eve, the mother of humankind, who clothed "the sons of Adam" in "robe[s] of clay." In turn, this was a prefiguring of the Incarnation, effected by Mary.<sup>25</sup> Hildegard's Mary is Eve and Wisdom in one, simultaneously the bride and mother of God and thereby also the "recreatix of the world," who purified all mortal flesh from the sin of Adam "by clothing Christ in it," by providing Christ with the "tunic of [...] humanity." She calls Mary the sister of Wisdom, in whose "bosom rests the Wisdom of the Father," and concludes that Mary in fact effected redemption, which Hildegard locates primarily in the

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<sup>22</sup> Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 42.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii-xviii.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 46, 71, 73-75, 79.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

Incarnation rather than in the Cross.<sup>26</sup> Finally, Hildegard describes the Church as “the house of Wisdom” being built and embodied by the saints, but also as “the new Eve, [...] born of Christ’s wounded flesh,” “the virgin mother of the faithful,” and the location of the (re)birth of “the Christ whom Mary bore once [...] in baptism [of new believers and] whenever his body is confectioned in the Eucharist.” In an interesting reversal, Mary now becomes the one emulated by the priest during Communion: “every priest now echoes *her*.”<sup>27</sup>

At first glance, it may seem as though feminists have exaggerated the lack of female imagery in Christianity. Hildegard certainly provides a wealth of multi-layered imagery in her theology of Wisdom, Eve, Mary, and Mother Church. Joan Chamberlain Engelsman concurs that Wisdom’s identity and attributes were transferred primarily to the female figures of Mary and Mother Church, as well as to Christ. Developments in Mariology granted Mary a miraculous birth, virgin-motherhood, and assumption to heaven, “qualities previously associated with goddesses, not mortal women,” including great wisdom.<sup>28</sup> Her assumption into heaven in particular recalls the return of Woman Wisdom to the heavenly realm when she could find no resting place on earth.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, in the patristic era the Church is identified as Wisdom, taking over the teaching of wisdom and the punishment of the disobedient from Woman Wisdom.<sup>30</sup> But Engelsman is not satisfied with this, arguing that these figures pale in comparison to Woman Wisdom, for neither of them have her divine status or her previous power. Mary and Mother-Church leave Wisdom too meagre a legacy in Engelsman’s view.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 94, 158, 162-166, 191, 178.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 201, 210, 193-4. Emphasis mine.

<sup>28</sup> Engelsman, 122-6.

<sup>29</sup> See pages 9 and 11 above.

<sup>30</sup> Engelsman, 133-4, 137-8.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 95.

We should be careful, then, that we do not accept female imagery for Christ uncritically. Even Hildegard's theology is not flawless, for she cannot get beyond gender hierarchy altogether. For Hildegard, the female is still the weaker sex, and therefore Mary, as well as Hildegard herself, are examples of God choosing the lowliest ones to do God's will. "God acts through the weaker woman rather than the stronger man" in order to prove the power of God through a "poor little female." Even the femaleness of Jesus Christ represents his humanity, his weakness, humility, and obedience, not his divinity, according to Hildegard.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, Gregory of Nyssa seems to subscribe to the stereotypes of the active male and passive female in his contemplative experiences, yet elsewhere he argues that in the Resurrection, as before the Fall, gender difference will pass away, and believers will attain a "de-genitalized," "angelic" state, a variation on androgyny.<sup>33</sup> In Gregory's era, however, this 'androgyny' was often based upon the male as ideal, meaning that women had to abandon their gender and become "virile" women in order to be true believers. In the theology of Jerome for instance, "the achievement of the [supposedly] sexless, angelic state is tantamount to [women] becoming male."<sup>34</sup> The *Gospel of Thomas*, a Gnostic text, even goes so far as to quote Jesus as saying, "every woman who makes herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven."<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, Hildegard's strong emphasis on female figures, including Wisdom (perhaps in spite of her own biases against them!) and Gregory's and others' willingness to see Christ's gender as fluid are important examples from within the Christian tradition of overcoming traditional gender hierarchy to some degree.

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<sup>32</sup> Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 182-3.

<sup>33</sup> Coakley, 163.

<sup>34</sup> Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature*, University of Pennsylvania Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>35</sup> Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus*, 159.

I cannot therefore support Engelsman's statement that "Ultimately, Sophia [...] herself completely disappeared from the Christian religion of that time,"<sup>36</sup> for it oversimplifies the situation and devalues Wisdom's thorough integration into the symbolic world of Christianity through her intimate connections with God, Mary, the Church, and Christ. Furthermore, Woman Wisdom is not in fact collapsed into Christology in the thought of Hildegard of Bingen, though she remains profoundly connected to the Christ. Engelsman also fails to take into account other examples in which the human/weakness=female, divine/strength=male dualism, typical of Hildegard and others, was altogether reversed, as in late medieval interpretations of the circumcision of Jesus Christ (recounted in Luke 2). This ritual overtly concerning his bodily maleness becomes the mark of his *full* incarnation into humanity, his "*full taking on of flesh*, indeed to the very last detail."<sup>37</sup> It both confirms that he possesses male genitalia, or a "gendered corporeality," and proves that his human body can be wounded, making the circumcision a foreshadowing of his death on the cross.<sup>38</sup> In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, this took the form of devotion to the "holy foreskin" and the "feast of the circumcision."<sup>39</sup> In this line of thought it is the female that comes to symbolize the divine, while the male symbolizes the human, something that could also apply to Wisdom Christology.<sup>40</sup> This reversal appears in medieval monasticism, in which women came to be seen by some as *superior* to their male counterparts, for a nun actually "became the bride" of Jesus Christ, while a monk "remained a mere servant." Taken to its extreme, this idea birthed the "theory that Christ was incarnate as a man because, in humility, he chose to assume the inferior masculine sex instead of the nobler

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<sup>36</sup> Engelsman, 120.

<sup>37</sup> D'Costa, 66.

<sup>38</sup> Ward, *Christ and Culture*, 165-6, 171.

<sup>39</sup> D'Costa, 66.

<sup>40</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 165.



feminine.”<sup>41</sup> Here we see gender hierarchy inverted, but in a way that is no less hierarchical. The idealization of women and the denigration of men as weaker and more sinful is thus not a satisfactory view of gender either.

Other, usually marginal, groups have dealt with Christ’s maleness in yet another way: through envisioning a second, female Messiah either among them or to come. Barbara Newman deems this a “perennial underground movement within the Church.” The second-century saw the Montanists as one such group. In medieval Spain, the Guglielmites were a sect based upon the belief that their deceased leader Guglielma was the Holy Spirit incarnate, who would come again “to establish a new, purified Church in which the Pope and cardinals would be female.” In preparation for this event, the sect named Sister Maifreda their *Papessa*, or “Popess,” and she functioned as a priest for several decades, until the Inquisition put a stop to the movement by burning the Popess and several other group members at the stake as heretics.<sup>42</sup> According to Newman, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England saw two groups arise, the Behmenists and the Philadelphians, both of whom followed the teachings of Jakob Boehme, a mystic who had visions of “the noble Virgin Sophia” and who promoted the leadership of prophetic women. The eighteenth- to nineteenth-century version was the Shakers, a sect derived from the Quakers, who believed their leader, Mother Ann, to be “the Second Coming of Christ in glory, that is, in the form of a woman.”<sup>43</sup> God was androgynous in their view, given that male and female were created in God’s image according to Genesis. Because of this, they believed the male Jesus Christ only partly fulfilled the Incarnation, while the second, female Messiah completed it.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 6, 8.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, 182.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 243, 311, and Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 261.

<sup>44</sup> Ruether, *Womanguides*, 111-2.

These groups, though their Christology seems outlandish, had something right: God is not limited to one gender. But these seemingly radical groups do not go far enough, for God is not limited to *two* genders either, but overflows *both* designations and all our names for the divine. God is however also intensely personal, especially in Jesus Christ, therefore human metaphors are especially fitting.<sup>45</sup> Human metaphors are usually gendered metaphors though, because gender is a part of human reality. In other words, both femaleness and maleness represent a *human* reality, and *neither* properly represents divinity; this is why claims to be the female Messiah or incarnation of the Holy Spirit are also heretical, for they too read gender into the divine reality and so fabricate the need for a second saviour. In speaking of God, we are free to use human metaphors of either gender, as long as we remember that they are *equally* appropriate and *inappropriate*. Gavin D'Costa states it clearly: "all genders find analogical affirmation in the life of God, while God's life itself is not gendered."<sup>46</sup> Can the same be said of Christ, however? The gender-bending Christologies of Hildegard, Gregory, Julian and others outlined above suggest that it can.

Christ, in his divinity, occupies the same position as God with regard to gender: the Christ is beyond it, making images of either gender equally appropriate and inappropriate. This is why believers throughout Christian history have not felt it necessary to cling to the maleness of Christ, but have freely played with the gender of Jesus Christ. The maleness of Christ has in no way remained an entrenched constant throughout Christian history, therefore to question it is not merely a scandal of the present age. It is Jesus Christ's divinity that legitimates the plethora of images of him, some male, some female, some from the natural world, and some objective, for in this divinity, he is beyond maleness or femaleness, beyond any of the names we call him. As I

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<sup>45</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 45.

<sup>46</sup> D'Costa, 74.

argued in the previous chapter,<sup>47</sup> the mystery of Jesus Christ is inclusive, wide enough to hold a multiplicity of names for Christ; as exemplified in the Bible, Christ is Woman Wisdom as well as Word and Son, and many other names.

This conviction has driven the christological gender fluidity evident throughout Christian history, as we saw, which today takes a somewhat different form in feminist, postcolonial and queer Christologies.<sup>48</sup> Postcolonial feminist theologian Kwok Pui lan therefore draws images from various cultural contexts, such as Guru, Corn Mother, Priest of Han and Feminine Shakti, and applies them to Jesus Christ. She argues that her basis for making these connections is found within “The images of Jesus/Christ presented in the New Testament [which] are highly pluralistic and hybridized, emerging out of the intermingling of the cultures of Palestine, the Hellenistic Jewish diaspora, and the wider Hellenistic world.” The New Testament prevents the illusion that Christ is “a finished product, to be accepted unquestionably by all. Rather, its pluralism indicates a christological open-endedness, inviting us to discover our own particular christology, that is, specific significance of Jesus for our situation[s].”<sup>49</sup> In short, Jesus Christ can be contextualized into different cultural/historical/social contexts, a process that can involve his becoming female, becoming Christa as well as Christ.

The more controversial Christologies of Virginia Ramey Mollenkott and Marcella Althaus-Reid exemplify the Christ of queer theology, in which the fluid gender of Jesus Christ has somewhat different connotations. Mollenkott theorizes that Jesus Christ is physically “intersexual,” another term for hermaphrodite. On the basis of a literal reading of the virgin birth,

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<sup>47</sup> See page 57 ff. above.

<sup>48</sup> The term “queer theology” is defined as “a movement and an alliance of people who question the sexual construction of theology,” in particular its “heteronormativity,” incorporating queer/gender theory with theology. Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid, eds., “Introduction: Queering Theology: Thinking Theology and Queer Theory,” in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God and Politics*, Queering Theology Series (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 4-5.

<sup>49</sup> Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 170-172. The latter quotation is Kwok quoting George Soares Prabhu.

Jesus Christ must only have received genetic material from Mary, and must therefore have possessed “both the chromosomal identification of a woman and the phenotypic anatomy of a man.” This is a variation on mystical androgyny, making Christ a kind of hermaphrodite, and thus the best bodily, human image of God, who is called both male and female but is “literally neither one nor the other.” Mollenkott concludes that hermaphrodites and “female-to-male transsexuals” in fact “come closer than anybody to a physical resemblance to Jesus.”<sup>50</sup> In a similar way, Althaus-Reid is opposed to the prevailing assumption that Jesus Christ was “a heterosexually-orientated (celibate) man. Jesus with erased genitalia; Jesus minus erotic body.” She argues that sexuality cannot be bracketed out of christological discussions, or out of theology in general.<sup>51</sup> Provocative images in Althaus-Reid’s Christology include “ambiguous Christ/Marys,” figures of Mary “cross-dressed” as a young Jesus (or vice versa) as well as the Bi/Christ. The Bi/Christ figure is inclusive, incorporating the “Heterosexual Christ, [...] the Gay Christ [...], the Lesbian Christ, [...] the Trans-gendered Christ and so on.” This is a Christ who stands in solidarity with those “outside heterosexuality” either as a sympathetic “companion” or as one of them.<sup>52</sup> In these Christologies, among others, we see Christ’s gender pushed in ever-new directions, parts of which resonate with the Gospel portrait(s) of Jesus Christ, and parts of which do not. To make Jesus a champion of those who surgically change their sex or of sexual promiscuity, as Mollenkott and Althaus-Reid each propose, risks losing touch with the Jesus

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<sup>50</sup> Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Omnigender: A Trans-religious Approach, Revised and Expanded* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 115-6. The latter “remain chromosomally female after their transition to maleness,” according to Mollenkott.

<sup>51</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 114, 4.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 82, 116-7. Althaus-Reid also speculates that Lazarus and Jesus may have been lovers, making Jesus Christ a gay man, or that perhaps Jesus “was a man who desired both men and women and met those men and women’s desires whoever they were,” making Jesus Christ a promiscuous bisexual (pp. 104, 68).

Christ of history.<sup>53</sup> Inversely, their respective suggestions that Christ is in solidarity with those oppressed on the basis of sexual orientation or variance from strict gender codes in fact resonate deeply with the biblical Jesus Christ. This raises the issue of the relationship between the historical Jesus Christ and our gendered images, to which I now turn.

### *The Flesh of God: Remembering the History of Jesus Christ*

Can the gender of Jesus Christ be pushed too far? Is there no risk involved in opening up the symbol of Jesus Christ to our rampant speculation? Indeed, as we envision Christ anew, there is a serious danger of forgetting about the Jesus of history, for Jesus Christ was not only fully divine, but also fully human. In my enthusiasm for re-imag(in)ing the Christ, I do not want to say with Sondra Stalcup, that,

Theologically, in the matter of understanding the redemptive experience of Jesus as the Christ, there is no material significance in Jesus' biological makeup, or in any fact about him in the past. As an event of God, as the eschatological event in every new present, Jesus' sex – or Judaism or race or marital status or any fact of what he said and did in and of himself – is not relevant in confessing him as the Christ.<sup>54</sup>

One cannot overlook the historicity of Jesus Christ in this way, ignoring Jesus of Nazareth, the Palestinian Jew of the first century, for that would be in effect to deny the Incarnation. Stated differently, Jesus Christ is not only a universal figure, whom we can image in diverse ways, but also a particular, historical human being. These two cannot be divorced. Our new images for Christ can *supplement* but cannot *replace* the Jesus of history, thus we are not altogether free to choose the content of our Christ. The fact of Jesus' historical humanity in some ways limits our imaging of Christ, for Jesus of Nazareth questions the legitimacy of our images of Christ,

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<sup>53</sup> See D'Costa, 66. Here he briefly discusses surgical sex-change procedures, which he identifies with a desire for "anatomical erasure." He states that such a desire "signifies a rejection of God's created goodness." I would question the underlying assumption that the individual self knows best what kind of body one should have, as well as the implication of a clear correspondence between anatomical sex and gender.

<sup>54</sup> Stalcup, 127.

providing a measure with which our images must resonate, and thus ensuring against the arbitrary making of Jesus Christ in our own image. This is a temptation to *all* Christologies, including feminist Wisdom Christology. What exactly does Jesus of Nazareth do to our concepts of the gender of Jesus Christ? How can we reconcile a divine Christ beyond male and female with a man who lived thousands of years ago? Are post-Christian feminists and traditionalist Catholics in this sense correct – is Jesus’ maleness unavoidable, one of the limits we must not transgress?

In one sense, Jesus of Nazareth was a man, that is, we know he possessed male genitalia, as confirmed by the Lukan account of his circumcision. Jesus was of the male sex, and I do not think this aspect of Jesus is open to debate or to speculation, as Mollenkott and Althaus-Reid propose. Mollenkott establishes the “chromosomal” femininity of Jesus (which is somehow not bodily apparent) only by literalizing the Virgin Birth, which is a metaphor for the uniqueness and mystery of the Incarnation. Likewise, Althaus-Reid argues that we can only know for sure that Jesus was identified as a biological male at his circumcision. After that, she claims, the biblical text is silent on the matter. She writes, “We read that Jesus had a penis when he was taken to be circumcised (Luke 2:21), but we don’t know if it developed, if he had an accident, three testicles or grew up with what might be considered a socially underdeveloped penis, and so forth.”<sup>55</sup> To such questions, I can only ask: does this matter? Would any of these (hypothetical) circumstances ‘undo’ the bodily maleness of Jesus? Probably not, at least not for the biblical writers. Furthermore, why do Mollenkott and Althaus-Reid find it necessary to literalize their “queer” images of Christ by reading them onto his physical body, and into the textual bodies of the Gospels? There is arguably room within the mystery of Christ for a “queer” image, without having to alter the flesh of Jesus Christ, just as female images like Woman Wisdom are valid

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<sup>55</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 104.

without Jesus of Nazareth becoming bodily female. Rather, our new images of Christ should seek to resonate with the biblical accounts of Jesus' inclusive ministry of reconciliation and solidarity with the oppressed.

I would thus rather affirm with Johnson that, "The fact that Jesus of Nazareth was a male human being is not in question." This is simply one aspect of his historical particularity. He was a man, just as he was Palestinian, Jewish, a peasant, and belonged to the first century. As accidents of his particularity, they are markers of his full incarnation, his full humanity, and are not eternal characteristics of God. No one would think to argue that God really belongs to the first century, or speaks mainly Aramaic, or that all priests should be Palestinian in order to represent Christ more accurately. Maleness seems to be the only aspect of Jesus of Nazareth's identity to have gained such disproportionate importance in the Church, yet it is only one part of his historical humanity.<sup>56</sup> Susanne Heine states, "Nowhere is it written that God becomes male; as he comes into history, however, he must become either man or woman."<sup>57</sup> I am not interested, then, in questioning the male sex of Jesus, but rather, what this maleness means and how he functioned as a male. In other words, I am concerned with the gender, not the sex of Jesus Christ.

Feminists and gender theorists differentiate between sex, the biological-physiological markers of maleness or femaleness, and gender, culturally-defined roles and behaviours designated male or female. Following Judith Butler, Sarah Coakley describes gender as "not 'natural' but repetitively 'performed.'"<sup>58</sup> Stated differently, male and female gender roles are not givens, but are learned and internalized within our socio-cultural-historical contexts. This is why

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<sup>56</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 151, 35, 155.

<sup>57</sup> Susanne Heine, *Matriarchs, Goddesses, and Images of God: A Critique of a Feminist Theology*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 134-135. She continues, "If a theology reinterprets the incarnation of God as a matter of becoming male and argues from that that men are nearer to heaven, it shows itself to be rooted in the short-cut of empiricist thinking which has not understood anything either about God or about human beings."

<sup>58</sup> Coakley, 158.

there is variation in gender definitions from context to context.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, Graham Ward argues that though we can be certain of Jesus' male sex on the basis of the aforementioned Lukan account of his circumcision, "the social construction and representation of his sexual identity (what normally constitutes gender) [...] is not so easily determined."<sup>60</sup>

Was Jesus of Nazareth a typical or even stereotypical male in his culture and society? Althaus-Reid argues that Jesus was in fact limited by the gender definitions of his context. Because he was a man, he must have "interpreted the world from a phallogocentric perspective," and because he did not experience the life of a woman, Jesus remained "ignorant of the feminine beyond the cultural constructions of gender of his time and society." She uses as her example the story of the woman with the haemorrhage in Mark 5, which she reads (against the text) not as an example of illness, but as "the case of the woman menstruating." Jesus responded to this woman with the "oppressive and colonial" act of stopping her menstrual bloodflow instead of with "radical or liberative" action. Althaus-Reid continues, "A popular messiah *with deeper insights into the structures of discrimination and oppression* would have established a dialogue with the woman [...] concerning the theme of menstruation and women's oppression."<sup>61</sup> In Althaus-Reid's view, then, Jesus was limited by the patriarchal gender boundaries of his time, and did little, if anything to counteract them.

Is this accurate, however? Can Jesus really be accused of being biased against women, of being a model patriarch, solely by virtue of his maleness, on the basis of one (questionable) example? Hardly. This would be to treat Jesus' maleness abstractly, and to ignore all the

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<sup>59</sup> Mollenkott, 3.

<sup>60</sup> Ward, *Christ and Culture*, 166

<sup>61</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology: Readings on Poverty, Sexual Identity, and God* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 45, 50-1. Emphasis mine. She also states: "for the [poor *Latina*] women who today ask Jesus, 'Who do you think we are?', as yet there is no reply because Jesus was not completely conscientized [with regard to gender], except that as God/man he was subjected to cultural and epochal elements which he did not succeed totally in transcending" (page 48).



particularities of his historical life; it would be to “focus [...] on male gender without considering the *actual particular male* that is being redescribed, and the significations that are generated by that particular body.”<sup>62</sup> We have no evidence that Jesus adopted the typical lifestyle of marriage and children, nor did he behave in conventional, ‘patriarchal’ ways towards others, but lived a life of service to others. In his friendships with women, who were clearly part of his inner circle of followers, he was not condescending, but remarkable and radical in his treatment of *all* with compassion and understanding, at times blatantly disregarding gender-related social taboos by speaking with women, touching them, and healing them in public – including the woman with the haemorrhage, who was indeed ill. In this way, “Jesus’ relational significance excludes no one – and certainly not women, upon whom he acknowledges his dependence and relations.”<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, some of Jesus’ own behaviour would have appeared markedly ‘feminine’ to those observing him in that context, just as some of it aligned with that which was considered ‘masculine.’ In this sense, I agree with Mollenkott when she states that Jesus “Since Jesus occasionally did the work assigned to women of his place and time, cooking for the disciples or washing their feet, makes a wonderful champion for gender transgressors everywhere.”<sup>64</sup> Jesus clearly did not feel constrained above all to follow the gender norms of his society; his primary allegiance lay elsewhere, in an ethic of love and compassion, making him “complexly masculine,”<sup>65</sup> not merely a male like any other.

Many feminists posit that Jesus’ maleness is thus not problematic, as the assumption that all men are patriarchal is simplistic; instead, Jesus’ maleness can be seen to have had a positive

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<sup>62</sup> D’Costa, 59. Emphasis his.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>64</sup> Mollenkott, 118. I agree with Mollenkott that homosexuality involves a positive broadening of gender as well, but I disagree with her argument that Jesus was himself gay (pp. 2, 119).

<sup>65</sup> Virginia Burrus, “Radical Orthodoxy and the Heresiological Habit: Engaging Graham Ward’s Christology,” in *Interpreting the Postmodern: Responses to “Radical Orthodoxy,”* ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Marion Grau (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 52.

purpose, as Jesus presented an alternative way of being male. This is particularly evident in the cross, the ultimate symbol of obedience and submission, enacted by a man and therefore subversive in a patriarchal context. For this reason, Ruether calls the cross the “kenosis [or emptying] of patriarchy,”<sup>66</sup> the ultimate symbol that God does not side with the oppressors, but with the oppressed, including those oppressed on the grounds of sex and gender. Likewise, D’Costa describes Jesus as “a man [...] claiming to be the Son of a different God, a God who puts love before the Law, who touches and heals, who communes with women and children, with lepers and outcasts, a God who seeks to topple the Freudian [phallic or patriarchal] world from within.” In Freudian terms, Jesus’ maleness was not based upon “the murder of the mother, but a profound acknowledgment of her (sometimes rightly mirrored in the church – and sometimes grossly distorted).”<sup>67</sup> He therefore modeled a radically non-patriarchal maleness in his context, an ironic maleness based upon service instead of domination and lordship, doubtlessly part of the reason he caused such outrage throughout his ministry.

Johnson takes this further, and argues that Jesus’ maleness was thus *necessary* in order to dethrone patriarchy. She states, “If in a patriarchal culture a woman had preached compassionate love and enacted a style of authority that serves, she would most certainly have been greeted with a colossal shrug. Is this not what women are supposed to do by nature? But from a social position of male privilege, Jesus preached and acted this way.”<sup>68</sup> Along comparable lines, Heine argues that “The rejection of such temptations [as Jesus faced in the wilderness] would be impossible for a woman because what she could choose instead of the devil’s offer would be what is always attributed to her: serving, renouncing, perishing.” On this basis, Heine argues that

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<sup>66</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 137.

<sup>67</sup> D’Costa, 59, 28.

<sup>68</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 160-1.

the Saviour must remain “Jesus Christus and not Jesa Christa,” someone who can choose solidarity with the “humiliated,” not someone already lacking power.<sup>69</sup> This position leads some to denounce female crucifixes as dangerous, for they risk supporting the patriarchal order instead of undermining it: “The crucified woman’s body affirms rather than subverts the social order, holding up an image that does not call into question the values of patriarchy [...] Christa perpetuates the violence done to women by eternally inscribing the female body with the marks of her suffering.”<sup>70</sup> In the opinion of these theologians, to make Christ into Christa is to empty Christ’s maleness of its critical subversive quality, leaving only a powerless female, a victim of patriarchy, in his place.

Is it really this simple, however? Does this answer sufficiently account for the constellation of particularities that comprised the identity of Jesus of Nazareth? Even if he was male in a male-dominated culture, is it really appropriate to call his situation as a Jewish peasant in Roman-occupied Palestine ‘privileged’? Is it not equally disturbing to place a powerless Jewish man upon the cross as to place a woman there? Could this not be read as an affirmation of the interests of the Roman Empire, the occupiers and oppressors? As already mentioned, Johnson herself acknowledges that sex and gender are only part of Jesus’ identity, just as they are only part of any person’s identity; “Age, race, period in history [...] and other essential aspects of historical existence are at least as important in determining one’s identity as sex.”<sup>71</sup> To split humanity into male and female and generalize about the status of one over the other is thus artificial; some women are in positions of great power, just as some men are oppressed. Power is not neatly divided along gender lines, but is more complex. This is why “psychological-cultural archetypes of femininity and masculinity,” utilized by Engelsman and Althaus-Reid, among

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<sup>69</sup> Heine, 140.

<sup>70</sup> Tina Beattie quoted in D’Costa, 61.

<sup>71</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 155.

others, are not altogether helpful for our discussion.<sup>72</sup> Power is ultimately a temptation for all *human beings*, for we all encounter situations in which we have the upper hand.<sup>73</sup> Jesus Christ, in his particular historical life as a (powerful) man and member of a (powerless) occupied people spoke out against the oppressors of and among his people, but did so in a way that involved the renunciation of the way of violence and the power that he could have grasped, perhaps as a man, but *much* more importantly as God incarnate, and indeed emptied himself, taking the form of a slave (Philippians 2). The importance of the maleness of Jesus Christ thus pales in comparison to the importance of his humanity, his incarnate-ness; stated differently, “The maleness of Jesus is superceded by the Christness of Jesus.”<sup>74</sup> That is, after all, his singular identity, for he is not an ordinary human being, but he alone is the full human Incarnation of the divine. As God incarnate, Jesus Christ offers divine solidarity with all of humanity. In his taking on of human flesh, he “becomes a representative of all of us,” whether powerless or powerful, “slave or industrialist,”<sup>75</sup> oppressor or oppressed, woman or man.

The argument that Jesus Christ is necessarily male also undermines Wisdom Christology itself, for if Jesus Christ cannot be Christa, then Woman Wisdom is irrelevant. If Christ can however be Christa, what does this look like? If the maleness of Jesus Christ is strange and different, what kind of woman is Wisdom? Let us examine the gender of Wisdom more closely in order to answer this question.

### ***Is Wisdom Woman? Complicating the Gender of Wisdom***

If Jesus Christ is not straightforwardly male, then neither is Woman Wisdom straightforwardly female. Some of the same arguments used of Christ apply to Wisdom, then. Firstly, gender is not

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<sup>72</sup> Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus*, 13, 158.

<sup>73</sup> Heine, 144.

<sup>74</sup> Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus*, 48.

<sup>75</sup> D’Costa, 65.

an aspect of the divine realm. In making Christ *necessarily* male, Heine and also Johnson, to some degree, reassign maleness to the divine, thereby (re)creating a gulf between Jesus Christ and Woman Wisdom on the basis of gender. This gulf would lead either to the establishment of two separate, gendered saviours, a kind of divine couple, or to the disuse of Wisdom imagery altogether. The first option would project maleness and femaleness onto the divine, but as I have already argued, this would place unacceptable limits on divinity, which is beyond gender. In short, it would idolize and divinize gender, something from our realm, thus making God in human image and violating the otherness of Christ's mystery.<sup>76</sup> This division of the divine into male and female will be the focus of my next chapter, where I will treat it in greater depth. As for the second option, here we have come full circle with Wisdom. Does this mean that we should allow Wisdom imagery to fall into disuse once again? Absolutely not! I would argue that we should in fact take a closer look at it in its particularity, for the portrayal of Woman Wisdom, like the portrayal of Jesus Christ, reveals a gender fluidity of its own.

In the Bible, Wisdom is clearly portrayed as a woman, but what kind of woman is she? Though the biblical text does not give us many details, we can ascertain that she filled a variety of roles, from prophet-teacher to householder-hostess, to bride, to co-creator and child of God. Some of her behaviour could be categorized as typically female, but some of it could easily be labelled 'masculine.' Unlike traditional portrayals of Mary, Wisdom is not a one-dimensional picture of the 'eternal feminine,' the ideal of womanly passivity and submissiveness,<sup>77</sup> but is at times a frightening, wrathful judge as well as being a loving bride and generous, welcoming hostess.<sup>78</sup> Thus Wisdom is "a very complex female image of God. She is a creative figure, a woman filled with self-awareness who is not afraid to praise herself. She can be wrathful, and

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<sup>76</sup> D'Costa, 29.

<sup>77</sup> Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus*, 164.

<sup>78</sup> Engelsman, 87.

she comes forth promising to proclaim her teaching. All these characteristics correspond very little or not at all to the ruling androcentric image of women.”<sup>79</sup> Wisdom, in other words, is not afraid to be ‘unladylike,’ an atypical woman who defies stereotypes! In Wisdom, *Christ exemplifies an alternative way of being female*, for some of her roles align with what might be considered typical women’s roles, but others do not, meaning that Wisdom does not fit neatly into the female gender of any context. In short, in Wisdom, Jesus Christ is complexly feminine, as he was complexly masculine in Jesus of Nazareth.

In addition, therefore, when we see the man Jesus of Nazareth behaving like Woman Wisdom, speaking the very same words as Woman Wisdom, and claiming the same relationship to God as Woman Wisdom has, the issue of gender becomes even more blurred for *both* of these figures. Is Woman Wisdom behaving in a ‘manly’ way, or is Jesus Christ doing ‘women’s work’? We cannot tell, and the biblical texts about the Wisdom-Word of God make no apology for this blurring of identities and genders, but only emphasize the wisdom of their ways and words. The link between Jesus Christ and Woman Wisdom was never primarily about gender, but about attempting to “understand the historical mission and fate of Jesus of Nazareth in theological [and biblical] terms.”<sup>80</sup> After all, just as there is nothing specifically masculine about being the Word of God, there is nothing particularly feminine about Wisdom itself; “Some men are wise, some women are wise.”<sup>81</sup> Precisely because Christ can be seen as Wisdom, we need not say with Heine and Johnson that Jesus’ maleness is necessary to his identity. While it is a true particularity of his historical life among us, he can be imaged as Wisdom as well. Christ is *also*

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<sup>79</sup> Silvia Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House: Studies on the Figure of Sophia in the Bible*, trans. Linda M. Maloney and William McDonough (Collegeville MN: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 2000), 64.

<sup>80</sup> Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus*, 158.

<sup>81</sup> Gail Ramshaw, *God Beyond Gender: Feminist Christian God-Language* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 45.

Christa, and we need not choose between them. The Word is wise, and Wisdom articulates herself; their ways are the same, the one Wisdom-Word of God.

This Wisdom-Word of God was and is incarnate in the human being Jesus of Nazareth, who is both like us and not like us, who both affirms us and challenges us. Woman Wisdom is an appropriate christological image, not because she confirms all that we believe about the feminine, not because she is precisely in our image. Rather, the reverse movement is what matters: that God becomes *human*, metaphorically and historically, is what is scandalous and astounding about the Wisdom-Word of God, for it reveals the loving solidarity of God for humanity, a solidarity that went so far as to take on a human life in all its particularity and confusion, including the mystery of gender, that symbol of our bodiliness, and thus of our suffering and mortality. This is what Woman Wisdom and the female crucifix can point to: the profound solidarity of Jesus Christ with our specific vulnerability and pain, and the response of love and forgiveness that God calls each of us to.<sup>82</sup> The Wisdom-Word of God becomes flesh, and this means Jesus Christ represents “us all, [...is] paradigmatic of human nature and the human condition generically,” not because he is male and maleness is the generic human sex, but because he is *God become human*. “Jesus the Christ’s ability to be savior does not reside in his maleness but in his loving, liberating history in the midst of the powers of evil and oppression.”<sup>83</sup> The Incarnation did not bless all things male, nor did it bless all things female; it blessed all of humanity by ending the inevitability of the equation of difference with enmity, allowing instead for difference to effect loving relationships.<sup>84</sup> The topic of the church community as the Body of Christ will take this further in my next chapter.

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<sup>82</sup> Clague, 49-50.

<sup>83</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 167. The former quotation is from Rosemary Radford Ruether.

<sup>84</sup> D’Costa, 56.

We must remember, then, that Jesus Christ is indeed the divine Wisdom-Word of God, not merely a gendered human being, a fact which relativizes his gender. Though Jesus Christ is fully human, he must remain an alien to us too. A distance must remain in our relationship with him. Woman Wisdom can provide a metaphor for this in her ‘otherness’ from us, both for women and men. We must all experience the distance between ourselves and Jesus Christ on some level, so for those men who believe themselves interchangeable with Jesus by virtue of their gender, Wisdom can provide a critical corrective. This cannot be how the maleness of Jesus Christ is interpreted without drastic distortion of the message of the gospel, for it “amounts to redemption via anatomical identification – and [...] a narcissistically projected divine.”<sup>85</sup> The distance that women have felt from Jesus Christ is therefore not altogether negative, since it has taught them about maintaining distance from the divine while bridging it with love for the other as other, as “the beloved other.”<sup>86</sup> This is certainly not to say that gender is the sum of the ‘otherness’ between us and Jesus Christ. The otherness between humanity and divinity is altogether different from the distinction between genders.<sup>87</sup> This is why we must continue to use a plethora of images for Jesus Christ, some drawn from our own identities, some utterly foreign to us, to give us a sense of the beautiful strangeness of our incarnate God, and to retain the mystery at the centre of our faith, for she is “the wisdom of God [which] is the opposite of ours: folly, foolishness, absurdity. And [...] the Word [which] spoke most powerfully when he endured his passion in silence.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 59. D’Costa argues that feminists must resist the same temptation to portray God in *their* image. See my next chapter.

<sup>86</sup> Sara Maitland, “Ways of Relating,” in *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, ed. Ann Loades (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 156.

<sup>87</sup> Janet Morley, “I Desire Her with My Whole Heart,” in *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, ed. Ann Loades (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 162.

<sup>88</sup> Gail Ramshaw, “The Gender of God,” in *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, ed. Ann Loades (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 168.



And so when attempting to define the gender of Jesus Christ, we are finally left with a paradox, a kind of non-definition, or at least not a closed one. We know that Jesus Christ is fully divine, and thus beyond gendered and non-gendered images alike. At the same time, we cannot deny that Jesus Christ became a particular human being in Jesus of Nazareth, a historical existence that included maleness. So Jesus Christ is the Wisdom-Word of God *and* is Jesus of Nazareth; we cannot let go of either one, yet neither makes gender fixed or static, but maintains its fluidity. This gender fluidity of Jesus Christ has a long tradition within Christian history, for he has been called Woman Wisdom, mother-Jesu, bride, and sister, for generations. Even in his earthly ministry as a particular, historical man, he did not hesitate to call himself Wisdom and to blur the lines between cultural femininity and masculinity in his behaviour, thereby undermining the patriarchal assumptions of his context. So I say somewhat facetiously with the early Anabaptist Menno Simons: “Oh, wonderful, unsearchable and incomprehensible love of God! He did not send into this unfriendly world an angel, a patriarch, or a prophet, but his eternal ALMIGHTY WORD, his ETERNAL WISDOM, the brightness of his glory, in the form of sinful flesh [...]”<sup>89</sup> No, we were indeed not sent a patriarch, but the Wisdom-Word of God, our very God become flesh among us, whose earthly life was a gathering of a new community of the new humanity. In the next chapter, let us explore this community further, drawing out the implications of Jesus Christ’s gender fluidity for the Church, which is his Body. What does it mean to embody the Wisdom-Word of God as women and men of faith? How do we as mortals embody the divine in our gendered bodies? How do we embody the Risen and Ascended One within our mortal flesh? I believe that Woman Wisdom, our eternal Teacher, can again provide insights into these issues.

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<sup>89</sup> Menno Simons, “The Lord’s Holy Supper,” in *The Complete Works of Menno Simon [...]* (Aylmer ON: Pathway Publishers, 1983), 42.

*CHAPTER FOUR*  
*Living the Metaphor:*  
*The Church as the Multi-Gendered Body of Christ-Wisdom*

“Although she is but one, she can do all things,  
and while remaining in herself, she renews all things;  
in every generation she passes into holy souls  
and makes them friends of God, and prophets,  
for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom.”  
Wisdom of Solomon 7:27-28

One cannot talk about the gender of Jesus Christ without discussing the gender of his followers, the members of the Church, the Body of Christ, for these issues are deeply interconnected. If the gender of Jesus Christ is determined to be exclusively male, the roles of men and women within the Church will reflect this, whereas if Jesus Christ is considered to be inclusive, that is, able to be imaged as male, female, or neither, as Word, Wisdom, and many other names, as I have been arguing, then the roles of the members of the Church will take on a different significance. If, as it says in Wisdom of Solomon above, Wisdom “passes into holy souls” in every generation, making them “friends of God and prophets,” leading them to lead lives of wisdom, what does gender actually mean within the Church community? Does it play any role in determining the roles of believers, or is it irrelevant? In this, my final chapter, I will attempt to answer these questions.

To state that the Church is the Body of Christ (following the Pauline letters to the Ephesians and Colossians) is no insignificant claim.<sup>1</sup> It is to state that, in a very real way, those who are members of the Church represent the Christ on earth, speaking and acting on his behalf, until the Second Coming. This is possible through the Spirit, who moulds the lives of believers, enabling them to follow Christ’s example as true disciples; enabling them, in other words, to live the metaphor of being the Body of Christ as the Church within the world. So how does gender fit

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<sup>1</sup> See Ephesians 1:22-23 and 5:23, and Colossians 1:18, 24.

into discipleship? Are there different patterns for women and men, since in some ways, Jesus was a man? Some feminists are uncomfortable with discipleship language because it can be interpreted as a call for women to shape their lives according to a male example. Others invert this argument, saying that through the Church, the Body of Christ, it is actually *Christ* who takes on male and female embodiment, and thus comes to possess a multi-gendered Body. On the basis of this observation, and because of my previous arguments that Jesus Christ is inclusively male and female, including Woman Wisdom, I will argue that the roles of believers in the Church cannot be divided along gender lines, but must be based upon spiritual gifts as well as the example of Christ-Wisdom. This means that Christ cannot be divided into ‘His’ and ‘Hers’ saviours, a male saviour for men (Jesus) and a female saviour for women (Wisdom or Mary), but must be seen as one inclusive Head of the many members of the Body.

### ***Completing the Incarnation: The Church as the Multi-Gendered Body***

In her essay, “Equal to Whom?,” Luce Irigaray argues that the Incarnation was incomplete. Jesus Christ could not have represented the divine in fullness, because he was only of the male gender. In her words, “After all, Christ is not of our sex the way he is part of men’s, of the people of men. [...] It is for this reason that I’ve suggested that the divine incarnation of Jesus Christ is a partial one; a view which, in any event, is consistent with his own. ‘If I am not gone, the Paraclete cannot come’” (from John 16:7).<sup>2</sup> This interpretation is not original to Irigaray, nor even to our time; groups such as the Shakers held similar beliefs about a second, female Messiah, or the female incarnation of the Holy Spirit, as I mentioned in the previous chapter.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, however, this view contains a grain consistent with orthodox Christianity, not in

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<sup>2</sup> Luce Irigaray, “Equal to Whom?” in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward, trans. Robert L. Mazzola, Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology Series (Malden MA: Blackwell, 1997), 209.

<sup>3</sup> See page 75 above.

terms of a second individual Messiah, but in terms of Christ being somewhat incomplete without the Church, as the latter is in some way a substitute for the ascended, and therefore bodily absent, Christ. This does not mean that the Church is now God incarnate or that it replaces Christ, but that “Christ is the one encountered in the church [...] through the earthly members of the body, who are the vehicles of Christ’s own acts of speaking and giving.” The commissioned and sanctified Church acts on behalf of the ascended Christ, its commissioner and sanctifier, just as a body is guided and moved by its head. In this way, there is an “inseparability of Christ and the church,”<sup>4</sup> as this metaphor shapes the very lives of believers. For my purposes here, the key difference between this and Irigaray’s proposal is that the Church is a *communal* Body, not an individual one, and thus cannot be gendered as easily as Irigaray claims it can.

Graham Ward argues along these lines when he speaks of a “theology of the ascension” in which the body of Jesus Christ is “continually being displaced;” there is a “transcorporeality in Christ.”<sup>5</sup> In the Last Supper, for instance, Jesus identifies his body with the bread, an affirmation that Jesus’ body is in fact “an extendible body. [...] this physical presence [of Jesus’] can expand itself to incorporate other bodies, like bread, and make them extensions of his own.”<sup>6</sup> In the crucifixion, likewise, Jesus’ body “swells to contain the future Church,” to which he gives birth from his wounded side upon the cross.<sup>7</sup> After Jesus has been raised, his body appears and disappears from the Gospel accounts, at times unrecognizable to his disciples, at other times replaced by the Church’s witness to what has happened to that body. Finally, the crowning displacement of the body of Jesus is the Church’s designation as Christ’s Body, something made

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<sup>4</sup> Ian A. McFarland, “The Body of Christ: Rethinking an Old Ecclesiological Model,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (July 2005): 244, 241, 239. I follow McFarland, who helpfully outlines a middle way between separating Christ and the Body too much (Karl Barth) or collapsing them into one (Robert Jenson) (p. 237). I especially do not want to reduce Christ’s resurrected body to the Church, as Jenson does (p. 232).

<sup>5</sup> Graham Ward, *Cities of God*, Radical Orthodoxy Series (New York: Routledge, 2000), 97, 100.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 99, 105.

fully possible by the ascension, when the body of Jesus Christ is removed from among us.<sup>8</sup> It is only after the ascension that “the Church in its identification becomes the body of Christ. [...] The Church dwells in Christ.”<sup>9</sup> For Ward, then, the Church is the expanded Body of Christ, containing believers and their witness to Christ; moreover, it is a body which itself continues to expand to incorporate the world, for the purposes of the salvation and “recreation” thereof.<sup>10</sup>

Ward also outlines the implications of his argument with regard to gender. On the basis of the tendency of Christ’s body to be displaced and to expand, he asserts that throughout the earthly, human life of Jesus Christ, his body, and therefore his gender, is somewhat “unstable.”<sup>11</sup> For instance, during the Last Supper, when Jesus gives his disciples the bread that is his body, his body is “both sexed and not sexed,” for it is both a male body and a neutral ‘body’ of bread. The bread thus also foreshadows the ‘neutrality’ of his broken body in death. “Death degenders,” Ward states, objectifying the body and abandoning it to suffering.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, however, Jesus’ body is perhaps at its most ‘female’ in the crucifixion, for his body expands to include and give birth to the Church upon the cross, and his wounded side becomes “both a lactating breast and a womb,” especially in medieval Christology. On this basis, Ward asserts that the Church, as Christ’s Body can be called a “multigendered” body, the Body comprised of all the believers, male and female.<sup>13</sup> Ward locates this change in the ascension, stating, “What happens at the ascension, theologically, constitutes a critical moment in a series of displacements or assumptions of the male body of Jesus Christ such that the body of Christ [...] becomes multi-gendered.”<sup>14</sup> The removal of Christ’s earthly body from among us through his ascension is thus

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 109, 112.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 108, 113.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 102-104.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 99, 105, 113.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 97.

not a tragic loss for the Church, in Ward's opinion, for it empowers the Church to now be that earthly Body, to now live that metaphor. As Ward explains, "Not-having the body of Christ is not a lack, not a negative: because Christ's withdrawal of his body makes possible a greater identification with that body."<sup>15</sup> As Irigaray rightly emphasizes, if Jesus is not gone, the Holy Spirit cannot come, which is why Jesus also says: "You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you'" (John 14:28). It is both a leaving and a not-leaving, for as one body is taken, another one is birthed. According to Ward, the ascension conforms to "the logic of birthing, not dying, or a continuation of the logic of opening-up. The withdrawal of the body of Jesus must be understood in terms of the Logos creating a space within himself, a womb, within which [...] the Church will expand and creation be recreated."<sup>16</sup> Jesus Christ is thus not only unstraightforwardly male within his own historical existence, as I focused on in my previous chapter, but also in the historical Body that provides his ongoing representation until he returns. For his was never a self-contained, strictly individual body to begin with, as Ward argues, but a body which overflows into a *community*, which unites a *group* of bodies into one multi-gendered Body.

But what precisely does it mean to be part of this multi-gendered Body? Needless to say, this is a complex concept that requires careful examination, and one which will preoccupy the remainder of this chapter. Doubtless the objection that this is 'only' a Pauline metaphor will be raised by some, but, as I argued in chapter 2, metaphors are no less 'true' than historical 'facts,' they usually are expressions of inexplicable mysteries. Therefore, to say that we are the Body of Christ is by no means a literal statement, but one way to express that the community of the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 113.

Church is mysteriously brought together by the Holy Spirit to worship God in Jesus Christ, who shapes our lives as believers in a very real way. What must be emphasized firstly, then, is that it is only through the Spirit that this identification can take place; there is nothing automatic about the ability of a group of believers to represent Jesus Christ, God incarnate. The sanctification of the Body for this task is not to be taken for granted. This is the ongoing work of God within that Body, for Christ remains its Head.<sup>17</sup>

Both Ward and Gavin D'Costa approach this concept through the practice of Communion. As already mentioned, Ward identifies the Last Supper as one of the clear expansions of Christ's body, by which it incorporates the bread. In telling the disciples that the bread is his body, Jesus Christ in a sense places his body, "the bread-as-his-body" into the hands of the disciples, who will soon afterward "hand him over" to be crucified. Ward focuses on the "handing-over," the "surrendering" of Christ's body.<sup>18</sup> But Ward leaves out the eating of the body-bread by the disciples, something D'Costa takes up. What constitutes the Body of Christ for D'Costa is the group of those who participate in the Communion meal: "Christ's body is coming into completion primarily in those who eat of his body and drink his blood, in the bodies of women and men, by the power of the Spirit." In other words, those who are nourished by Christ in an ongoing way are (becoming) part of his Body. Thus, D'Costa agrees with Irigaray that the incarnation of Jesus Christ is incomplete, but for him, this is not because Jesus Christ is merely a male, but because Christ *chooses* to complete the incarnation in the Church, "a corporate personality coming into being," comprised of both women and men, all those who are nourished by the Spirit.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> McFarland, 239. There remains a distinction between the Head and the other members of the Body.

<sup>18</sup> Ward, *Cities of God*, 102-103.

<sup>19</sup> Gavin D'Costa, *Sexing the Trinity: Gender, Culture, and the Divine* (London: SCM Press, 2000), 49, 75.

Furthermore, and central for D'Costa, women and men within the Church are *in relationship* with one another, joined by a love which mirrors the love within the community of the Trinity.<sup>20</sup> The Church is thus clearly the Body of Christ because it is a body of members connected through loving relationships with one another. This last assertion ties D'Costa to Elizabeth A. Johnson, who argues likewise that the Body of Christ is composed of “all those who by drinking of the Spirit participate in the community of disciples. Christ is a pneumatological reality, a creation of the Spirit who is not limited by whether one is Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female.” In her view, believers become part of the Body of Christ through discipleship, as “their own lives assume a christic pattern” through the power of Christ himself; in other words, participation in the Body of Christ means believers are to live according to the example of Jesus Christ, to live in a Christ-like way.<sup>21</sup> For Johnson, then, Christ is “inclusively all the baptized,” making it possible for us to image Christ “quite accurately [...] as black, old, Gentile, female, Asian or Polish.” This great diversity of portrayals simply reflects the continuation of Christ in the Church, the Body of Christ, which he “animate[s]” through the Spirit.<sup>22</sup> There is thus mutual indwelling here: as the Church, believers are Christ’s Body, and he is rendered multi-gendered by their different bodies, but Christ, as the Head, also shapes each member of the Body into a “christic” image as they live out their faith, influencing their decisions and behaviours, their relationships with one another, as D'Costa says. Believers are Christ’s Body not simply because of static or intrinsic identities, i.e., not simply because of being human, but because of this indwelling. In Johnson’s terms, “the story of the prophet and friend of Sophia,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1992), 162.

<sup>22</sup> Sandra Schneiders quoted in Ibid.



anointed as the Christ, goes on in history as the story of the whole Christ, *christa* and *christus* alike, the wisdom community.”<sup>23</sup>

***Body of Christ, Wisdom Embodied: Gendered Saviours or Salvation from Gender?***

Where does this leave Wisdom? How does it work for the Church to be both the Body of Christ and the community of Wisdom, as Johnson calls it? Integrating Wisdom into the imaging of the Church highlights the issue of how gender is understood in the Church, and thus will contribute to my answer about what it means to call the Church a multi-gendered Body. Firstly, it must be understood that by Wisdom I mean a christological name, that is, another name for the one Jesus Christ, not a second, female saviour. Jesus Christ is God’s Wisdom incarnate in human history, hence the correspondence between their relationships to God, their words, and their actions. To join the community of the Wisdom-Word of God is to become her Body; they are the self-same thing. This assertion is critical with regard to the issue of gender and ethics, the central question being whether there is one ethic in the example of Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God, for all believers to follow, regardless of gender, or whether there are two, gender-specific ethics, represented by Christ and Wisdom, respectively.

The latter option is favoured by post-Christians and traditionalist Christians alike. Irigaray, for instance, insists that it is not sufficient simply to say that Jesus Christ advocated gender equality, for this still excludes women from divinity; “women are not called to be equal to men [...] they are called ‘upon to be *equal* to God.’”<sup>24</sup> She would like to see men and women have “an equal share in the divine,” for God to be imaged as Father and Mother, “God as a

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>24</sup> D’Costa, 51. The latter part of the quotation is D’Costa quoting Grace Jantzen on Irigaray.

couple or couples.”<sup>25</sup> Traditionally, Roman Catholicism has advocated a divine couple of sorts in Jesus Christ and Mary, imaged as son and mother but also spouses: Jesus Christ is the Son/Bridegroom and Mary is his Mother/Bride, the King of Kings and the Queen of Heaven, as in the theology of Hildegard of Bingen explored in the previous chapter. Is this what I am advocating in saying that Jesus Christ should be Wisdom and Word? No, I am not interested in setting up a christocentric (perhaps more Protestant) version of the traditional Roman Catholic image of Jesus and Mary as the divine couple, providing separate examples of faithfulness for male and female believers. But my reasons against such a model require further explanation.

Traditional Roman Catholic theology proposes a view of the genders as complementary, in which Mary and Jesus provide the supreme examples of femaleness and maleness. Leonardo Boff’s Mariology provides a good example of such thought, for he emphasizes the doctrine of Mary’s status as “Co-Redemptrix” and “Co-Mediatrix” with Christ, arguing that “Mary is actually the pivotal point of all salvation history,” for it is her willingness to bear Christ that sets the Incarnation in motion. Mary becomes just as important as Jesus Christ, but in a different (womanly?) way, as her “greatness consists in her service to others, and her glory consists in her concealment so that others may appear in all their splendour.” Elsewhere, Boff outlines the gender-specific saviours even more explicitly: “In Jesus Christ, the male has realized his ultimate destiny inasmuch as the male nature of Jesus (which includes the feminine) has been divinized. *A pari*, in Mary we are postulating the concretion of the ultimate vocation of woman through a hypostatic assumption by the Holy Spirit [...]”<sup>26</sup> He speaks of Jesus and Mary as together “represent[ing] the whole of humanity,” and even goes so far as to outline gender-specific salvation: “Men will find themselves taken up, in the likeness of Jesus of Nazareth, into the

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<sup>25</sup> Irigaray, 207, 209.

<sup>26</sup> Leonardo Boff, *The Maternal Face of God: The Feminine and Its Religious Expressions*, trans. Robert R. Barr and John W. Diercksmeier (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 15, 154.

Person of the Son. [...] Women will find themselves taken up, in the likeness of Mary of Nazareth, into the Holy Spirit.”<sup>27</sup> Boff here implies that women and men do not become part of the one Body of Christ, but remain divided, even in salvation.

To his credit, Boff does not simplistically divide men and women into *completely* separate masculine and feminine camps, but instead speaks of the masculine and feminine abiding in each individual, but in different proportions. This is what he means by saying that the male Jesus Christ “includes the feminine,” but the feminine is present “only implicitly, as the recessive component.” The feminine contains inverse proportions of the same, for Boff.<sup>28</sup> What allows Boff to define gender in this way, however, is the stark division of qualities or traits into the categories “masculine” (or “virile”) and “feminine,” while protesting their respective association with only men or women. For example, Boff associates “tenderness” with femininity and “strength” with masculinity,<sup>29</sup> while simultaneously insisting that “Virility is found in a woman, as well. Femininity is found in a man, as well. But virility and femininity are each manifested differently in a man and in a woman. In a man, virility predominates, and this is what makes him a man. In a woman, femininity prevails, and thus she is a woman.”<sup>30</sup> While Boff allows a slight degree of gender fluidity, then, he reasserts the distinction between the genders by generalizing and thus reinforcing gender stereotypes, arguing along the lines that men may possess some tenderness, but for the most part, this is a womanly attribute. Because his view of gender is so clear-cut, Boff associates Wisdom imagery, which of course concerns a female figure, primarily with Mary instead of Jesus.<sup>31</sup> Boff comes dangerously close to supporting what

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<sup>27</sup> Leonardo Boff quoted in D’Costa, 37.

<sup>28</sup> Boff, 91-92.

<sup>29</sup> D’Costa, 37.

<sup>30</sup> Boff, 51.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 249-250.

Johnson calls the “‘myth’ of gender dualism,” inferring clear-cut distinctions in behaviours between men and women on the basis of sex alone.<sup>32</sup>

Boff is certainly not alone in holding such a view. Michele M. Schumacher, a proponent of the Catholic “New Feminist” movement argues similarly that human beings are distinctly divided into male and female, for, “No human life, not even that of Christ, can reveal the whole nature of humanity, for man [...] is always ‘other’ than woman, his ‘counterimage.’”<sup>33</sup> This is why the role of Mary in the life of Christ must be emphasized; she complemented Christ’s maleness, making redemption the result of a co-operation between a man and a woman. Furthermore, this is what must be mirrored in the Church, according to Schumacher, particularly in the limiting of the priesthood to males only. She reasons that the maleness of priests, like the maleness of Jesus, is important because it indicates their roles as instigators of salvation, while the laity play a responsive role, and thus are deemed the “bride.” She explains that Christ

is male because he is the relation of Bridegroom. The priest, because he is [...] the sacramental sign of Christ, in whose Person he acts, must be capable of entering into that relation which vis-à-vis the Church is explicitly male. To think that women can do that is to suppose [...] that male and female are not relationally ordered to one another, but simply interchangeable with one another.<sup>34</sup>

This argument presupposes a clear division of men and women into respectively active and ‘responsive’ roles, though Schumacher argues that the latter is not passive, but requires a self-giving on the part of women and other laypeople. Interestingly, Schumacher highlights that the Church is a Bride which includes both women and men: “male laity are ‘brides’ within this symbolic pairing, [...] for] they – just as much as women – really must respond to the divine

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<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 108.

<sup>33</sup> Michele M. Schumacher, “The Unity of the Two: Toward a New Feminist Sacramentality of the Body,” in *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, ed. Schumacher (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 213.

<sup>34</sup> Joyce Little quoted in *Ibid.*, 220-221.

Bridegroom with a sincere gift of self.”<sup>35</sup> She even includes priests within the Bride, for insofar as they are members of the Church, “they too offer themselves to the divine bridegroom who offers himself through their ministry,” making individual priests the carriers of both symbolic genders within themselves. Schumacher does mention that women and men are both called to be the Body of Christ, stating that, “the body-bride is built up through the mystical transformation of each of its members into the image of her Head and Bridegroom.”<sup>36</sup> While this may seem to make women and other laypeople carriers of both symbolic genders as well, Schumacher differentiates this “image” from that of priests, stating that laypeople are “*spiritually assimilated*” to Christ, bearing the “*likeness of holiness*,” while only priests act “*in persona Christi*.”<sup>37</sup> For Schumacher, the limiting of the priesthood to males is not problematic, however, because, as exemplified by Mary, motherhood is an exclusively female role: “Women are [...] icons of the church because they – as differing from men – are alone capable of entering into a spousal relationship *as brides* and thus also as mothers. They alone are able to so give of themselves as to let the beloved *literally enter within themselves* and to so receive the seed of that relation as to nourish and protect its fruit within their body-persons.”<sup>38</sup>

Schumacher’s thought reveals a series of slips between gender equality and inequality, and between symbolic and literal gender. While it is true that Christ instigates salvation through first loving humanity, and that believers are called to a responsive love enacted through the Spirit, to divide these into ‘male’ and ‘female’ modes is strange, to say the least, for what Schumacher is really addressing here is the *divine* initiation of salvation and the obviously lesser *human* response. Schumacher herself admits that believers are not completely divided according

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 223, 225.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 230-231. Emphasis hers.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 228.

to gender, for men and women laypeople are the brides of Christ, just as they are part of the Body of Christ; moreover priests are also both brides and images of Christ. What Schumacher seems to be developing here is gender fluidity for all believers, but she subtly reinscribes stark gender divisions in two ways. Firstly, she is clear that the role of priests must remain superior to that of laypeople. While this hierarchy is not based exclusively on gender differences, it is partly based upon them, for Schumacher is adamant that only men can be priests. In turn, women alone can be mothers in emulation of Mary. The second aspect of Schumacher's argument lies within the first: in dividing men and women into priests in the image of Christ and mothers in the image of Mary, respectively, Schumacher literalizes what she asserted to be symbolic genders, making only men the Bridegroom while all women remain Brides. Except for laymen and celibate/childless women, whom she only mentions in passing, gender fluidity essentially becomes an impossibility. In this way, she manages to divide women and men into gender-determined groups modelled on Mary and Jesus, the divine Bride and Bridegroom. In the work of Boff and Schumacher, we thus see a polarization of the genders based upon generalizations concerning the character traits, roles, and gifts of each. They collapse biological/anatomical sex and socio-cultural gender, making no distinction between the two. Stated differently, on the basis of "obvious biological sex differences" or "roles in reproduction," they assume "predetermined personality traits" and "distinct social roles" for men and women, dividing them into public and private realms, respectively.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, 108. Johnson explains this further: "In the concrete, this view identifies masculine nature with what is active, powerful, rational, able to give form – thus what is fit for leadership in the public arena. By contrast, women's feminine nature is identified with what is passive, malleable, emotional, receptive to form – thus what is meant for nurturing roles in the private realm."

Can such a stark gender division be avoided if we use Wisdom as the “female” face of Jesus Christ, instead of portraying Mary as his ‘counterpart’? That depends on how it is done. If the thought of Hildegard of Bingen is any indication, the answer would be no. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Hildegard’s theology centres around four prominent female figures: Eve, Wisdom, Mary, and *Ecclesia* (Mother Church). These awe-inspiring figures are each powerfully connected to one another, to the divine, and to salvation. For Hildegard, Wisdom is closely associated with Christ, is the revelation of “a dimension of God,” the one who calls human beings to work and clothes them with righteousness.<sup>40</sup> Yet Hildegard does not summon female believers primarily to emulate the impressive figure of Wisdom; her egalitarianism seems to be limited to divine or archetypal women alone. The redemption of women in the Church consisted instead of the emulation of Eve, Mary, and *Ecclesia*, exclusively through either motherhood, “bearing the children of wisdom in her body,” or virginity, “collecting the works of wisdom in her heart.” Believers are not more than the “temple [...or] house of Wisdom,” which for women means, primarily, motherhood: “Woman’s primary significance in the divine scheme of things is to reveal the hidden God by giving him birth.”<sup>41</sup>

Despite Hildegard’s more controversial theological claims, including her emphasis on Wisdom and her likening of the priestly role to that of Mary, she was not optimistic when speaking about ordinary women, including herself. She constantly referred to herself as the “poor little female” through whom God was paradoxically speaking “only because [...] the wise, learned, and masculine clergy [...] had failed to obey.” Thus, while some of her theology inverts gender hierarchy, promoting in its place a “hierarchy of redemption, in which God acts through the weaker woman rather than the stronger man, the social implications remain conservative”;

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<sup>40</sup> Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1987), 43, 66, 73.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 202, 93.

strength in a woman is the exception to the rule, proof of God's miraculous intervention, for Hildegard. She by no means promoted female priesthood, stating that "'woman is a weak and infirm habitation' who can no more consecrate the body of Christ than she can beget her own child; and, what is more, she lacks the beard, [...] the visible masculinity, which is required of a priest." In other words, Hildegard generally holds to the "laws incumbent on feminine frailty" and male strength, such as in her assertion that Jesus was male in his divinity and female in his humanity.<sup>42</sup> In this way, Hildegard, despite her reliance on Wisdom as a central theological figure, remains bound within gender hierarchy when it comes to the practices of believers in the Church, much like Schumacher and Boff do.

The manner in which I am proposing that Wisdom be reintroduced, however, is somewhat different from Hildegard's. Hildegard allows too much distance between Jesus Christ and Wisdom in part because of her attempts to maintain gender hierarchy; this is why her four female figures are essentially interchangeable in their prefiguring and echoing of one another.<sup>43</sup> As I have already stated, I am proposing a more intimate connection between Wisdom and Christ, so that hers is in fact a christological name. This is therefore distinct from the vision of Mary and Christ as the divine couple, because Jesus Christ is Wisdom and Word, female and male within her/himself. There is no need to divinize another, female figure, such as Mary, and to raise her to equal status with Christ, in order to balance the scales of gender, as it were, because *within Christ there is already both male and female*. This is not to say that Jesus has a "feminine side" or possesses the supposedly feminine traits of gentleness, humility, etc., but that Jesus, as the Christ, is God become flesh, our God who is beyond male and female, and who can therefore be imaged as the Son of God and Woman Wisdom. In addition, because Jesus Christ is

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 3, 195, 184, 214-215, 182-183.

<sup>43</sup> See pages 71-2 above.



God become flesh, he represents all of humanity, thus he can be imaged as she. This is especially the case as s/he is imaged in the men and women who make up the Body of Christ.

The quasi-divinization of Mary within traditional Roman Catholic theology in some ways erodes the singularity of Christ, placing Mary alongside him as immaculately conceived, as living without sin, as resurrected and ascended into heaven, as the living mediator between believers and God.<sup>44</sup> In other words, she bears all the marks of his divinity. D’Costa is concerned that Boff emphasizes Mary’s uniqueness to the point that she *replaces* the Church instead of *representing* it. For D’Costa, Mary is important as the first believer in Christ, and her calling should be seen as that of all believers, of the entire Church; “*all* Christians, women or men,” are to be “co-redeemers” with Christ, meaning that the term is not inappropriate “because it is applied to Mary, but only [...] when limited to her.”<sup>45</sup> For D’Costa, Mary is the first of many who come to believe in Christ and form the Body that is the Church, but she “should not be divinized, and in fact her very divinizing runs against the proper insight that *all* creation is divinized. This allows for multiple feminine divine representations, not just one as a mirror ‘equal’ to the one man Jesus – who is indeed not one, but is risen and now a community, called the ‘body of Christ’ [...].”<sup>46</sup> But perhaps D’Costa overstates it somewhat, for I would say Jesus Christ is *one* Body-community with *many* members; the Church is one and many, and it is not necessary to choose between these terms. Because Christ is now the multi-gendered Body of the Church, there is thus no need for a singular female goddess to appear alongside Jesus Christ, as both traditional Roman Catholicism and feminists like Irigaray advocate, for Christ is not (and never was) exclusively male in gender, neither in his earthly life as a man nor now as s/he lives through the multi-gendered Body.

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<sup>44</sup> Boff, 173-174.

<sup>45</sup> D’Costa, 29, 32, 33.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 27, 38.

But Wisdom takes us further beyond D’Costa’s position, because he too retains a special position for Mary as “midwife” at the birth of the Church from Christ’s side. In her, D’Costa asserts, the redemptive love of God is “seen first and preeminently,” thus she “generates the possibility of other female divine representations in the established and unwritten calendar of female saints.”<sup>47</sup> What D’Costa is saying here is in effect that female believers represent Mary, not Christ, because of their gender. Christ does not in fact contain the feminine, and thus requires Mary and other female believers to supplement this lack within the Body. But if Jesus Christ is Woman Wisdom, then women and men are images of Christ-Wisdom in the Body, because here the Body is multi-gendered by virtue of being *Christ’s* Body, not because it is the Body of Jesus and Mary together. If the Body of Christ is the self-same Body of Wisdom, there is in fact *one* life of the *one Saviour* for *all* to follow, not one for each gender. All believers are called to become Christ-like, not only half, while the other half becomes Mary-like or Wisdom-like. As I emphasized in the previous chapter, to look to Wisdom for a separate “womanly” ethic is misguided, for her role, her identity, and her words are the *same* as Christ’s, for she and he are one.<sup>48</sup> Unlike Mary, Wisdom cannot be said to complement Jesus, for they perform the self-same salvific functions. Like Christ, she plays a variety of roles, and is at home in public and private realms alike, acting as hostess and street-preacher alike. This is what Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza purports: “the preaching, healings, exorcisms, and inclusive table community of Jesus called forth a circle of disciples who were to continue what Jesus did. Sophia, the God of Jesus, wills the wholeness and humanity of everyone and therefore enables the Jesus movement to become a ‘discipleship of equals.’ *They are called to one and the same praxis of inclusiveness*

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 74, 60.

<sup>48</sup> See page 88 above.

*and equality lived by Jesus-Sophia.*”<sup>49</sup> What Schuessler Fiorenza implies here is that gender is irrelevant in the Body of Christ. Because there is one Saviour imaged in either gender, gender does not determine ethics or roles within the Body of Christ. All are called to follow one example of prophetic solidarity and suffering love. All are called to mould their lives according to the Wisdom-Word of God. All are called to put away hostility, including the hostility between genders, and live under the Reign of God which has already begun. This is perhaps what Paul had in mind when he wrote that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male or female (Gal. 3:28). In the Body of Christ, all are united in Wisdom; there are not two, gendered churches, but one.

### ***Not Two, but One and Many: Power and the Gifts of Wisdom***

To state that there is one Saviour and therefore one ethic of discipleship requires some further explanation, however. If there is but one ethic for all believers, is this ethic really based upon the “masculine” ideal, but parading as “generic”? Furthermore, does this mean faith requires the erasure of differences, including gender differences? These are critical questions, pointing to the complexity of the claim to be explored in this final section.

A legitimate concern among feminists is that if there is only one example for believers to follow through discipleship, it will be an example modelled on the “masculine,” whether consciously or not. Is this a return to the early Christian or Gnostic interpretation of faith making women become men in some way? According to Schuessler Fiorenza, this is the case: “in some early Christian traditions Jesus’ saving activity was construed in masculine terms and [...] these scriptural texts invite wo/men to identify with the masculine-coded Jesus.” This is not

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<sup>49</sup> Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 135. Emphasis mine.

necessarily negative in her view, for this “identification with cultural-religious ‘maleness’ as divine humanness might have enabled women to evade the impact of cultural feminine gender discourses.” By emulating the lifestyle of a man, in other words, believers who were women were taking steps toward subverting prescribed gender roles instead of looking for a more stereotypically ‘feminine’ role model. Thus the definition of faithful living as “becoming male” need not signify the rejection of the female, but instead, “a radical rewriting of cultural femininity and masculinity.”<sup>50</sup> But what kind of rewriting is Schuessler Fiorenza talking about here? She mentions that it is positive for women to emulate the “masculine” behaviour of Jesus, “such as public preaching, power, authority, and divinity.” At the same time, though, she cautions women against internalizing the image of Jesus as “servant and self-sacrificing child of God,” a model which she interprets as promoting the suffering of women for the sake of others.<sup>51</sup> Elsewhere, she describes discipleship as creating “equality from below” through the humbling of those who are in power: “Jesus [...] does not exhort all Christians to become servants and slaves but only those who have status and power in the societal or ecclesial patriarchal pyramid.”<sup>52</sup> It would seem Schuessler Fiorenza’s vision of the Church is not of a single, universal ethic after all, but one in which women and those who have been denied status follow the ethic of empowerment, while those who are now in authority follow the ethic of servanthood.

The issue of suffering and servanthood deserves closer attention, for it is not unique to Schuessler Fiorenza. Many feminist theologians are uncomfortable with the call for all Christians to emulate the suffering of Christ in their discipleship, for it tends to legitimate the oppression of women. For instance, Mary Daly writes, “The qualities that Christianity idealizes, especially for

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<sup>50</sup> Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 78.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57.

<sup>52</sup> Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 305.

women, are also those of the victim: sacrificial love, passive acceptance of suffering, humility, meekness, etc. Since these are the qualities idealized in Jesus ‘who died for our sins’ his functioning as a model reinforces the scapegoat syndrome for women.” Particularly in situations of the abuse of women or girls, the Church’s calls to obedience, suffering, and forgiveness have led many women to submit to ongoing abuse instead of holding their abusers accountable.<sup>53</sup> This points to a problem in the single-ethic model: it fails to take into account the different experiences of members of the Body, and the different ways in which discipleship might affect their situations. To call all members to suffer, to take up their crosses and follow, may be revolutionary for men in positions of power, but changes little for those who are already powerless and suffering, since it is difficult to voluntarily give up one’s power if one already has none. This is true within the Church community as well, as Lydia Neufeld Harder posits. She critiques the Church (particularly the Mennonite church) for failing to take into account “the different ways in which the dominant and the marginal tend to hear these words.”<sup>54</sup> The Church’s “ethic of servanthood could easily be internalized to imply passivity and submissiveness by those who were used to being dominated and feeling powerless.” In doing so, they “felt that they were obeying God’s divine authority embodied in the church.”<sup>55</sup> Stated differently, the promotion of an ethic of suffering within the Church only takes into account “the theological construction of sin from a male perspective,” defining “sin in male terms as arrogance, pride, and hybris,” not in terms of self-effacement, passivity, or “the failure to become a self,” which may be temptations for women and others in powerless positions.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus*, 98-99. Former quotation is from Mary Daly.

<sup>54</sup> Lydia Neufeld Harder, *Obedience, Suspicion and the Gospel of Mark: A Mennonite-Feminist Exploration of Biblical Authority*, Studies in Women and Religion Series (Waterloo ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1998), 54.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>56</sup> Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus*, 101, and *Discipleship of Equals*, 297.

If women and men experience the call to suffering in drastically different ways, does this mean gender must be taken into account after all? Many feminists share the opinion that “*for women, the theme of self-emptying and self-abnegation is far from helpful as a paradigm.*”<sup>57</sup> The response of many, Schuessler Fiorenza included, is to promote an ethic of empowerment for women instead of suffering and submission.<sup>58</sup> But this move is fraught with its own theological risks according to Sarah Coakley, who sees the feminist quest for “autonomy” or “agency” and aversion to any kind of “submission” as problematic. While a great number of feminists (Christian and secular alike) may see the two as mutually exclusive, Coakley is of the opinion that “some version of *kenosis*,” defined as “voluntary self-emptying,” is “not only compatible with feminism, but vital to a distinctly Christian manifestation of it, a manifestation which does not eschew, but embraces, the spiritual paradoxes of ‘losing one’s life in order to save it.’”<sup>59</sup> *Kenosis* is in some sense central to the Christian life for Coakley, and she is suspicious of feminists who disregard it, or even discard it, in favour of a hunger for power that does not always resemble the alternative definition of power lived by Jesus Christ. D’Costa likewise criticizes Irigaray’s promotion of God as a couple because it immortalizes gender divisions, projecting an aspect of our creaturely existence onto the divine; in short, it makes God *in our image*. In D’Costa’s opinion, “If female divinity is predicated upon the need for women’s subjectivity, then it is very likely that divinity will be finally a projected desire for what women want to be – rather than a ‘response’ to a gift, that in its own story offers an alternative imaginary.”<sup>60</sup> It is dangerous for women to create a separate ethic of empowerment for

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<sup>57</sup> Daphne Hampson quoted in Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 3. Emphasis Coakley’s.

<sup>58</sup> Schuessler Fiorenza, 101.

<sup>59</sup> Coakley, xii, 3-4.

<sup>60</sup> D’Costa, 29.

themselves, arguably based more upon what they would like their Christian calling to be than the difficult and counter-intuitive ethic it really is.

Coakley continues along these lines, naming the dangers inherent in feminisms that oversimplify issues of power and define it along liberal-secular or “Enlightenment” lines:

to leap to the supposedly clear-cut goal of ‘justice’ without delicate training in *attending* to the ‘other’; to impose programmes of reform without considering *self*-reform and *self*-knowledge; to up-end ‘patriarchal’ power without considering the possibility of the mimetic *feminist* abuse of power: such, we might say, are the looming dangers of feminist institutional ‘success.’<sup>61</sup>

When Schuessler Fiorenza blatantly calls women to pursue positions of power and authority and reject notions of femininity as relational and empathetic,<sup>62</sup> how much is she sacrificing, and to what end? Does “equality” for her mean a simple, clean reversal of gender roles, a kind of gender ‘opposite day’ in which women are empowered and men are humbled? She seems to imply as much.

But Schuessler Fiorenza is also cognizant that power and oppression are not neatly split along gender lines,<sup>63</sup> something Coakley raises as well. According to Coakley, feminists who promote women’s empowerment and avoidance of *kenosis* at all costs in reality subscribe to simplistic gender divisions as well, assuming that “‘males’ (all males, including ‘workmen’ and ‘slaves’?) need to compensate for their tendency to ‘dominate’ by means of an act of self-emptying; whereas ‘women’ (all women, including university professors?) do not.” In addition, such an ethic ends up glorifying “‘male’ power and dominance” as that which “ought now *rightly* to be pursued (also by way of compensation) by feminist women,” while “vulnerability”

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<sup>61</sup> Coakley, xvii. See also Neufeld Harder, 92-95. On feminist hermeneutics, the latter writes, “feminists too easily assume a continuity between themselves and the marginalized in the biblical text, while ignoring the possible continuity between the dominant characters in the text and women in the feminist community.”

<sup>62</sup> Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus*, 55-56.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 48, 101.

becomes devalued as “prescriptively ‘female’” and therefore of secondary importance.<sup>64</sup> Though Schuessler Fiorenza’s position contains more nuance than the position critiqued by Coakley here, she too exhibits a certain disdain for traditionally female roles, especially when performed by women, finally concluding that “servant ecclesiology” is unhelpful for women and other oppressed believers.<sup>65</sup> But does a reversal of gender or status roles really come any closer to discerning the actual gifts of believers than generalizations about gender? Is it any less of a generalization to call all women to empowerment? Furthermore, though these so-called ‘feminine’ roles may be unappealing, they arguably come closer to empowerment as defined by the example of Christ-Wisdom than the quest for self-actualization and authority promoted by Schuessler Fiorenza. Thus, in one sense, Schuessler Fiorenza comes close to oversimplifying the Church community in her all-too-tidy reversal of gender and/or status. Arguably, Coakley’s position comes closer to capturing the “liberative” power modelled by Christ-Wisdom, a kind of power that paradoxically consists of “submission” and “dependent ‘vulnerability.’” The example of Christ-Wisdom therefore does not set up an either-or, nor simplistically reverse gender expectations, but, interestingly, demonstrates and embodies a coming-together of roles traditionally parcelled out to women and men.

What is the way forward then, with regard to gender within the Body? When approached from the perspective of traditional Roman Catholic theology, which establishes separate saviours for men and women in Jesus Christ and Mary, we are left with two distinct and rigid ethics that divide women and men within the Body of Christ. Likewise, when we approach the issue by creating a single ethic for all, we fail to take into account the different contexts/experiences of

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<sup>64</sup> Coakley, 22.

<sup>65</sup> Schuessler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 301.



believers; in trying to incorporate the differences, however, we actually end up valorizing an ethic of empowerment for women and humility for men. None of these options adequately addresses gender issues within the Body. It does not help to overemphasize gender (by clinging to traditional gender or simply inverting it), nor does it help to ignore it altogether. The way forward, then, must lie somewhere in between.

A helpful way to approach the issue of gender is, I think, the (biblical) language of gifts, specifically the gifts of the Spirit of Wisdom to the various members of the Body of Christ, by which I mean gifts used in the Body gathered for worship and/or in the daily life and work of the members thereof. At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted Wisdom of Solomon 7:27-8, which states, “Although she [Wisdom] is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets [...]” These verses outline a key aspect of the Body as the House of Wisdom herself: in the Body, believers are united in Christ-Wisdom, but Christ-Wisdom is no one-dimensional figure. Wisdom can do all things while remaining one, or, in Pauline terms, there are many gifts but one Spirit, many members but one united Body (I Cor. 12:12ff). Oneness does not imply uniformity when speaking of the Body; it does not mean sameness or a lack of diversity. Believers’ lives have their basis in the one example of Christ-Wisdom, but this is the *richest* example, the *most inclusive* example, incorporating “all things.” Believers are not to be perfect, identical carbon-copies of Jesus Christ, but “friends of God and prophets” in their own way, people of Wisdom according to their varied gifts. This is why it is the entire *community* which forms the Body of Christ-Wisdom.

In reference to the gifts of the Spirit of Wisdom, we can begin to reframe our definition of gender within the Church. We must acknowledge, then, that one aspect of the diversity of the

Body is gender. We cannot deny gender altogether, nor is it necessary to do so. Johnson is critical of feminists who promote “a single-nature anthropology, which views sexual difference as biologically important for reproduction but not determinative of persons as such.” In this line of thinking, each person “may assume public and private roles according to [his or her] giftedness,” not according to sex/gender. Johnson argues that such a model fails to recognize the importance of gendered embodiment, “which affects far more than reproduction in the life of every person.” Embodiment cannot simply be overlooked, or the mind and body divorced in such a way that the body is inconsequential for personal identity. But Johnson does not differentiate between sex and gender, between the physical and cultural-symbolic signs of maleness and femaleness, something I will return to below. Johnson also disagrees with the notion of “a single human ideal, possibly androgynous, which can be destructive of genuine human variety.”<sup>66</sup> However, as I argue above, the oneness of the Body need not imply that all believers are identical within the community of the Church.

To acknowledge that gender is one aspect of the diversity of the Body is not to say it is the only difference, or even the most important difference, between human beings. But what is gender, then? I do not want to say with Schumacher that gender is all-important. Schumacher is highly suspicious of the feminist distinction between socio-cultural gender and biological/anatomical sex, arguing that this is to divide culture and “nature” too starkly, a step which furthermore comes close to denying the graced state of nature itself. Put differently, because God has made human beings as gendered beings, there is nothing inherently negative about that distinction, thus it should not be denied in favour of a single neutral, genderless model

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<sup>66</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 155.

of the human being.<sup>67</sup> Thus far, Johnson would probably agree, but Schumacher goes further, confirming the complementarity of women and men as the “two modes” of a single human nature.<sup>68</sup> Here Johnson cannot agree with Schumacher, for she does not want to promote a “binary” which divides humanity into men and women, portraying them as “polar opposites” with separate, clear-cut attributes and roles.<sup>69</sup> I have to agree with Johnson here.

What Johnson proposes, then, is an alternative view in which there is “*one human nature* celebrated in an interdependence of *multiple differences*. Not a binary view of two forever predetermined male and female natures, nor abbreviation to a single ideal, but a diversity of ways of being human: a multipolar set of combinations of essential human elements, of which sexuality is but one.”<sup>70</sup> In terms of giftedness within the Church, what Johnson is proposing would translate into a vision both more *general* and more *specific* than gender divisions: it is more general in that there is a single human calling inspired by the Spirit of Wisdom, and more specific in that each human being brings his or her identity and specific gifts to that calling. A vision in which there are only two kinds of gifts is not nearly complex enough to encompass the reality of the Body of Christ, which is one Body with many uniquely-gifted members. Perhaps surprisingly, Schumacher also mentions this, before undermining it by limiting women to the roles of literal and/or symbolic brides and mothers. She describes the life of faith as “both a natural human vocation and a specifically personal one, which is to say that the universal call to holiness in union with Christ – the call to make oneself a gift – is lived in a unique manner by

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<sup>67</sup> Michele M. Schumacher, “The Nature of Nature in Feminism, Old and New: From Dualism to Complementary Unity,” in *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, ed. Schumacher (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 24.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>69</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 154.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

each and every individual.”<sup>71</sup> Thus gifts within the Body of Christ are not parcelled out neatly along gender lines, but are both part of the more general call to be disciples of Christ-Wisdom, and more specific to the context and experiences of each individual.

But thus far I have only discussed what gender is not; I have still not positively answered the question of what constitutes gender. Unlike Johnson and Schumacher, I believe there does have to be a distinction between biological sex and social-cultural gender, for to collapse them is to assume that gender is fixed and constant across cultural, historical and other contexts. This is simplistic, for gender assumptions and roles vary greatly. For instance, certain tasks which one culture deems ‘women’s work,’ such as cooking or sewing, may be considered ‘men’s work’ in another culture, as well as the inverse; in some cultures, it is women who build the houses and carry heavy burdens, tasks males do in other societies. The same could be said of character traits; while some cultures see emotionality as feminine, others label it masculine.<sup>72</sup> Gender is in fact a very mysterious thing. Ward argues against the mistaken assumption that “human bodies are objects that can be catalogued,” for we really “have no immediate access to what is most intimate to us,” i.e., our bodies.<sup>73</sup> We cannot, in other words, determine behaviour, roles, or gifts strictly by reading the sexes of our bodies; there is no clear correspondence there. Johnson herself admits that “Masculine and feminine are among the most culturally stereotyped terms,” which does not reflect the fact that “the spectrum of traits is at least as broad among concrete, historical women as between women and men.” She concludes that “the meaning of male and

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<sup>71</sup> Schumacher, “The Nature of Nature,” 44, 47. Brides means for Schumacher either human marriage or the marriage of nuns to Christ.

<sup>72</sup> Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Omnigender: A Trans-religious Approach, Revised and Expanded* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>73</sup> Graham Ward, “On the Politics of Embodiment and the Mystery of All Flesh,” in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God and Politics*, eds. Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, Queering Theology Series (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 73-74.

female is still historically emerging.”<sup>74</sup> D’Costa likewise prefers “not to suggest that men and women are equal, but that they are different, even if the specifying of this difference is still part of the process of learning redemption.” Looking to Christ certainly does not affirm the correspondence of “anatomy” and gender,<sup>75</sup> as our discussion of Christ as Wisdom has indicated. In the end, our genders are no easier to “get our ‘hands’ around” than Christ’s.<sup>76</sup> So the tight knot of sexual difference and gender must be undone, for though we remain embodied, our genders become fluid as we follow Christ-Wisdom’s way.

Within the Church, therefore, gender differences cannot be overemphasized or determined too narrowly. Certainly gender cannot be used to determine whether believers do or do not possess certain spiritual gifts, for spiritual gifts may or may not align with gendered maleness or femaleness as defined by a given context. As to the question of whether or not there is a gender code within the Church, one has only to look to Christ-Wisdom, the Head of the Body, to see that the ‘gender code’ of Christ is in fact not a gender code: it is the same ethic lived differently by each individual; it is the oneness and multiplicity of gifts. Cultural definitions of gender play no more important a part in determining the gifts of believers than sexed embodiment, ethnicity, age, or any other specifics of believers’ lives. The Body that is multi-gendered, as Ward calls it (notice it is not two-gendered or bi-gendered, but *multi*-gendered), is also multi-ethnic, multi-generational, multi-lingual, etc., yet none of these ought to play significant roles in determining gifts; no one group belonging to any of these categories should be prescribed certain roles on the basis of one factor of their identities. Yet, though all of these differences are irrelevant in terms of determining the gifts of believers, they nevertheless are not erased. Ward states, “It is not that gender disappears. Gender is not transcended. It is rather

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<sup>74</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 49, 155.

<sup>75</sup> D’Costa, 96.

<sup>76</sup> Coakley, 154.

rendered part of a more profound mystery; [...] I have to be taught what it means to be such a [gendered] self by the Christ who draws me into a relationship with him.”<sup>77</sup> I would argue that sexed embodiment does not disappear, but that gender is indeed broadened, transformed, or “rewritten” to use Schuessler Fiorenza’s term, into something that no longer separates believers from one another.

This brings us back to the concept of relatedness in difference, something mentioned by both Schumacher and D’Costa. Schumacher speaks of “*a common human vocation*”: for believers “*to exist mutually one for the other.*” She locates this primarily, however, in the union between male and female, whether husband and wife or Christ and Church.<sup>78</sup> D’Costa agrees that relatedness is central to the Body, but does not valorize the love between a man and a woman as the highest form of relatedness-in-difference. He writes, “In bringing together such gender differences, without erasing them, Jesus inaugurates our sharing in that ‘source’ in which all differences, created and uncreated, are harmoniously and subsistently related, such that a transforming perichoresis of love might take place.”<sup>79</sup> For D’Costa, as for Johnson, gender differences are but one among many differences within the Body, all of which are important precisely *as differences*. In his words, “it is in the relationship between gendered [or any other kind of] difference, not in gender itself, that we find the analogical bridge to the trinitarian God.” God imaged as Trinity exemplifies a love in community, not autonomy, as ideal. D’Costa warns that “Without God’s trinity, thinking difference is in danger of thinking duality, for without *relationships of love*, difference has no chance of being celebrated, let alone established.”<sup>80</sup> This renders Irigaray’s call for a female deity irrelevant as well, for Irigaray bases this call not only on

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Schumacher, “The Nature of Nature,” 45-46.

<sup>79</sup> D’Costa, 74.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 61, 56.

the assumption that Jesus Christ and even God are exclusively male, but that this means men and not women are saved. D'Costa disagrees with the argument that "What women need is a female saviour," stating, "What remains problematic within this equation is the assumption that men could possibly be saved apart from women, or women apart from men, given that God created human persons 'male and female' (Gen. 1.27), in relation, and in God's own image." It is impossible for the Church to be divided into male and female, each with separate saviours, because part of the transformation effected within the Church is transformed relationships *between* the sexes. Peace between men and women is a feature of the Reign of God, for it does not erase difference, but acknowledges and rejoices in it.<sup>81</sup> D'Costa concludes that redemption occurs through "the transforming of *relations between* men *and* women, and between each other," not through segregation according to (supposed) gender difference or the related imaging of the divine as a heterosexual couple.<sup>82</sup> What remains central for D'Costa, then, is the relational community that is the Body, not couples or nuclear families, as Schumacher tends to emphasize, whether in their literal or spiritual forms.

Within D'Costa's framework, then, sexual differences, though preserved, cease to be problematic, for difference is not threatening for the community of the Body, but an integral part of its identity. Schuessler Fiorenza interprets Paul's statement in Galatians that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, or male or female (3:28) as a proclamation that "Women and men in the Christian community are not defined by their sexual procreative capacities or by their religious, cultural or social gender roles, but by their discipleship and empowering with the Spirit." Because of this, she states that these distinctions become "insignificant" in the face of the

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<sup>81</sup> D'Costa, 56-57.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

equality of believers.<sup>83</sup> In my view, she is partly right, for it is true that in relation to the discernment of gifts and roles, these aspects of believers' identities should be of little or no consequence, but, as D'Costa states, what is powerful about the community of the Body is not that everyone is equal in terms of sameness, but that differences are preserved but *are no longer divisive, are no longer sources of tension or hostility* within the Body, but instead become causes for celebration and unity-in-difference. This is why the retrieval of Wisdom as a christological name matters in the first place: if sexed difference is undone, what would be the point of imaging Jesus Christ as Woman Wisdom? But because difference is retained within the Body of Christ, the development of a variety of names and images for Christ reflects the richness of the Body, which is both one and many. Furthermore, within this vision of the Body, power becomes redefined accordingly. No longer is autonomy the highest ideal, but relationality through mutual affirmation and mutual challenging; honesty and vulnerability become most important, not independent success and competition. As all seek to follow the example of Christ-Wisdom in their own ways, "Jesus' 'vulnerability' [...becomes] a primary narrative given, rather than a philosophical embarrassment to explain away." It becomes "a (special sort of) 'human' strength."<sup>84</sup> It becomes a prophetic sign of God's Reign, for the power of Christ-Wisdom is clearest in the handing over of the Body to those who would become members of it by following in love as friends of God and prophets.

As in our attempts to grasp and describe the gender of Jesus Christ, our attempts to describe our own genders within the Body of Christ leave us perhaps more perplexed and mystified than before. Yet there is wisdom in this open-endedness, for the very fact that the

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<sup>83</sup> Schuessler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 212-213.

<sup>84</sup> Coakley, 25.



Church is the Body of Christ-Wisdom until the Reign of God comes in full is a great mystery. Articulating this mystery in the language of Woman Wisdom can redirect us toward the Christ instead of severing men from women within the Church, and establishing separate saviours and separate sets of spiritual gifts for them. There are not twin Churches, the Christian and the Marian, but if Christ is also Wisdom, women and men are equally in his/her image; there is one Church with one Head. At the same time, this oneness does not mean human beings are called to be identical, but to be united precisely in their many differences, which are not undone, but transformed. No longer are differences obstacles to unity or obstacles to the particular gifts each has been given, gifts which may or may not align with prescribed gender roles. Women and men are thus called to be members of the Body and to use their myriad gifts to the glory of Christ-Wisdom, the Head of the Body, Saviour and Redeemer of all.

## CONCLUSION

### *Calling Wisdom Our Sister: Conclusions and Further Possibilities*

“Say to wisdom, ‘You are my sister,’  
and call insight your intimate friend [....]”

Proverbs 7:4

It is my hope that Woman Wisdom’s worth has been apparent on these pages, that they gesture towards the value of calling her our sister and intimate friend, of (re)familiarizing ourselves with her name as a christological name, as a rich and striking biblical name for the divine. We have seen the way in which she illumines the profoundly mysterious nature of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, made flesh and dwelling among us, yet the very same who existed before creation: the one who is and is not a metaphor for God. We have seen how Woman Wisdom’s name can be included in the name above every name, as she provides a fruitful tension between male and female, pointing beyond our ideas and concepts into the genderless mystery of God. I have also spoken of the fluidity of the gender of Jesus Christ, both in the imagery we use for him in his divinity, as well as in the Gospel accounts of his earthly life as a man from Nazareth whose beloved followers included men and women alike. This same gender fluidity exists in Wisdom’s identity, thus relativizing the gender of Christ-Wisdom and drawing our attention to the heart of the Incarnation, which is the radical solidarity of the divine with all of humanity. In the Church, this solidarity is made flesh in the lives of believers, both men and women, as they follow Christ-Wisdom as disciples, living the metaphor of being the Body of Christ-Wisdom. This does not mean that the Church is split into genders with separate saviours and separate ethics, but that there is one Body united in its myriad differences and spiritual gifts; that in the Church, believers are freed to the same gender fluidity as Christ-Wisdom so that their sexed bodies no longer divide them, but are transformed as they become members of the one Body.

These three themes are evidently only a few of the many directions Wisdom Christology can take. I have only ventured a few paces into the vast territory of Wisdom. Wisdom Christology does not exclusively address feminist concerns; it also bears particular relevance to interfaith dialogues and ecological theology. The retrieval of Woman Wisdom as a christological image and name not only emphasizes ties between the Testaments, i.e., between Christian and Jewish Scriptures,<sup>1</sup> but moreover provides a common starting point for dialogue with many other world religions in which wisdom and wise living are key theological/spiritual concepts.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Wisdom's role as co-creator emphasizes the concern of the divine for all of creation, a biblical theme especially relevant to the present context of global environmental crisis.<sup>3</sup> I hope theologians will take up the task of tracing Woman Wisdom's promising insights in these areas as well. Having here articulated my own experiments in Wisdom Christology, I have concluded that there is much more to be said about this particular name for the divine; she still has much to teach us, much life-giving wisdom to impart to those who have ears to hear.

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<sup>1</sup> See Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*, (New York: Continuum, 1994), 140ff.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1992), 166.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 165-66. See also Denis Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology*, Ecology and Justice Series (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

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