



## **Light Shines in the Darkness and the Darkness Has Not Overcome Her\* Women and Wisdom**

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It is not only a matter of pronouns or hormones; the interpretation of Scripture is moving in new directions as women have been called and authorized to speak by the community of faith. Metaphors for, and mysteries of, the One God dance before the eyes of faith as we seek to speak God's truth to a community of women and men in such a way that the walls of division will be broken down. Whether or not one believes that the text is androcentric<sup>1</sup> (and I do), it is an interpretation of a divine encounter and as such represents God in a way that is simply not our own doing. Scripture is not to be dismissed as oppressive or anesthetic (i.e., an opiate of the masses), for as twentieth century Christians we should recognize that Scripture is prior to our experience; moreover, it is God who claims us through this Word—before we have a chance to claim it. Without such acknowledgment, our suspicions will leave us to our own devices and the animosity between the sexes will only be heightened. And part of the task before us is that of reconciliation. Women, like any other oppressed people, look to God with hope, for the Word that embraces (in which we live and move and have our being [Acts 17:28]) tells us, indeed, that we were created for community with all peoples.

### I. SYMPTOMS OF BONDAGE

From my particular context as a pastor on the northern prairie, where the basic metaphor for life is male, there may be particular symptoms of bondage that differ for women and men. There are even a number of women who do not come to

\*“Et lux in tenebris lucet et tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt” (John 1:5, The Vulgate).

<sup>1</sup>For a full background of androcentrism, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1986) 41-64.

church because their husbands do not come. These husbands do not want their wives to be at church (away from their control) and do not let them attend. Of course these women do as they were taught: wives should be submissive. So they submit to the male authority, the head of the house, the image of a male god, and as the years pass, God becomes more and more distant to them. All things conspire to keep them in an underworld of worthlessness and exclusionary poverty.

Life for the men in this culture is also lacking in completeness though they act as kings and princes, authoritative in family matters. The role to which they feel they must live up denies them basic human intimacies. The facade of strength allows for no rest, no tears, no

acknowledgment of need or fear, and no sighs deeper than words. The companionship (male and female) for which we were created eludes them, and they are missing out on the time of their lives. They may appear as if they have it all, always having their own way, but having it our own way is what leads to the death of God (Matt 27:22-23). As such, the world's wish for power and control is a deep, deep bondage. When the maleness of humanity or the masculinity of God is placed above everything else, we need to be reminded of the proscription against idolatry. For to worship false gods leads to the living hell of broken community.

In order to speak more fully and more evocatively to this broken community, we need to do more than throw Scripture back and forth. Yes, we need to rediscover those passages which affirm what is female, but we do so not simply to refute those passages (1 Tim 2:11-15 et al.) which have been used against women. That is a "no win" situation where we will only persuade those who have already been persuaded. The examination of the basic androcentricity of the text may prove to be fruitful, provided that it is not done for its own sake (i.e., for a community to emerge where the goddess supersedes to the exclusion of men) but for the edification of the community so that women and men from every tribe and nation will sing to the praise and glory of God. An important aspect of this reconstruction moves toward a critical examination of the history of interpretation (post-biblical) and breaks through the subtle yet idolatrous tendencies of male translators, who in their own way were striving to be faithful. As women are incorporated into the "guild" of interpreters, the myth that interpretation is value-neutral is once again destroyed. Both male and female human experience is to be drawn upon for a more complete picture, and this of course can be extended to all groupings of people. Just as male writers in Israel's patriarchy may have never noticed that women were an oppressed group in need of liberation,<sup>2</sup> so also healthy adults may have overlooked children or the elderly, or one race may not have seen the suffering of another. The effect of this type of partnership in grappling with Scripture can only help the mission of the church.

What we learn from this particular hermeneutical endeavor is that God is wholly other and that we desperately need each other. Women and men seeking *shalom* should not be dissuaded by what has been interpreted as an overwhelm-

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<sup>2</sup>Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, "Feminist Uses of Biblical Material," *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 60.

ingly masculine text. After all, Jesus does call God Father, for Father is a most important relationship in ancient Israel. And that is precisely the point; Jesus names the relationship. He does not imply the shape of God's genitalia. However, with maleness as the primary metaphor of humanity, the inappropriate move to speak of an exclusively male God happens quite easily. A look at *Sophia* as an expression of God may be a light drawing us to the future where God is all-in-all.

## II. BEYOND ANDROCENTRICITY

A helpful place to look as we seek to understand ancient Israel's life and worship of God (*lex orandi/lex credendi*) is its relation to its neighbors of the day. What was the language of prayer and speech? Since a confession of faith always makes a division against unbelief, what was their confession of faith over-against? Whether Wisdom is seen as the self-revelation of

creation or the revelation of God,<sup>3</sup> a look at its pre-history will help us to see what was, in the language of the people, considered to be revelatory of God and what wasn't. One should keep in mind the androcentricity of what was recorded, for in its recording, this androcentricity was meant to be passed on to its male posterity. Moreover, it is necessary to recognize that this monotheistic community was called into being and continuity by the One God. Although various competing religions abounded with duality, ancient Israel would understand all revelatory expressions to be from one God.

Was it by accident that the powerful figure of the goddess in Canaanite religion, who was believed to bring forth the first fruits of the earth, is similar to the feminine figure of Wisdom personified, in certain writings of ancient Israel? Would a Jungian analysis find *Sophia* functioning as an Isis/Maat (i.e., the archetypal feminine in the collective mind of the Israelite people)? What obstacles need we overcome to find out who influenced whom? What did the dominant powers of the day have to lose or gain by the emergence of such a powerful feminine figure? Was it for reasons of faith or culture that the feminine image is split between Wisdom and Folly (the strange woman)? Did Israel's hatred of the Canaanites affect this division and repression as much as its own male domination over women? How much did the flagrant misogyny of writers such as Ben Sirach affect the interpretation of this feminine expression of the divine?<sup>4</sup> Was it possible for Ben Sirach and others to believe that women were so closely related to the image of the divine (cf. Sir 42:12-14)?

Even as we call the text androcentric, the answers are not clear. Israel's wisdom literature is not ditheistic, but it uses the language of the divine to speak of *Sophia* as a self-expression of God. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza brings clarity as she speaks of theology as "reflective mythology." That is, she says,

it uses elements of goddess-language in order to speak of the gracious goodness of Israel's God. A well-known prayer to Isis proclaims that the different nations and peoples use divine names familiar to them. They call on

<sup>3</sup>Roland E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Creation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985) 8-9.

<sup>4</sup>Joan Chamberlain Engelsman, *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979) 74-76.

the goddess, doing so because they know that Isis being one, is all. Divine Sophia is Israel's God in the language and *Gestalt* of the goddess.<sup>5</sup>

To speak of *Sophia* as the gracious goodness of God is a confession of faith in the One who truly is all. And although the Isis myth is not fully developed until the second century of the Common Era, goddess worship had captivated the near eastern peoples prior to that time. The One God who is both male and female, yet neither male nor female, expresses a divine graciousness to humanity in terms that are characterized as female and male. To pit so-called feminine and masculine dimensions of God against each other is, again, a situation where nothing is gained, for the result is only to carry the idolatrous tendencies of those who seek a male god one step further. The biblical language that we have inherited was first used as prayer, renunciation, confession, praise, and sacred story. It was used to worship a merciful God and to instruct, and it

served at times as metaphor and allusion to speak of the unspeakable. It is no wonder that a culture and religion dominated by male authority would have as its mainstay masculine language. We, on the other hand, need not be so confined.

### III. WISDOM AND WORD IN JESUS

When God becomes flesh in Jesus born of Mary, the language and conceptualizations of God require re-examination. In the wisdom tradition, the creative work of God could be seen as mediated by *Sophia*. Now it is understood to be the work of Christ Jesus. The fullness of God is manifested in this Incarnate One. If the work of *Sophia*, her presence in creation, revelation, and redemption is now expressed under this second *persona* of God, what happens in the Christian community to that which was previously expressed in uniquely feminine language? Wisdom is still seen as related to the cross (1 Cor 1:21-24 and Heb 1:3), but the image of Word (*Logos*) is now understood as God's primary and fullest expression. Rosemary Radford Ruether suggests that,

Christological hymns substitute *Logos* for *Sophia*. Theologically, *Logos* plays the same cosmological roles as *Sophia* as ground of creation, revealer of mind of God and reconciler of humanity to God. But the use of the male word *Logos*, when identified with the maleness of the historical Jesus obscures the actual fluidity of the gender symbolism by appearing to reify as male a "son-of-God" who is, in turn, the image of the Father.<sup>6</sup>

Yet all our attempts to distinguish between the person and work of Christ leave us with a peculiarly wonderful mystery; for what Christ is, is what Christ does. Christ Jesus does the saving; which means that God—at a particular time, tied to a particular flesh—does something brand new. This disclaimer duly noted, Ruether's work leads to some very important questions. Is there anything salvific in the maleness of the person of Jesus? What resemblance is there between the Son of God and the Father? Must those who speak for God share in a masculine image? Are we idolizing the gender of the word *Logos*?

<sup>5</sup>E. S. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 133.

<sup>6</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon, 1983) 58.

Jesus, the incarnate One, dies on the cross and is raised to new life. It is not his masculinity which saves us, but his doing of God's will. The shift in language from *Sophia* to *Logos*, with the advent of Christ Jesus does not unmask the mystery of the creator. If we want to know who God is, we look to Jesus, the self-expression of God. There is no other place to look than to this Jewish, male, carpenter who is an outlaw. His maleness is no more salvific than any of his other attributes, but his word of direct address is.

While Matthew and Luke identify Jesus as Wisdom's spokesperson, the Johannine community is much more captivated by the experience of Word. This, I believe, may have more to do with continuity and discontinuity than with androcentricity. The wisdom motif as it appears in the New Testament represents continuity. The Word, though it is prior to Wisdom (the Word was God), represents discontinuity. It is God breaking in in a new way. It is always new as it is

spoken and heard. Wisdom is a part of, but not the totality of, this self-communication of God. The newness comes in the words and touch of Jesus. In the Word that is Jesus we see the Wisdom of God as we've never seen it before, on the cross (1 Cor 1:21-24). Wisdom was not an independent spirit/person that incarnated herself in Jesus, but an expression of the gracious goodness of God that we experience in its fulness in the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The Word who was God is the creator of Wisdom. Neither Wisdom nor Word needs to be bound by human gender, since each is an expression of God's grace. That the church was grasped by the Word, as the one who creates and redeems, is not folly at all, for how is it that we experience this gracious goodness but on the lips of another? So then the language of our worship (the prominence of John 1) speaks of Jesus as divine Word. For women and men to speak of Wisdom as the feminine dimension which was replaced by a masculine expression gives more credence to the tradition of sexual stereotyping where masculinity wins out. Reconstruction must lead to something new, where none of us has anything to lose. The strength of a feminist interpretation comes in the understanding of Jesus' self-identification with *Sophia*. Other theologians have opened up the text to us in looking at Wisdom christology, but it is among self-identified women and women-identified men<sup>7</sup> where a connection is made to women's experience and interpretation of the divine.

Let us remember that it is Christ Jesus who looks at women and sees Wisdom where the world sees only folly (Luke 24:10-11)! Wisdom is taken for foolishness until it is seen through the eyes of faith. In Jesus, Wisdom is tied to the cross. "I am the light of the world," says the Christ (John 8:12). The cross makes it clear that without such light we will be left in our own darkness.

#### IV. A LIBERATING WORD

As we seek to bring light and hope to communities where women and men have been cut off from each other, we are called to speak a liberating word. Though our bondage is communal, its symptoms manifest themselves uniquely in each

<sup>7</sup>For a definition of Women-Church, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone* (Boston: Beacon, 1984) 1-22.

of us. Women who have suffered under the yoke of male domination will find new life as they hear that they need not resemble Jesus physically in order to experience the rich grace of the Word, or to be God's spokespeople.<sup>8</sup> Men whose backs and spirits have been bent low under the weight of misused authority, and a demand to be something they aren't, can find rest in the Wisdom of God. Together our lives will be molded into one shape, that of the cross. For at the cross all that leads to self-aggrandizement and unbelief, low self-image, or abuse is put to death. The cross will light the way to a more abundant life. In the Wisdom of the cross, the creation is given back to us the way it was intended to be, and men and women will be trusted companions of one another.

<sup>8</sup>A 1976 Vatican declaration states: "There must be a physical resemblance between the priest and Christ" ("Declaration on The Question," section 27); quoted from R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 126. The statement effectively denies that Roman Catholic women's experience is valuable in interpreting the faith.