Folding the Jesus-Sophia metaphor: a basis for a non-androcentric Christology within a Christian feminist interpretive community

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FOLDING THE JESUS-SOPHIA METAPHOR:
A BASIS FOR A NON-ANDROCENTRIC
CHRISTOLOGY WITHIN A
CHRISTIAN FEMINIST INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

FOLDING THE JESUS-SOPHIA METAPHOR:
A BASIS FOR A NON-ANDROCENTRIC CHRISTOLOGY
WITHIN A CHRISTIAN FEMINIST INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY

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University of Dayton, 1995

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The paper tests the hypothesis that the Jesus-Sophia metaphor, first employed by the Matthean interpretive community in a patriarchal setting, reveals a basis for a non-androcentric christology when interpreted within the aims and assumptions of the contemporary Christian feminist interpretive community. The hypothesis is based on two premises: one, that as a metaphor, Jesus-Sophia cannot stand alone as an objective and finite storehouse of meaning; and two, that the aims and assumptions of an interpretive community shape the meaning the community’s members find in the metaphor. Weaving a systematic approach with biblical theology, the author’s method poses four questions to each community: What are the aims and assumptions of the community? How and why is the Jesus-Sophia metaphor used in the community? What does the metaphor reveal about Jesus as Christ? What does the metaphor reveal about women in relation to the divine? The first chapter describes how interpretive communities fold a metaphor, and notes the tensive characteristics of a metaphor and the political and historical qualities of interpretive communities. The second chapter explores how and why the gospel writer Matthew’s interpretive community folds the Jesus-Sophia metaphor and what meaning that community’s folding reveals. The third chapter explores the aims and
assumptions of the Christian feminist interpretive community and recounts Christian feminism’s folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor as typified in the works of Elizabeth A. Johnson. The fourth and final chapter demonstrates that the hypothesis proves true as the meaning revealed by the Christian feminist interpretive community’s folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor offers the Christian tradition a basis for a christology which decenters maleness as a constitutive element of the incarnation and affirms the christomorphic nature of women.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER

I. REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH AND LITERATURE ................................................. 5
   Folding A Metaphor Within An Interpretive Community
   The Wisdom Tradition And Sophia

II. FOLDING THE JESUS-SOPHIA METAPHOR WITHIN THE MATTHEAN INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY ................................................................. 18
   An Introductory Review Of Wisdom Christology Research
   Wisdom Christology In The Gospel of Matthew
   What Are The Aims And Assumptions Of The Matthean Interpretive Community?
   How And Why Does Matthew Use The Jesus-Sophia Metaphor?
   What Does The Jesus-Sophia Metaphor Reveal About Jesus As Christ?
   What Does The Jesus-Sophia Metaphor Reveal About Women In Relation To The Divine?

III. FOLDING THE JESUS-SOPHIA METAPHOR WITHIN THE CHRISTIAN FEMINIST INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY ............................... 34
   What Are The Aims And Assumptions Of The Christian Feminist Interpretive Community?
   Why And How Does The Christian Feminist Interpretive Community Fold The Jesus-Sophia Metaphor?

IV. TESTING THE HYPOTHESIS: DOES THE JESUS-SOPHIA METAPHOR PROVIDE A BASIS FOR A NON-ANDROCENTRIC CHRISTOLOGY?........ 48
   Revisiting The Premises: Interpretive Communities, Metaphors And Matthew’s Folding Of The Jesus-Sophia Metaphor
   Christian Feminism’s Criteria For A Non-Androcentric Christology
   What Does The Jesus-Sophia Metaphor Reveal About Jesus As Christ?
   What Does The Jesus-Sophia Metaphor Reveal About Women In Relation To The Divine?
   Does The Hypothesis Prove True?

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................................. 66
INTRODUCTION

Christianity makes the extraordinary claim that God entered human history uniquely and concretely in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The incarnation of God in Jesus reveals God in a manner unlike any other form of revelation. The person Jesus is God, revealing and known: “who has seen me has seen the Father.” (Jn. 14:9)

Christian feminist theology makes its own extraordinary claim that the Christian tradition has assumed an exclusively androcentric focus when interpreting and expressing the mystery of the incarnation, and that this focus implicitly attributes a powerfully influential ontological maleness to God. Truly, Christian feminism asserts that under the androcentric assumptions of the Christian tradition, “who has seen me has seen the Father” becomes a literal statement.

Christian feminist theology, with its a priori assumption that what does not value the human dignity of women does not reflect the divine, contends that reliance on male metaphors alone has permitted the Christian tradition to attribute normativity to the male sex which God “himself” chose for the incarnation, and therefore to stake claims for male privilege, for patriarchal structures, and for denying women the ability to act in persona Christi. Christian feminism asserts that such claims are in direct opposition to both the teachings and actions of Jesus, who included women in his ministry and life in liberating, mutually respectful, and egalitarian relationships, and to the experience of women who have and continue to understand themselves as christomorphic, able to act in persona Christi, and fashioned in the image and likeness of the redeemer God.

Yet the Christian community lacks the language to speak about women in this way; indeed, the official language of the tradition has yet to express the incarnation of God, who is beyond and without sex and gender, in anything other than male gendered terms. The challenge of Christian feminist theology is to develop and to interpret anew symbols, metaphors, and images of God which decenter gender, thus breaking open the mystery of the incarnation to reveal Christ who can be imaged fully both female and male.
Within the Judeo-Christian tradition itself lies a rich image of God in female form. Sophia, the powerful, creative personification of divine wisdom in Jewish scripture, is a metaphor for the God of Israel expressed and understood in the *Gestalt* of a woman. In the wisdom texts, Sophia is present and active at creation; she delights in humanity and makes friends of all. She is gracious and available to all who seek her. She is a “a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the Almighty; ... For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness” (Wis.7:25-26). What’s more, the community of the gospel writer Matthew perceives Jesus as the incarnation of the divine Sophia, thus attributing to him her cosmic, redemptive, and pre-existent characteristics.

Matthew’s community creates a metaphor by folding together two identities, the female personification of divine wisdom and a male itinerant preacher believed to be the Messiah. The Jesus-Sophia metaphor serves to satisfy the Matthean community’s aims and assumptions in regard to its polemical position with the pharisees and scribes of its parent Jewish community. Admittedly, the Matthean community appears to take little notice that Sophia is a female personification.

Yet, when interpreted anew within the aims and assumptions of a Christian feminist community, might the gender fluidity of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor invite women directly into the mystery of the incarnation? And might such an invitation challenge the Christian tradition to new patterns of thought and praxis in regards to women as *in imago Christi*?

My aim in this work is to follow the folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor through two interpretive communities: one of its origin, the Matthean community, and the contemporary Christian feminist community, as typified in the writings of Elizabeth A. Johnson. Though I am exploring a biblical metaphor and biblical texts, my theological approach engages a systematic methodology. Weaving a systematic approach with biblical theology in order to examine how these two faith communities incorporate this biblical metaphor into their traditions and beliefs, my method poses four questions to each: What are the aims and assumptions of the community? How and why is the Jesus-Sophia metaphor used in the
community? What does the metaphor reveal about Jesus as Christ? What does the metaphor communicate about women in relation to the divine?

My choice of methodology serves to test a hypothesis: that the Jesus-Sophia metaphor, first employed by Matthew in a patriarchal setting, reveals the basis for a non-androcentric christology when interpreted within a contemporary Christian feminist community. I base my hypothesis on two premises: one, that as a metaphor, Jesus-Sophia cannot stand alone as an objective and finite storehouse of meaning; and two, that the aims and assumptions of an interpretive community shape the community’s folding of the metaphor, thus shaping the meaning the community finds in the metaphor.

In the first chapter, I describe how interpretive communities fold a metaphor, noting the tensive characteristics of a metaphor and the political and historical qualities of interpretive communities. In the second chapter I describe how and why the gospel writer Matthew’s interpretive community folds the Jesus-Sophia metaphor and what meaning the metaphor reveals in that community in regard to Jesus as Christ and to women in relation to the divine. In the third chapter, I explore the aims and assumptions of the Christian feminist interpretive community, as represented by Johnson, and recount Christian feminism’s retelling of the incarnation by folding the Jesus-Sophia metaphor. In the fourth and last chapter, I revisit the hypothesis outlined above, testing to see if the meaning revealed by the Christian feminist interpretive community’s folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor offers the Christian tradition a basis from within for a christology which is truly inclusive.

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1It is worth noting that I am placing my work in line with constructive Christian feminist theology, as opposed to post-Christian feminist theology. To women who choose the latter position, the Christian tradition appears hopelessly patriarchal and unredeemable. Post-Christian feminism devotes its efforts to developing a spirituality centered on non-androcentric and non-Christian symbols, deities and rituals. However, constructive Christian feminists note that the Christian tradition has been a source of sustaining spirituality for their foremothers and for themselves, and believe that the church can be challenged to new forms of thought and praxis by Jesus’ liberating message. Hence, these women choose to stay within yet work to transform the Christian tradition.

2I am employing the distinction found in feminist theory between biological sex and socially constructed gender, where the latter refers to the meaning that a social or political framework applies to sex. Christian feminist theology takes the position that it is gender, not sex, that forms the basis for the devaluation of women in scripture and theology. Anne Carr discusses this distinction, and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s use

3 Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her (NY: Crossroad, 1983), 131.

4 I am using Roland Murphy’s definition of biblical theology: “an organized presentation of the biblical information concerning God, humans, and the world according to biblical categories.” See Murphy, The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature (NY: Doubleday, 1990), 111.

5 Murphy, The Tree of Life, 112.
CHAPTER ONE
REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH AND LITERATURE

In this chapter I lay the groundwork for an exploration of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor within the chosen communities. First, I outline the operation of a metaphor within an interpretive community, largely focusing on the work of Stanley Fish, Bernard Lee, and Anne Carr. Second, I provide a description of Sophia, herself a metaphor for divine wisdom within in Jewish wisdom texts, and explore how she was understood within Second Temple Judaism.

Folding A Metaphor Within An Interpretive Community

In their book Metaphorical Process, Mary Gerhart and Alan Russell visualize a metaphor in the activity of folding. Imagine two fields of meaning on a plane side by side. Differences exist, yet one who views both sides at once can recognize their relation. Now picture one field of meaning folded over the other and cajoled in to shape until the similarities between the two are juxtaposed and are the center of focus. This folding gives rise to a metaphorical relationship. The folders insist that an analogy exists between the two fields of meaning, and hence create a metaphor.

The Jesus-Sophia metaphor folds two fields of meaning: Jesus, the first century Jewish male itinerant preacher who was crucified, and Sophia, a female personification of divine wisdom in the Jewish scriptures. Insofar as Sophia is a metaphor folding two fields of meaning, woman and divine wisdom, the Jesus-Sophia metaphor is a sort of “double folding” within a network of metaphors.

Folding a metaphor is an interpretive process. An uninterpreted fact, or a text that contains meaning on its own, does not exist. Meaning of facts and texts occurs in the process of interpretation, as an event between the fact and/or text and the reader. Sandra Schneiders
draws out three implications of this process of interpretation. One, the text does not contain
one correct meaning, designed by the author and understood by the reader. Rather, the text is
a linguistic structure that permits a variety of readings by different readers or by the same
reader at different times. Two, because meaning occurs in the interaction between the text and
the reader, the reader makes an actual contribution to the meaning of the text. Three, the
meaning of the text is not under the control of the author. Despite the author’s intent, after
the text is produced, it means whatever it means. Interpretation, therefore, necessarily
requires the reader to interact with the text in an effort to achieve meaning.²

However, the reader does not stand alone in the interpretive process. The reader is a
member of a community, an interpretive community, with particular goals, motivations, and
assumptions. As a member of a specific community, the reader creates, understands, and
expresses meaning through a variety of devices: simile, symbol, ritual, narrative and metaphor.
The reader’s choice of device, and the meaning it conveys, emerges from the interpretive
community and ultimately serve to legitimate the community’s aims.³

Metaphors are symbolic, and as such evoke and suggest meanings which sculpt human
thought and behavioral responses. Metaphors are also tensive and trans-temporal, thus
accommodating new experiences, relationships and understandings. New meanings and new
metaphors arise from new interpretive communities or changing interpretive communities.
Members of the community name new experiences, events and knowledge derived from
historical observation, cultural milieu, technological advances, and other interpretive
communities, in continuity with their interpretation of a metaphor. Thus, the metaphor
continues to communicate its original intent, yet builds upon that meaning and reveals new
knowledge which coheres with or negates that meaning.

These characteristics of a metaphor suggest that a metaphor cannot stand alone as a
stable, objective storehouse of meaning. Literary critic Stanley Fish asserts that a metaphor’s
meaning occurs in a dynamic between the text and the reader, yet neither the text nor reader is
the controlling authority of interpretation. Rather, claims Fish, the interpretive community
interacts with the metaphor in order to produce meaning:
Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading, but for writing texts, for constituting their properties. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around. Hence, Fish asserts, the community’s unconscious, collective assumptions enable and limit the reader’s interpretation of a metaphor.

Fish maintains that speakers of the same language share a linguistic system with rules each member internalizes. This linguistic system permits uniformity at a primary level of understanding: when you say “the sky is blue”, I understand you at a primary level. Superimposed on this primary level is a secondary level where differences between readers occur and distinctions between interpretive communities become evident. To say the sky is blue to a farming community in the midst of a drought conveys a different meaning than it does to a family planning a picnic.

Thus, different interpretive communities recognize the constitutive elements of a metaphor, yet respond to and interpret them differently. For example, Latin American liberation communities, African-American Christian communities, and Christian feminist communities will overlap in their interpretation of the metaphor “God the father”, but their meanings will not mirror each other. Members of a particular community will be inclined to agree because they will see and make meaning in relation to that community’s assumptions, purposes and goals. Members of other communities will not see the meaning which that particular community found; these other communities may label that particular community’s interpretations as false or deviant, or may come to see new meaning in its own interpretation.

An individual usually participates in more than one interpretive community, and thus contributes to a weaving of two communities’ interpretations. Such weaving often encourages critique of a community’s interpretation and frequently accounts for differences within interpretive communities.

Differences within and between interpretive communities point to the radically historical and political characteristics of Fish’s literary method: historical because interpretation is influenced by an environment of political, cultural and literary determinants; political because what is normative occurs within communities, and the ways of interpreting flow from a
community which often labels other communities’ interpretations as aberrant. The struggle for interpretation of meaning can become a struggle for power; a community’s task is not to determine the correct way of understanding a metaphor, but rather to determine politically from which perspectives a metaphor will be interpreted.9

Because the goal of this method is to uncover what political motivations and historical contingencies create a particular metaphor, one can never fully arrive at “the point” of the metaphor. As Fish writes,

Coming to the point is a goal of a criticism that believes in content, in extractable meaning, in the utterance as a repository. Coming to the point fulfils a need that most literature deliberately frustrates...the need to simplify and close. Coming to the point should be resisted, and in its small way, this method will help you resist it.10

Clearly, Fish opposes any interpretation that makes claim to perennial meaning. But what about the Christian metaphors which are meant to reveal perennial meaning about the triune God who became incarnate in Jesus? Can the Christian interpretive community never come to “the point” about God?

In many ways, yes. As Aquinas notes, all language about God is analogical, limited and imprecise.11 Or, as Tillich states, symbols participate in the reality which they signify but are not the identity of that which they signify. The transcendent God always transcends the symbol.12 Hence, metaphors about God’s relation to humanity, such as the Jesus-Sophia metaphor or the Father-Son metaphor, only point to aspects of God; a metaphor cannot fully reveal God.

And like any metaphor, Christian metaphors occur in a socio-historical community which assists in producing the metaphor’s meaning. Anne Carr writes that “in every religious symbol, there is tension between the unconditioned in which the symbol participates and the immanent, the appearance, the bearer of the Holy in a particular cultural situation.”13 The task of theology is not to affirm or negate particular metaphors and symbols, but to interpret them within a particular community. This interpretation is undertaken fully aware that no one
metaphor fully depicts God and that symbols can only be interpreted anew in succeeding historical situations.\textsuperscript{14}

The danger in folding a metaphor is that the dissimilarities between the two fields of meaning can be ignored so much so that the interpretive community loses control of the metaphor and begins to take it literally.\textsuperscript{15} Take the earlier example of “God the father.” The metaphor relates two fields of meaning, God and father, and expresses the idea that like a human father, God is a progenitor, a provider, a caretaker and guide. Differences between the two fields of meaning exist as well: God is not a father insofar as God is not male, nor does God possess any of the nasty qualities, such as neglect or abusiveness, that are sometimes found in some human fathers. Yet most Christian communities omit these differences so much so that they attribute ontological maleness to God. In these communities, to speak of God, who is “beyond gender”, in female terms as well as male is often viewed with suspicion, fear and might even provoke charges of heresy.\textsuperscript{16}

What are the similarities and differences between the two fields of meaning in the Jesus-Sophia metaphor? Like Sophia, Jesus the Christ is understood to be pre-existent, begotten of God, present and active in the creation of the world, to have a unique and privileged knowledge of God, and is identified with the Torah. But unlike the female Sophia, Jesus is male. That Matthew, writing in a patriarchal context, links a female personification with a male person is striking from a twentieth century perspective. That Elizabeth Johnson, writing in the contemporary feminist community, might find in this link the basis for a non-androcentric christology is a challenging appropriation of the Christian tradition.

But who is this Sophia, and how was she understood in relation to the monotheistic God of Israel? Theological attention to this rich symbol has been inconsistent throughout the tradition, and has been revived of late. To provide a background for an exploration of the folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor in the two interpretive communities, I now turn to a review of the research on the wisdom tradition, and on the pre-Christian Judaic world’s understanding of Sophia.
The Wisdom Tradition And Sophia

Renewed interest in the personification of Wisdom occurred in the early to middle part of this century. Using a historical-critical approach in order to survey the history of wisdom research, R.B.Y. Scott notes three reasons for the apparent neglect of the wisdom texts in previous centuries. One, the wisdom texts are only one element in a constantly expanding field of Hebrew scripture studies. Two, biblical scholars have found it difficult to integrate the wisdom texts with the historical character of Hebrew biblical theology. Three, some of the most significant wisdom literature (e.g., Sirach, Solomon) is only listed in the Greek and Roman canons, thus seeming to most Jewish and Protestant scholars to be ‘lesser’ apocryphal works.

A 1923 publication on the British museum’s collection of Hieratic papyri demonstrates that the literary forms, ideas and motivations of the wisdom texts are not exclusively Hebrew, but rather linked to the Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures. The link sparked anew interest in the wisdom literature. Results of such interest occur in a list of areas: similarities between wisdom literature and its contemporary near eastern cultures; the influence of wisdom literature on a wide range of Hebrew scripture texts and other apocryphal and contemporary writings; the motivations and methods of Hebrew writers for borrowing characteristics for Sophia from Egyptian and Mesopotamian goddesses; the compatibility of the wisdom tradition and the Hebrew faith; the Hellenistic influence on the wisdom tradition; reverberations of the wisdom tradition in mariology; early Christian identification of Jesus with Sophia; and feminist theologians’ use of the Sophia symbol as a female Gestalt of God and as the basis for a non-androcentric christology.

Characteristics of the wisdom literature include a focus on the human condition and not necessarily on a chosen race, near silence on particularly Israelite beliefs in Yahweh and Israel’s heilsgeschichte, and discussion mainly on practical morality and the problems of theodicy. Some wisdom literature provides pithy statements meant to advise on life situations of family, business, and politics (e.g., Prov. 27:17; 12:1; 11:14). The wisdom literature also contains some of the more negative writings about women in the Hebrew scriptures. Yet, one of the most notable characteristics of the wisdom literature is the
personification of God’s wisdom in the female figure of Sophia (Job 28; Prov.1, 8, 9; Sir.1:9f, 4:11-19, 6:18-31, 14:20--15:8, 51:13-21; Bar.3:9--4:4; Wis.6:12, 11:1). Texts which share these wisdom characteristics are Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes in the Christian and Jewish canons, and Baruch, Sirach, and the Wisdom of Solomon in the Roman canon. Wisdom influence is also notable in Psalms, Tobit and Esther, as well as much non-biblical literature.

The literature provides no single, static Jewish wisdom myth, yet a general picture of Sophia can be drawn: she makes friends of humans in order to save and redeem them, she sends out her messengers, and she is located uniquely in the law. A scriptural profile of Sophia indicates her divine origin, her eternal presence with God and her active role in creation, her immanence in the world, her responsibility for the coherence and stability of the cosmos, and her particular mission to humanity. Sophia speaks to humans and promises her followers will find prosperity. Those who miss her find death. Like a householder, Sophia summons forth all humanity to her banquet. She is identified with the Torah and her work is found in Israel’s history. Sovereigns rule through her; she is a teacher and a lover. Wisdom is a gift from God but Sophia is also found by human effort and discipline.

Who is this active, creative, powerful personification and what is her relation to Yahweh? James Dunn proposes four possible options as to who Sophia was for the Hebrews and in the Hebrew scriptures: one, Sophia as a divine being, as in parallels to Egyptian and Mesopotamian religions; two, Sophia as a personification of a divine attribute; three, Sophia as a hypostasis, a “quasi-personification of certain attributes proper to God, occupying an intermediate position between personalities and abstract beings,” and four, Sophia as the personification of the cosmic order. I consider each briefly below.

Though the Sophia metaphor likely came into prominence as a manner to counteract the attractiveness of the more prevalent goddess cults of the time, most especially the Egyptian goddess Isis, no temples, priests or cults developed around Sophia as they did around the goddesses. Praise of Sophia always remained in the context of Jewish monotheism, and thus, she would have not been understood as an independent divine being on a par with Yahweh.
If not an independent deity, is Sophia simply a personification of a divine attribute? Many other of Yahweh’s attributes are spoken about in personified form: mercy, word, spirit, right hand, etc. Yet something more seems to be happening with Sophia; no other attribute is so developed in its personification.

Sophia as a hypostasis of God may appear an attractive alternative, based on the scriptural picture of Sophia. Yet hypostasis varies depending on the meaning one attaches to it, especially in the Christian tradition where the word acquires a technical meaning in relation to the Trinity. Hypostasis in a divine sense --- something which occupies an intermediate position between God and humanity --- comes dangerously close to violating the monotheistic nature of Judaism, or runs the risk of losing the divine nature of Sophia by placing her first among created beings. Ultimately, however, there is no evidence that the Hebrews viewed Sophia as a hypostasis. Sophia as a divine hypostasis is a meaning she later acquired in Christian trinitarian controversies, and eventually led to the Arians’ use of Sophia as a way to discredit the eternal existence of Christ.

Sophia as a personification of the cosmic order provides yet another incomplete answer. Though Sophia orders creation (Ps.2:6; 3:19; Sir.1:1, 14, 14:26-15:2, 39:1, 42:21), creation is also discussed without any reference to her (Sir.16:26, 18:1-2,4). In addition, identifying Sophia only as a personification of the cosmic order fails to take into account the many other functions she performs.

The personification of Wisdom is a fluid concept in the Hebrew scriptures, yet Sophia never competes with the one Yahweh. In conclusion, Dunn asserts that Sophia is a way to speak about God’s design in creation, and as such, is a metaphor for the transcendent God’s immanence in the world, and is directly related to the Torah.

...for a Jew to say that Wisdom “effects all things,” that Wisdom “delivers Israel from a nation of oppressors,” that “love of Wisdom is the keeping of her laws,” (Wis.8:5, 10:15, 6:18) was simply to say in a more picturesque way that God created all things wisely, that God’s wise purpose is clearly evident in the exodus from Egypt and most fully expressed in the law he gave through Moses. (emphasis mine)
Dunn's conclusion rejects the hypostasis or independent deity options. Rather, he views the personification of wisdom in Sophia not so much as the personification of an attribute or of cosmic order, but as a manner in which to express God's immanence in the world. Though the tradition about Sophia may borrow from the wider contemporary religious culture, in the context of Jewish monotheism the Sophia metaphor remains a way to express Yahweh's active involvement in the world in a full range of activity.56

Bernard Lee, noting the ambiguity surrounding Sophia's relationship to God, appears to lend support to Dunn's thesis. Lee acknowledges that Sophia is from God yet seems to be functionally equivalent to God. Sophia is God's immanency; unlike earlier manifestations of God in the Hebrew scriptures (eg., to Moses, Abraham, and Noah), Sophia now manifests God who stays behind the scenes. She is so linked to God, Lee writes, that to encounter Sophia is to encounter God.57

Gerhard Von Rad asserts a similar thesis as he acknowledges functional equivalence between Sophia and Yahweh. He writes, "So wisdom is truly the form in which Yahweh makes himself present and which he wishes to be sought by man. 'Who finds me finds life' (Prov.8:35). Only Yahweh can speak in this way...And yet, wisdom is not Yahweh himself."58

Von Rad baldly states the androcentric assumption overriding much biblical exegesis: that God can be imaged only in male form. Under the rubric of this assumption, Sophia is functionally equivalent to God, represents God's immanence in the world, and mediates God, but is not God. Elizabeth Johnson calls for a critical examination of the affects of such androcentric assumptions on exegesis. Noting Von Rad's statement that "Only Yahweh can speak in this way", Johnson observes that Von Rad has overlooked the fact that Yahweh too is an image of God formed in Israelite history. "Sophia is not YHWH, understood in the specificity of that biblical name, but both the female Sophia and the male YHWH express the one God who promises life upon being found." Rather, Johnson writes, removing the blinders of the androcentric assumptions about God reveals the full significance of the wisdom texts: "...Sophia is in reality God herself in her activity in the world, God imaged as a female acting subject."59
Hence, Johnson agrees with Dunn, Lee, and Von Rad that Sophia is not a personification of a divine attribute, nor an independent deity apart from Yahweh, nor a hypostasis of God. Like Dunn, Lee, and Von Rad, Johnson recognizes the functional equivalence of Sophia and Yahweh. Yet Johnson takes a step beyond Von Rad to assert that Sophia is God, revealing and known. And unlike Dunn and Lee, Johnson’s position within the Christian feminist interpretive community calls her attention to the gender of Sophia: God expressed in a female metaphor.

Whether or not the Israelites held such a theological distinction is an arguable question. But one can conclude that the personification of Sophia was not an abstract principle in Second Temple Jewish monotheism. Her intimate, and at times ambiguous, relationship to the divine, her creativity and activity, and her agency in the world all point to a personification not merely of a divine attribute, but rather to a metaphor for God, transcendent yet present in the world.60

Matthew links this female metaphor for God with a male historical person in order to understand the significance of Jesus as Christ. As I will explore in the next chapter, the Matthean community’s folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor encourages a seminal shift in christological thinking. Yet did Matthew recognize or interpret the gender fluidity of the metaphorical imagery his community was creating? And in his patriarchal community, did the choice of this metaphor reveal anything about women in relation to the divine? I now turn to the Matthean interpretive community to discover how and why Matthew folded the Jesus-Sophia metaphor, and what the metaphor reveals about Jesus as Christ and about women in relation to the divine.

1See Gerhart and Russell, Metaphoric Process (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University, 1984), 114.
Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 14.

Ibid., 44.


Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 15.

Ibid., 49.

Ibid., 15-16.

Ibid., 52.

Thomas Aquinas, *De divinis nominibus* 1, 2; *In boeth. de trin.* 1, 2, ad 1; and *De potentia* 7, 5, ad 14; all quoted in Elizabeth A. Johnson, “The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female” *Theological Studies* 45 (1984): 453.


Ibid., 293.


Ibid., 25.

Ibid.


See the appendix of non-biblical wisdom literature in Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 151-179.

Suggs, *Wisdom, Christology and Law*, 44.

Prov.8:22; Sir.24:3,9; Wis.7:25f.

Prov.8:22-29, 30; 3:19; Sir.1:4, 9f; Wis. 7:22, 8:4-6, 9:9,2: Ps.104:24.

Wis.7:24, 8:1.

Wis.1:7, 7:24,27; 8:1, 11:25.

Prov.8,4, 31-36: sir.24:7, 12, 19-22; Wis.7:27-28, 8:2-3.

Prov.1, 8, 9: Sir.24:19-22; Wis. 6:12-16; 7:22; 8:7-9, 9:10-16.


Prov.8:32-6.

Prov.9:1-6, 10-12.


Wis.10:1-21.

Prov.8:15f.

Prov.8:5-10, 32f, 9:5-11.

Prov.8:15,17.
46 Prov.2:6; Sir.1:9f, 26, 6:37; Wis.7:7, 9:4.

47 Sir.4:17, 6:18-36; Prov.4:10-27, 6:6; Wis.1:5, 7:14.


56 Ibid., 176.


59 E.A. Johnson, “Jesus, Wisdom of God,” 275. However, neither Johnson or Von Rad considers -- and I do not know-- the Jewish consciousness of gender. Did they perceive Yahweh as male, or is this a Christian overlay based on Christian perspectives of God as Father?

60 See also Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 133.
CHAPTER TWO
FOLDING THE JESUS-SOPHIA METAPHOR WITHIN THE
MATTHEAN INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY

The first century Jewish-Christian community of the gospel writer Matthew is among the earliest to employ the Jesus-Sophia metaphor. Through my exploration of the aims and assumptions of the Matthean community, I hope to uncover what that community's use of the metaphor reveals about Jesus as Christ and about women in relation to the divine.

I will begin with a brief summary of research in the area of wisdom christology in general and in Matthew's gospel specifically. I will then apply my method to Matthew's redaction of four Q passages to uncover how and why Matthew's interpretive community identified Jesus with Sophia via its folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor.

An Introductory Review Of Wisdom Christology Research

In 1863, David Friedrich Strauss first raised speculation regarding the relationship between wisdom mythology and logos christology. Taking up this speculation, Rudolf Bultmann and others explored Jesus' use of familiar wisdom forms and recognized Jesus as a teacher of wisdom. Bultmann held that the wisdom christology which influenced John's logos christology is anticipated in Matthew and in Q.

Indeed, taken together, certain New Testament passages which seem to express the divine origins of Christ are informed to a significant degree by wisdom terminology. The majority of these passages are located in the Q material, the gospel of Mark, the gospel of John, the Pauline corpus, as well as the apocryphal gospels of Thomas and the Hebrews. The New Testament authors' use of the wisdom tradition is purposeful: to identify Jesus with the creative and saving activity of God within history among God's people. In essence, by applying wisdom terminology to the person of Jesus, these writers attributed cosmic significance to Christ and established a previously unknown sort of privileged relationship between Jesus and God. Within this framework, James G.D. Dunn proposes that wisdom
christology provides a way to explain a movement of thought among the earliest Christians from belief in a post-existent Christ to belief in a pre-existent Christ. Herein, suggests Dunn, lie the origins of the doctrine of incarnation.

Wisdom Christology In The Gospel Of Matthew

Wisdom themes in Matthew's gospel have long served biblical scholars only to point to and dismiss erratic and tangential passages in an otherwise coherent narrative. In a seminal work in 1970, Jack M. Suggs set out to rescue Matthew's wisdom christology from the footnotes of scholarly research by exploring the possibility that wisdom speculation contributed centrally to Matthew's christology. Suggs' work will serve as the framework for my approach to the Gospel of Matthew. I will review briefly below the thesis of Suggs' book, Wisdom, Christology and Law in Matthew's Gospel, as well as the contributions of James G.D. Dunn and Celia Deutsch who follow in support of Suggs.

Review Of The Research

By approaching Matthew's wisdom themes in a systematic and unified manner, Suggs brings Matthew's wisdom christology to the fore. Suggs' method focuses primarily on the Q passages in Matthew, using Luke as a measure of literary control. Suggs postulates that in Q Jesus is the last and greatest of Sophia's envoys. Matthew, according to Suggs, redacts Q in such a way as to identify Jesus with Sophia. This identification is achieved by Matthew's incorporation of the Q material into a gospel framework with a passion narrative, and by Matthew's reworking of the Q material to portray Jesus-Sophia incarnate as the embodiment of the Torah.

Though Suggs' thesis met with some disagreement, more have accepted, affirmed and built upon Suggs' work. James G.D. Dunn agrees with Suggs that Q presented Jesus as Sophia's messenger, and that Matthew redacted Q in such a way as to depict Jesus as Sophia incarnate. Dunn asserts that a significant development in christological thinking occurred between Q and the Gospel of Matthew, even though Matthew may not have been self-consciously advancing such a development.
Celia Deutsch, building upon Suggs' thesis, explores how and why Matthew double folds the Sophia metaphor into the metaphor Jesus-Sophia. Deutsch's method will assist, especially as I explore what Jesus-Sophia revealed to Matthew's community about Jesus as Christ and about women in relation to the divine.

What Are The Aims And Assumptions Of The Matthean Interpretive Community?

Arguably, Matthew is not so much a writer as he is a redactor, using Mark's gospel, the Q source, and a body of materials specific to his Jewish-Christian community. The Gospel of Matthew was written and compiled some seventy years after the death of Jesus within a community that held two central beliefs: one, that the Torah represented the definitive commands of God, and two, that Jesus provided the definitive interpretation of the Torah. Matthew's community stood within the wider Jewish community, and seems to have found itself at odds with its parent community regarding the latter of these two tenets of faith.

As claimed by Suggs and others, the polemics over the true halakah between the Matthean community and the wider Jewish community, particularly the pharisees and scribes, placed Matthew's church on the defense. Matthew's community needed to legitimate themselves as halachic interpreters. In order to do so, Matthew's community ultimately needed to legitimate Jesus over and above the pharisees and scribes as the giver of the true halakah.

How And Why Does Matthew Use The Jesus-Sophia Metaphor?

In order to legitimate Jesus as the authoritative interpreter of the Torah, Matthew drew on two natural facets of his community's consciousness: one, the personification of divine wisdom in the female metaphor of Sophia and her identification with the Torah; and two, the Q sayings source which presented Jesus as one of Sophia's greatest envoys. Matthew redacts Q in such a way that Jesus becomes identified with Sophia herself, thus portraying Jesus as an embodiment of the Torah.

Drawing on the work of Suggs, Dunn, and Deutsch, I will explore four passages in which Matthew's redaction of Q is apparent; adopting Suggs' method, I will utilize Luke as a
measure of control. Throughout my exploration, I shall keep the following question in mind: what does Matthew's use of the metaphor within his community reveal about Jesus as Christ and about women in relation to the divine?

Folding The Jesus-Sophia Metaphor

The first passage, Mt.11:19/Lk.7:35, occurs at the end of a Q unit in which John the Baptist has sent his followers to Jesus to inquire if Jesus is the expected one. Jesus offers the enigmatic answer of pointing towards his teaching and healing. After the Baptist's disciples leave, Jesus comments that John ranks above the prophets of old and titles him a messenger of the kingdom and the greatest born of women. Jesus then continues to speak of "this generation." The Q unit in Mt.11:16-19 and Lk.7:31-35 is almost identical, up until the last verse:

To what then shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market place and calling to the others --- 'We piped to you, and you did not dance; I wailed to you and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'

LK.: Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.

MT.: Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

The differences between Luke's "all her children" and Matthew's "her deeds," when read in the context of each gospel, point to a difference in understanding the intention of this verse.

Dunn, Deutsch, and Suggs all agree that Luke's use of "children" is more original to the Q source than Matthew's "deeds."17 "All" is a favorite word of Luke's; Dunn asserts that the evangelist likely inserted it here to imply that both Jesus and John, despite their differing styles, were both messengers of wisdom. Even permitting the possibility that "all" the children came from Q, Dunn allows that the "all" would hardly refer to Jesus and John alone, but to their disciples as well,18 and indeed, all who accept their teachings.19 Regardless of whether Luke inserted "all" or if "all" came from Q, it appears that Q is stating that both John and
Jesus are envoys of Sophia; I cannot assume from this passage that Q identifies Jesus only with Sophia.

Matthew's reference to the "deeds" of wisdom in 11:19 can be read in light of 11:2, in which he alludes to the "deeds of Christ." The deeds of Christ in 11:2 and the deeds of wisdom in 11:19 bracket the sequence. V. 11:2 is significant: nowhere else in the gospel is the term "Christ" used. A more conventional phrasing would have been to refer to the deeds of Jesus. Rather, here Matthew seems to be referring to the messianic deeds.²⁰

These deeds, those of Christ and those of wisdom, are not two different things but one single activity that necessitates the use of the same word. These deeds are the ones that John heard about in prison, and are the ones about which this generation complained. These deeds of Christ's are also Sophia's deeds: reaching out to humanity, preaching (11:2-6), and speaking prophetically (11:20-4).

So, via this identification of the deeds of wisdom and the deeds of Christ, what does Matthew convey that is different from Q? In Luke, likely more original to Q, both Jesus and John are the last of Sophia's envoys. "Where Q at most presented Jesus as the envoy of wisdom and most probably as the child of wisdom, Matthew clearly took the step of identifying Jesus as wisdom herself."²¹ Matthew, in v.11-19, posits a functional equivalence between Jesus and Sophia by subordinating John to Jesus and thus implying in 11:19 that Jesus is not just another of Sophia's prophets. Rather, Jesus, who performs Sophia's deeds, embodies Sophia and is Wisdom.

The second passage, focusing on the exclusive knowledge of the Father and the Son, is widely accepted as a wisdom saying:²²

In that hour Jesus said, 'I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to the babes; even so, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.'(Mt.:11:25-27/Lk.10:21-22)²³
The exclusivity of the mutual knowledge between the Father and the Son reminisces the privileged relationship between Sophia and Yahweh; like the Son, Sophia is hidden, transcendent, known only to God, and mediates knowledge of God. This passage represents the strongest argument for a wisdom christology in Q. However, Dunn argues that the exclusive knowledge postulated here is more likely a reference to Israel’s claim to election by Yahweh than an allusion to Sophia. Interestingly, one of Dunn’s arguments for this thesis is one of the few passing references among (non-specifically feminist) biblical scholars to the female personification of Sophia in regard to the Jesus-Sophia metaphor. Dunn states that in this particular Q passage focusing on the exclusive, mutual knowledge of the Father and the Son, the language of an identification of Jesus and Sophia sits awkwardly because Sophia is most often described as the "daughter of God.”

While Q at most implies some sort of correlation between Jesus and Sophia, Matthew equates Jesus and Sophia via his addition of two verses at the end of this saying. In vv.28-30, Matthew places the words of Sophia in Jesus’ mouth, apparently without any of the concern Dunn holds regarding the femaleness of Sophia or the maleness of Jesus. Compare his addition with Sirach 51:

*Mt. 11:27-28:* Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest in your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

*Sir.51:23-6:* Draw near to me, you who are uneducated, and lodge in the house of instruction. Why do you say you are lacking in these things, and why do you endure such great thirst? I opened my mouth and said, 'Acquire wisdom for yourselves without money. Put your neck under her yoke, and let your souls receive instruction; it is to be found close by.'

Is it possible that Luke deleted the reference to Sirach? Such a conjecture would rest largely on an argument from silence. And evidence seems to point more towards an addition from Matthew rather than a deletion from Luke. Strauss first drew attention to the apparent dependency of Mt.11:25-30 on Sir.51:23-6. Later, Bultmann challenged the form-critical unity of Mt. 11:25-30 by contending that 11:27 and 11:28-30 differed in character. Bultmann classified the former as a Hellenistic revelation saying, the latter as a Jewish wisdom saying.
Citing this evidence and noting that vv.28-30 appear independent of vv.25-27 in the Gospel of Thomas, Suggs accepts the thesis that Matthew specifically added vv.28-30 to the Q material.  

In Sirach, the wise person counsels others to take the yoke of wisdom; in Matthew, Jesus speaks as Sophia, inviting others to take his yoke. The yoke in Sirach refers to the Torah (Sir.15:1; 24:1-34; 51:23-6); the yoke of Jesus is also a reference to the Torah, especially when read in context of the halachic discussion that immediately follows this saying (12:1-14). But what does it mean that Jesus' yoke is easy and light? Suggs speculates that Jesus' yoke does not abolish the demands of the Torah, but rather is gracious and life-giving.

The use of the word "burdened" also significantly supports this interpretation of Matthew's addition. Jesus, speaking as Sophia, addresses the burdened in v.28, and in v.30, pairs his burden with his yoke, symbolically his law. In Matthew's gospel, burden appears only here and in 23:4, where it refers to the heavy burdens the teachings of the pharisees lay on others. By inviting those who are burdened with the pharisees' interpretation of the Torah to take up his light and easy yoke, the Matthean Jesus implicitly states that his interpretation of the Torah supersedes that of the pharisees.

Matthew's polemical stance appears directly aimed at the "officially wise Jewish establishment" of scribes and pharisees. His identification of Jesus with Sophia portrays Jesus as hidden and yet revealed, transcendent and yet mediator of knowledge of God and of the hidden things of the reign of God. In vv.28-30, Jesus offers himself as the proper interpretation of the Torah. Matthew's addition of vv.28-30, dependent on Sir.51:23-26, authenticates Jesus' apocalyptic and halachic teaching. Jesus is Wisdom who can reveal hidden things and teach with authority over and above the scribes and pharisees.

In the third Q passage, Jesus delivers an oracle of doom. Luke's version remains consistent with Q's presentation of Jesus as Sophia's messenger and spokesperson. Here, first, is the passage as it appears in Luke:

Therefore also the wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,' so that this generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world, from the
blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be charged against this generation. (Lk. 11:49-51)

In this passage, Jesus is speaking and quotes the Wisdom of God. However, Matthew's redactional changes to the passage itself, as well as the context into which he places the passage, presents a fairly clear identification of Jesus as Sophia:

Therefore I send you prophets, sages and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation. (Mt. 23:34-36) [emphasis mine]

Matthew substantially alters this passage. He turns a Sophia saying into an I-saying of Jesus, and switches from the future to the present tense. That Matthew altered the passage and not Luke is likely; it is unlikely that Luke would edit an I-saying of Jesus into a Sophia saying.

Would Matthew's readers have recognized this I-saying as a Wisdom-saying? The ambiguous source of the Sophia saying makes it difficult to determine --- if the saying was well known, then the connection likely would have been clear. But this seems evident: Matthew's redaction in this passage places Sophia's words on Jesus' lips, and assigns to Jesus Sophia's function of sending prophets, a function that belongs to no one else in pre-Christian Judaism except Sophia and God. In his redaction, Matthew apparently had no trouble transferring the words of Sophia to Jesus.

And what of Matthew's shift to the present tense? Recall that Matthew's community aimed to legitimate their sages and scribes as interpreters of the Torah. The shift to the present suggests that Matthew incorporated this aim into his writing:

The envoys sent by wisdom are not only, or even primarily, the prophets of old, whose sending is described in vv. 29-32. Rather, they are the disciples of Jesus and 'messengers' of Matthew's community over against opposing teachers...[the teachers of Matthew's community] are the proper teachers of the tradition because they are Wisdom's envoys and they experience opposition because that is the fate of the prophets. (author's emphasis)

Furthermore, Matthew's redaction places this passage in a unit (19:1-25:46) in which conflict between Jesus and the opposing leaders is the theme. The sources of conflict include
the halakah (19:3-9; 22:15-22, 23-33, 34-40) and Jesus' authority to teach and heal (21:15).
In Matthew, the oracle is immediately preceded by a discussion contrasting Jesus' model of
leadership over and against the scribes and Pharisees (23:1-12) and the "woes" Jesus
addresses to them (23:13-33). Matthew's identification of Jesus speaking as Wisdom in this
context makes the political move of legitimating Jesus as the sender of envoys and the teacher
of the halakah, thus also legitimating the teachers in his community over and against their
opponents.36

The fourth passage from Q, a lament over Jerusalem, is almost identical in both Luke and
Matthew: it is the context and interpretation within each gospel that reveals Matthew's
redactional changes. Again, Jesus is speaking:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent
to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers
her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken.
And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the
name of the Lord!' (Lk.13:34f/Mt.23:37-39)37

Matthew places this passage immediately after the Q passage discussed immediately above;
Luke puts the two in separate locations. Though some have tried to speculate which usage
represents the original context in Q38, it is nearly impossible to arrive at a clear
determination.39 As Dunn points out, it is possible that in their individual redactions that
Matthew and Luke each removed this saying from a wholly different context than in which
either presents it.40

Interpretation of Q hinges on understanding the first person references of the passage. Is
the "I" who gathers the children the same person who sends the prophets? Answering this
question could help determine the relationship Q intended between Jesus, the speaker, and
Sophia.41

If the one who sends the prophets is the same one who gathers the children like a mother
hen, then possibly Sophia is performing both functions; both are appropriate to her. Sophia
sends prophets (Lk. 11:49; Prov.9:3; Wis.6:16; Sir.24:7-12), and the metaphorical imagery of
a mother hen is fitting to maternal Sophia (Sir.1:15). And if this is so, then Jesus is
distinguishing himself from Sophia and placing himself in line with her prophets. In Luke, this
possibility seems to bear itself out, where Jesus speaks as one in the tradition of the prophets who must die in Jerusalem (Lk.13:31-33).

If, however, the one who laments over Jerusalem is not the same person as the sender of the prophets, then the one who laments, Jesus, is the one who has been sent as the climax of prophetic appeal. The "how often" could refer to Jesus or to past prophets, or simply be an expression of frustration on Jesus' part. As for the mother hen imagery, while it is appropriate to Sophia, is not exclusive to her; such imagery is familiar to the Hebrew scriptures. Again, one can conclude that Jesus is most likely speaking as a messenger of Sophia.

As this exercise demonstrates, it is not possible to establish enough of a connection between Jesus and Sophia to posit a different interpretation of Q than shown thus far: Jesus as a messenger of Sophia. Suggs concurs, and adds that the lament can be attributed to Jesus only when placed in a context as Matthew does, immediately following an identification of Jesus with Sophia.

The contexts of this passage in Matthew and in Luke provide a key to interpreting Matthew's redaction from Q. In Luke, the lament immediately follows Jesus' response to the report that Herod has plans to kill him (13:31-33). Jesus states in v.33 that a prophet cannot die outside of Jerusalem. Luke's context seems to correspond with Q's consistent interpretation of Jesus as one of Sophia's prophets.

In Matthew, the passage stands with Sophia's oracle of doom, now placed on Jesus' lips. The lack of a transition between the oracle and the lament indicates that Matthew viewed Jesus speaking as Sophia in the lament. Interpreted in light of 23:34-36, Jesus here seems again to be the sender of prophets rather than the one being sent: "anyone who recognized the wisdom terminology in Mt.23:34-9 would readily recognize Matthew's intention to identify Jesus as wisdom" and thus attribute cosmic, Christic significance to him: Jesus as wisdom incarnate.

Why Matthew Folds The Jesus-Sophia Metaphor

The tensive, trans-temporal character of metaphors and symbols enables interpretive communities to employ them to incorporate and express new meanings. Matthew takes the
Sophia metaphor and transforms it in such a way as to offer a theological reflection on the significance of Jesus' identity. In folding the Jesus-Sophia metaphor, Matthew ascribes to Jesus the words, functions and qualities of Sophia: like Sophia, Jesus is hidden and revealed, mediates knowledge of God, is a teacher and a prophet, invites his disciples to take his yoke, is maternal and affective with his followers, and sends his envoys into the world.\(^{47}\)

Matthew's Jewish-Christian community believed that Sophia had come to abide in the Torah (Sir.24). Behind Matthew's writing lies a strong argument between Christians and Jews regarding the true halakah. In order to legitimate his community's Christian interpretation of the Torah, Matthew identifies Jesus with Sophia as an implication that Jesus is the true interpretation of the law.\(^{48}\) Jesus' yoke is not opposed to Sophia's yoke, as the pharisees claim. What the reader confronts in Matthew is law opposed to law. "The yoke of Jesus is not some other yoke than the yoke of the Torah. Rather, the yoke of the true Torah, of wisdom, is set over against the Phariseic Torah."\(^{49}\) The true Torah, hence, is entrusted in Jesus and to his envoys, who are the teachers and scribes in Matthew's community.

For Matthew, the Jesus-Sophia metaphor authenticates the halachic teaching of Jesus, and with it, authenticates the teaching of the community of Jesus' disciples: for their teaching "originates ultimately in a teacher who is uniquely legitimate."\(^{50}\)

**What Does The Jesus-Sophia Metaphor Reveal About Jesus As Christ?**

In folding the Jesus-Sophia metaphor, Matthew made an early development in christological thinking. Where Q identified Jesus as an envoy of Wisdom, Matthew identified Jesus as Wisdom.

Matthew, Dunn writes, opens up a way of thinking about Jesus not just as different in degree from earlier prophets, but also in kind. Matthew's use of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor moves from a christology which speaks of Jesus' divinely-given function to one which speaks of Jesus' metaphysical status. As noted earlier, Matthew may not have consciously advanced this development.\(^{51}\) Yet Matthew's application of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor provides some insight into how the earliest Christians made a move from a belief in a post-existent Christ to a
belief in a pre-existent Christ, in a Jesus who was not just a prophet sent by Sophia, but intimately related and even identified with Sophia herself.

**What Does The Jesus-Sophia Metaphor Reveal About Women In Relation To The Divine?**

Often in the process of folding a metaphor, certain aspects of the metaphor are re-imagined or ignored. In Matthew's folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor maleness and femaleness is all but ignored. Jesus is Wisdom, not because Sophia is now male or because Jesus is now female, but because Jesus functions and acts as Sophia does. As Deutsch adroitly points out, Matthew's use of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor provides no scriptural evidence that the metaphor either reflects women's religious experience or enhances their position within the community. The focus and application of Matthew's use of the metaphor originates in his community of scribal leadership and legitimates those exercising that leadership. The evidence from Matthew's gospel suggests that all in this leadership were male. Matthew subsumed a female metaphor into a male person both in the portrayal of Jesus as Sophia and in the legitimation of the male scribal class. Although Deutsch notes that while the Jesus-Sophia metaphor in Matthew's community may or may not have served to maintain women's subordination to men, I cannot conclude that Matthew intended to do away with the biological sex of either Jesus or Sophia, or to use the metaphor as a way to keep women out of the teaching class.

That the Jesus-Sophia metaphor reveals nothing about women in relation to the divine in Matthew's community is consistent with his gospel. Matthew's gospel offers no evidence that women exercised public teaching roles, or that Matthew conceived of the divine in female form. Deutsch suggests that what the Jesus-Sophia metaphor represents in regard to gender, if anything, is a masculinizing of the wisdom tradition. The content of the Sophia symbol is no longer an imaginary female but rather linked to a historical male. However, from twentieth century perspectives and assumptions about patriarchal communities, Matthew's shift is striking and requires further exploration in terms of gender and feminism. For that, I now turn to the meaning of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor within a different yet overlapping interpretive community, that of contemporary Christian feminism.


3 Bultmann, The History of the Synoptic Tradition, 115.

4 Mt.11:25-30/Lk.10:21-22; Mt.11:16-19/Lk.7:31-5; Mt.23:34-36/Lk.11:49-51; Mt.23:37-39/Lk.13:34.


9 Dunn, Christology in the Making, 163.

10 Ibid., 212.


Christology and Law in Matthew's Gospel, by M. Jack Suggs, In Catholic Biblical Quarterly 33 (1971): 146, suggests that Suggs' method is problematic in that he studied a handful of texts apart from their context; Russell Pregeant, "The Wisdom Passages in Matthew's Story," in The Society for Biblical Literature's 1990 Seminar Papers, 469-493, applies reader response criticism to Matthew's gospel and suggests that while Matthew applies wisdom motifs to Jesus' life, he doesn't necessarily equate Jesus with Wisdom incarnate. Gench, "Wisdom in the Christology of Matthew", identifies three issues of debate over Suggs' work: his concept of a reconstructed wisdom myth, his understanding of the character of Q, and the importance of literary context in interpretation. She utilizes redaction criticism to the gospel as a whole and ultimately concludes that Matthew does not identify Jesus with Sophia.

13 Dunn, Christology in the Making, 198-200.


15 Ibid., 14.

16 Suggs, Wisdom, Christology and Law, 119; M. Johnson, "Reflections on a Wisdom Approach to Matthew's Christology" 60.

17 Dunn, Christology in the Making, 197; Deutsch, "Wisdom in Matthew: Transformation of a Symbol," 304-5; Suggs, Wisdom, Christology and Law, 36.

18 Dunn, Christology in the Making, 198.

19 Suggs, Wisdom, Christology and Law, 36.

20 Ibid., 37.

21 Dunn, Christology in the Making, 198.

22 Dunn, Christology in the Making, 198-200.

23 Quoted from Dunn, Christology in the Making, 198.


25 Dunn, Christology in the Making, 198-200.

26 Ibid.


28 Bultmann, The History of the Synoptic Tradition, 159; Bultmann viewed vv.28-30 as depicting Jesus as a teacher of wisdom, not as Sophia herself; cf. Gench, "Wisdom in the Christology of Matthew," 11.

Deutsch, "Wisdom in Matthew: Transformation of a Symbol," 38. To see how this implicit claim also operates at the Sermon on the Mount, see Suggs, *Wisdom, Christology and Law*, 109-115, 117, 120.

Robinson, "Jesus as Sophos and Sophia," 8.


Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 203.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


See Gench, "Wisdom in the Christology of Matthew" 20-21; Deutsch, "Wisdom in Matthew: Transformation of a Symbol," 47; Robinson, "Jesus as Sophos and Sophia," 11. This interpretation is also consistent within Matthew's gospel, especially the Sermon on the Mount; see Suggs, *Wisdom, Christology and Law*, 109-117. While M. Johnson agrees that Matthew held an apologetic stance in light of the Pharisees and the Torah, he claims that Matthew did not identify Jesus with Wisdom in order to make that stance. Rather, Johnson asserts, Matthew viewed and depicted Jesus as the true interpreter of the Torah; see "Reflections on a Wisdom Approach to Matthew's Christology," 61.


52 Deutsch, "Jesus as Wisdom," 2.

53 Ibid., 31.

54 Ibid., 31.
CHAPTER THREE
FOLDING THE JESUS-SOPHIA METAPHOR WITHIN
THE CHRISTIAN FEMINIST INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY

The Christian feminist interpretive community builds upon the Matthean community's use of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor. Like Matthew's community, Christian feminism affirms that the metaphor attributes cosmic, christic significance to Jesus. However, unlike the Matthean interpretive community, the Christian feminist interpretive community folds the Jesus-Sophia metaphor with particular assumptions about the christomorphic nature of women and about the Christian tradition's emphasis on maleness as a constitutive element of the incarnation.

In this chapter, I aim to uncover how the Christian feminist community's aims and assumptions shape its folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor. To do so, I will apply my method to the works of Elizabeth A. Johnson, who has emerged as a leading thinker in feminist use of wisdom christology. An analysis of her work will assist in revealing what the Christian feminist interpretive community's folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor discloses about Jesus as Christ and about women in relation to the divine.

I now turn to Christian feminist interpretive community, as typified in Johnson’s writing, and pose the first two of the four questions I asked of the Matthean community: What are the community's aims and assumptions? How and why does the community fold the Jesus-Sophia metaphor?
What Are The Aims And Assumptions Of The Christian Feminist Interpretive Community?

Feminism is an ideology that appears in varied forms, and certainly not all feminists agree on what the goals of feminism are.¹ Some of the more common classifications of feminism include radical feminism, cultural feminism, liberal feminism, romantic feminism, and more recently, victim feminism and power feminism.² I will restrict exploration of the contemporary feminist community to the generic tenets and goals that most feminists hold, and that most constructive feminist Christian theologians, such as Johnson, employ.

While feminists diverge due to their ideological alliances and differing world views, feminism, at its core, affirms the full human dignity of women. This affirmation usually leads feminists to critique patriarchal systems and androcentric thought patterns which violate that dignity, and to advocate social and intellectual changes which encourage and recognize women's full human dignity.

In this vein, Christian feminism assumes that "women are equally created in the image and likeness of God, redeemed by Christ, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, called to a life of faith and responsibility in this world, and destined for glory with God forever."³ Hence, Christian feminist theology opts for an a priori assumption that what denies the human dignity of women is non-reflective of God.⁴

From this a priori position, Christian feminism observes that patriarchy and androcentrism are prevalent in both the church and secular society. Christian feminism asserts that ecclesial patriarchal structures and androcentric thought patterns perpetuate sexism and malign the image of God in women. Johnson argues that, throughout its history, the church has consistently defined women as mentally, morally and physically inferior to men; as pre-ordained for domestic and private roles; and as unfit to mediate God's grace in officially
sacramental ways.³ In response to the patriarchal character of the Christian tradition and church teaching concerning women, Christian feminists fervently contend that, even for the church, sexism cannot be God’s will. “Such second class citizenship disparages the image of God in women, profanes [their] baptism, distorts the relationship between the sexes, and damages the community that is the church.”⁶

Christian feminism notes that ecclesial sexism is most prevalent in christological teachings.⁷ Christian feminist critiques of the development of classic christology charge that an excessive focus on the maleness of Jesus has led the Christian tradition to support and perpetuate androcentrism. This androcentrism, according to a feminist analysis, is evident in church teaching and praxis which views male humanity and experience as normative, even privileged. In order to bring this situation to critical and conscious reflection, Christian feminism undertakes to proclaim anew the liberating message of Jesus in an non-androcentric manner by employing a three-step agenda: one, deconstructing⁸ the use of male gender in the Christian tradition and scriptures; two, uncovering liberating impulses within the tradition and scriptures that explicitly recognize the christomorphic nature of women; and three, applying steps one and two to re-tell the story of the incarnation and redemption in a liberating, inclusive manner.

Deconstructing The Use Of Male Gender In The Christian Tradition

Christian feminism’s view of classic christology⁹ points out the Christian tradition’s excessive focus on the maleness of Jesus. Johnson draws on the works of Rosemary Radford Ruether¹⁰ to describe how this focus distorts the ontological and functional understandings of Jesus’ christic nature, ultimately impugning the christomorphic nature of women and placing their salvation at risk. In addition, Johnson highlights how the church’s teaching and praxis
justifies these distorted christologies with a dualistic anthropology which conceives of gender roles as divinely ordained.

**Distorting Ontological Christology.** Feminist analysis claims that the Christian tradition misconstrues Jesus' maleness so much so that it implicitly attributes ontological maleness to God. When the language of the Christian churches expresses God's revelation in Jesus exclusively in male metaphors such as Father-Son, Logos (connected with the male principle in Greek philosophy), lord and king, their members come to take literally the statement "Who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9). Even less dominant metaphors such as shepherd reflect an androcentric social construction.¹¹ Literalizing and absolutizing male metaphors for God implies a "necessary ontological connection" between maleness and divinity; the man Jesus is the incarnation of the male Logos and the revealer of the male Father God.¹² This occurs, Johnson writes, "despite the evidence in scripture and tradition that the mystery of God transcends all naming and creates female reality in the divine image and likeness."¹³

Johnson argues that this misuse of Jesus' maleness accrues honor, normativity and superiority to men over women in ecclesial theology and praxis. The Roman Catholic church asserts that God's choice of male humanity as the vehicle for the incarnation reveals divine intentions in regard to the male sex: male persons are christomorphic, whereas female persons are not. Nowhere is this more evident than in the 1976 document *Inter Insigniores*, which denied women the sacrament of ordination based largely on their femaleness as divergent from the maleness of Jesus and of the twelve apostles.¹⁴ The logic of *Inter Insigniores* explains that men enjoy a "natural resemblance" to Christ, whereas women do not. Hence, only men can act in the person of and represent Christ. Ironically, unlike Genesis which recognizes that both male and female images the creator God (Gen.1:27), *Inter Insigniores* claims that the only
maleness images the redeemer God. As Johnson observes, *Inter Insigniores* requires women to rely on a christomorphic male to mediate Christ for them.\textsuperscript{15}

**Distorting Functional Christology.** A feminist analysis points out that any understanding of the incarnation which views maleness as constitutive of Jesus’ christic nature produces a logical anomaly: if women cannot claim christomorphic nature, isn’t their very salvation at risk? Christ’s solidarity with humanity is crucial for salvation; by entering into sinful humanity and transforming it from within, God incarnate in Jesus Christ plays out God’s compassionate will to offer salvation from sin. Or, to phrase the position another way, as the early Christian saying goes, “What is not assumed is not redeemed.” As Johnson notes, if maleness is necessary for a christic role, then Christ made flesh does not include women’s humanity, and women are effectively out of the loop of salvation.\textsuperscript{16}

Dualistic anthropology “solves” this conundrum by viewing man as the head of woman. Christ assumes female humanity via his assumption of male humanity, and thus secures salvation for women. However, Johnson notes that the logical anomaly continues when this androcentric christology meets an egalitarian anthropology. For if men and women are equal in human dignity and equally formed in God’s image and equally transformed by baptism in Christ, such androcentric emphasis on christic roles and function continues to distort the message of God’s liberating self-revelation in the incarnation.\textsuperscript{17}

**Distorting Anthropology.** Feminist analysis points out that the distortion of Jesus’ maleness which accords christomorphic nature to male humanity alone is predicated upon and perpetuates a dualistic anthropology. Under such an anthropological system, each sex is presumed to possess unique characteristics; men and women find human fulfillment within their sex’s pre-determined roles. In the Christian tradition, particularly in the contemporary teaching of the Roman Catholic church, divine intention regarding the characteristics and proper roles for each sex is understood to be revealed in Christ’s institution of the eucharist.
John Paul II’s letter in 1988, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women), provides a clear example of ecclesial application of a dualistic anthropology. According to the letter, a woman’s manner of fulfilling herself as a human person differs from that of a man’s because she possesses particular feminine resources due to her biological sex: her potential for motherhood, her “special sensitivity,” her “moral and spiritual strength,” and the love she gives to others, particularly her children. She must fulfill herself on the basis of these resources. Her vocation, that is, the manner by which she gives love and reaches human fulfillment, is “determined” by her femininity and is found two paths, motherhood and virginity. Women’s model on these paths is Mary, who possessed in herself both virginity and motherhood. John Paul II advises women that they share in the redemption of Christ when they emulate his mother Mary, either as physical or spiritual mothers.

From this separation of gender roles in relation to the incarnation and redemption, *Mulieris Dignitatem* continues to affirm dual roles for males and females in the church. Confirming *Inter Insigniores*, John Paul II explains how Christ’s institution of the eucharist further reveals divine will regarding what it is to be male or female. In the act of the eucharist, Christ expresses the “unity of the two,” the mutual self-giving between a man and a woman in marriage. Christ is the bridegroom, a masculine symbol because Christ became “a true man, a male.” The Church is the bride, a feminine symbol which is linked to the masculine, because both women and men constitute the human community of the church. Thus, according to the pope, the feminine bride becomes a symbol of all that is human, whereas the masculine bridegroom symbol “represents the human aspect of the divine love” which God expresses for all people. Because Christ’s love is that of a bridegroom, it is the “model and pattern of all human love, *men’s love in particular*.” (emphasis mine) The role of the bridegroom, and its
necessary and exclusive link to maleness, is most fully expressed in Christ’s choice to include the twelve male apostles at the Last Supper, the first eucharist.

Since Christ in instituting the eucharist linked it in such an explicit way to the priestly service of the apostles, it is legitimate to conclude that he thereby wished to express the relationship between man and women, between what is “feminine” and what is “masculine.” It is a relationship willed by God both in the mystery of creation and in the mystery of redemption. It is the eucharist above all that expresses the redemptive act of Christ, the bridegroom, toward the church, the bride. This is clear and unambiguous when the sacramental ministry of the eucharist, in which the priest acts in persona Christi, is performed by a man.24

Here maleness remains a constitutive, necessary element to represent Christ. At the heart of the matter regarding christic roles, the church’s teaching attempts to justify a dualistic anthropology as divinely ordained, and relies upon this anthropology to accord privileged, christomorphic status to men alone.25

Searching The Tradition

Working with an awareness of the feminist deconstruction of the use of male gender in the Christian tradition, particularly of the androcentric assumptions and the dualistic anthropology which supports much of the institutional church’s teaching and praxis, feminist theology begins to search the Christian tradition for liberating impulses, or what Letty Russell describes as “useable past.”26 Looking for clues which will provide insights for a feminist retelling of the Christian narrative, feminists’ search includes not only the canonical texts, official sources of revelation and the doctrines of the church, but also apocryphal works, heretical and reform movements and women’s experience.27

A basic tenet of Christian feminist theology is that the institutional church has long neglected women’s experience as a hermeneutic source for the Christian narrative.28 Women’s daily life experiences represent various ways to articulate the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, according to Johnson. She notes well that there is no one women’s experience,
but rather the experiences of a diversity of women from a wide range of backgrounds, cultures, races, and classes: "...they form a mounting chorus of new interpretation arguably more coherent with the original impulse of the Christ event than is the traditional patriarchal construal." Women from African-American, Asian, Latin American, African and Anglo backgrounds contribute to this chorus by understanding the Christian narrative in a manner that empowers their lives. Yet, despite the variety of experiences among women, Johnson claims that all women share a common social location which makes it possible to speak of women's experience: all speak from the margins of public discourse. It is the aim of Christian feminist theology to bring women's speech and experience to the fore.

Johnson acknowledges her own social location as a white, academic, middle class North American seeking to be aware of women's sufferings at home and in the larger world. She also acknowledges that her task is to weave together the two interpretive communities in which she participates: feminism and the Catholic Christian tradition. Valuing the christomorphic nature of women and the experience of women, Johnson searches the Christian tradition for sources that she can use in a non-androcentric re-telling of the Christian narrative.

Johnson highlights several assumptions of the Christian tradition which are useful in developing a non-androcentric christology. Among these are the incomprehensibility of God and the analogical nature of religious language, and the Roman Catholic church's distinction between the institution and community models of church. While Johnson makes use of these assumptions and characteristics, she explores in unprecedented depth God's wisdom personified in the female metaphor of Sophia and early Christian identification of Jesus with Sophia as a source for Christian feminist theology.
Why And How Does The Christian Feminist Interpretive Community

Fold The Jesus-Sophia Metaphor?

Applying critical analysis (step one) and the uncovered useable material (step 2), Johnson proceeds to the third step of a Christian feminist approach: to retell the story of Jesus, the incarnation of God, in a non-androcentric manner which includes and incorporates the experience of women and decenters maleness as a constitutive element of Jesus' christic nature.

Like Fish's understanding of the reinterpretation of symbols within various interpretive communities (see Ch.1), Johnson's method here is to reinterpret the content of the older wisdom christology tradition in light of a new context, feminism. Johnson describes such activity as "historical borrowing." She notes that not only does the new context uncover new meaning in the old tradition, but also that the older tradition contributes to the new context and its interpretation of experiences.

Johnson's retelling of the Christian narrative focuses on four areas: Jesus' relationship to God, his ministry, his death, and his resurrection. I recount this narrative below.

The Jesus-Sophia metaphor casts Jesus as the prophet and child of Sophia. He calls her by many names and describes her in numerous stories and images: Abba, the shepherd of lost sheep, the woman searching for a lost coin, the father forgiving the prodigal son, the bakerwoman kneading yeast into dough, the mother giving birth. The gender fluidity within his understanding of her comes to its fullness in his direct relationship to Sophia: the equivalence between his deeds and hers (Mt.11:19) reveals that he is Sophia, present to and directly participating in humanity.

Jesus' message as the prophet and child of Sophia is a proclamation of her all-inclusive love. He offers her will for wholeness for all to all, especially the poor and burdened. He
invites others to join him on her paths of justice. Jesus, like Sophia, delights in humanity. Through Jesus, Sophia seeks to gather all under her wings and offer peace. Via his parables, healings, exorcisms, and meals, Jesus-Sophia "spells out the reality of the gracious goodness and renewing power of Sophia-God drawing near."37

His ministry is one of liberating relationships. Like Sophia, Jesus seeks to make all friends of God.38 His ministry especially involves women as friends, economic supporters, challengers, advisers, evangelizers, receivers of healing, and anointers of him. Jesus-Sophia focuses his attention on the most undervalued members of society: the poor, the sinners, the prostitutes, the tax collectors. His followers participate in a discipleship of equals, a discipleship that threatens the ruling class.39

Ultimately, Jesus-Sophia’s liberating life and message prove too challenging to the dominant male class.40 Humanity again rejects Sophia’s friendship,41 and like many in the long line of Sophia’s murdered prophets, Jesus is executed. Johnson describes Jesus’ death as an act of violence brought about by "threatened human men, as sin," and therefore against the will of a gracious God.42 "What comes clear in the event, however, is not Jesus’ necessary passive victimization divinely decreed as penalty for sin, but rather a dialectic of disaster and powerful human love through which the gracious God of Jesus enters into solidarity with those who are suffering and lost. The cross in all its dimensions, violence, suffering, love, is the parable that enacts Sophia-God’s participation in the suffering of the world."43 Indeed, according to Johnson, using wisdom categories to filter the story of the cross allows one to understand Jesus’ suffering and death as linked to the ways of Sophia forging justice and peace in an antagonistic world.44 Like Sophia, Jesus does not overcome domination and sin as a warrior god, but rather as a compassionate lover and as a friend in solidarity with suffering humanity.
However, the narrative does not end with Jesus’ death. Human and divine love triumphs as Sophia pours out life in a new, unimaginable manner: Christ rises in a new life with God. “What is affirmed as faith, for evidence continues to contradict this, is that overwhelming evil does not have the last word. The crucified one is not, in the end, abandoned.” Sophia keeps her promise of transformed life for all humanity (Prov. 8:35) in her risen child. Her Spirit, which has sealed Jesus in risen life, pours itself out on his circle of disciples, men and women, and they are “missioned to make the inclusive goodness and saving power of Sophia-God experientially available to the ends of the earth.”

The on-going story of Jesus-Sophia continues in this spirit-filled community. From the beginning, Johnson writes, the community of Jesus’ followers is marked by the confession that Jesus-Sophia is the Christ. Intrinsic to this confession is the belief that the entire community shares in the living, dying and rising of Christ and is, too, christomorphic in character. The contemporary Christian feminist community proclaims for itself the same christomorphic character, finding particular import in the gender fluidity in the Jesus-Sophia metaphor. In order to explore the meaning Christian feminism finds in folding the Jesus-Sophia metaphor, I turn in the next chapter to the final two questions of my method: Within the aims and assumptions of a Christian feminist interpretive community, what does the Jesus-Sophia metaphor reveal about Jesus as Christ? What does the metaphor reveal about women in relation to the divine? By doing so, I seek to test out my hypothesis that the Jesus-Sophia metaphor might offer the Christian tradition a basis for a non-androcentric christology.

1See Sidney Callahan’s article “Mary and the Challenges of the Feminist Movement” in America (December 18, 1993): 9-10.

2Naomi Wolf articulates the latter two in her book Fire With Fire, (NY: Random House, 1993). I should note that “victim feminism” is a name Wolf has given to certain types of contemporary feminism, not a name that these feminists have chosen for themselves. However, it is a term that has acquired broader use, and one that I
believe aptly applies to those feminists who claim a victim status for women and do not allow women the opportunities to better their own situations. For a fuller description of the various forms of feminism, see Josephine Donovan, Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism (NY: Continuum, 1993).


6 Ibid., 6.


8 My use of the term deconstructing is similar to French feminism’s use of the word: “Women and their realities have been denied and destroyed by [the patriarchal symbolic] order. Because they exist ‘outside the Symbolic’ on the margins of discourse, the remain in an other, different space. From this zone, they remain as subversives, who must ‘deconstruct’ the symbolic order of the phallus. At the same time they must affirm the values and vision of their own other realm of experience.” See Donovan, Feminist Theory, p. 114.

9 Christian feminism also points out that Greco-Roman society greatly influenced the church as it developed. Early Christian leaders shaped christology to reflect the patriarchal household/imperial empire model of that society. “[Jesus] was seen as the Pantocrator, the absolute king of glory whose heavenly reign sets up and legitimizes the earthly rule of the head of the family, empire and church.” See Elizabeth Johnson, “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” 118. And thus, the subversive, liberating message of Jesus who came to offer salvation to all, including the outcast, the poor and the sinners, was corrupted by the ruling class.


13 Johnson, “The Maleness of Christ,” 108-09. Johnson suggests that the connection between God and maleness is so strong in the literal imagination that even the doctrine of Chalcedon is overruled: some of the human nature of Jesus, his maleness, seems to spill over into his divinity. See She Who Is (NY: Crossroad, 1992), 152.

14 Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Inter Insigniores: Declaration on the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood (Washington, DC: USCC, 1977). Interestingly, Pope John Paul II’s apostolic letter Ordinatio Sacrandortalis (22 May 1994) did not make the claim that women cannot act in persona Christi, as did Inter Insigniores; rather, the pope remained silent on the issue. However, he maintained that while the ban on women’s ordination did not indicate a lessening of women’s dignity, it was ‘in accordance with God’s plan for his church.’


17 Johnson, She Who Is, 153.


19 Ibid., 281, 273.

20 Ibid., 281.

21 Ibid., 278

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 279

25 This view is upheld in Ordinatio Sacradotalis.


27 It is worth noting that Christian feminism’s re-telling of the Christian narrative, and indeed, each step of its 3 part agenda is analogous to a postmodern critique of western institutions and narratives. Postmodernists favor “shifting the epistemological grounds” for such narratives in order to permit “local, ad hoc, and historically contextual truths and practices to emerge and be heard. Such truths --- repressed and/or marginalized by metanarratives --- provide new, if fragmentary, bases for legitimation.” However, Christian feminism falls away from postmodernism insofar as the latter is premised on an extreme nominalism: “only individual particulars have legitimacy. Any theory or generic statement is suspect and rejected, because it elides particular differences.” See Donovan, Feminist Theory, 201-2. Christian feminism assumes that “a feminist biblical interpretation is thus first of all a political task. It remains mandatory because the Bible and its authority has been and is again today used as a weapon against women struggling for liberation.” (See Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, “The Will to Choose or to Reject: Continuing Our Critical Work,” in Feminist Interpretation of the Bible, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985) 129.) Because postmodernism negates the possibility of political identity and action, it proves an unsatisfactory theory for Christian feminism.


29 Johnson, “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” 116

30 For examples from the Asian, African-American, and Latin-American perspectives, see “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” 117.

31 While feminists take seriously their roles as contributing to the sensus fidelium in the development and preservation of the authentic tradition in the church, they point out that their voices are systematically ignored when in conflict with the official magisterium. They note that Dei Verbum rejected the concept of a teaching church and a learning church, and that it moved beyond Pius XII’s assertion that the word of God is entrusted solely to the magisterium, yet they point out that “no structures were established to promote and protect the kind of dialogue necessary for discerning what are authentic developments of the tradition in our day if the work of God is truly entrusted to the entire church.” See Hilkert, “Experience and Tradition,” 75.

32 Johnson, “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” 118

34 Vatican II allotted theological and existential priority to the church as community, yet noted that both models are necessary for the church’s continuing existence. The church as the community of believers, Johnson notes, includes all members and need not be androcentric in focus. See “Feminism and Sharing the Faith,” 10.


36 Johnson, “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” 123.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Feminist theology, like liberation and political theologies, rejects the interpretation of Jesus’ death as a repayment for humanity’s sins. Johnson, She Who Is, 158; “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” 124-5.

41 In the apocryphal book of Enoch (41:1-2), Sophia goes forth to live among human beings, but is rejected and returns to heaven.

42 Johnson, She Who Is, 158-9; cf. “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” 124.

43 Ibid., 158-9.

44 Ibid., 159.

45 Ibid.

46 Johnson, “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” 124.

47 Johnson, She Who Is, 161.
CHAPTER FOUR
TESTING THE HYPOTHESIS:
DOES THE JESUS-SOPHIA METAPHOR PROVIDE A BASIS FOR A
NON-ANDROCENTRIC CHRISTOLOGY?

In folding the Jesus-Sophia metaphor, the Christian feminist interpretive community is
telling the ancient story of the incarnation. People of various times and cultures have told this
story in many ways and have found different meanings within it. Yet Christian feminism retells
the story with the unique purpose of avoiding the androcentric character of most other
christological expressions. In this chapter, I return to my hypothesis --- that the Jesus-Sophia
metaphor, first employed by Matthew in a patriarchal setting, may reveal the basis for a non-
androcentric christology when interpreted within a contemporary Christian feminist
interpretive community --- and test its validity.

In order to do so, I will summarize the groundwork laid thus far for assessing the hypothesis. I will revisit briefly the premises, as outlined in chapter one, on which I base the hypothesis. I will also recall Matthew's folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor and the meaning it produced within his interpretive community as described in chapter two. I will then draw from chapter three a summary of the Christian feminist interpretive community's criteria for a non-androcentric christology. These criteria will aid as I judge the suitability of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor to provide a basis for a non-androcentric christology.

I then move to the final questions in my methodology: What does the Jesus-Sophia
metaphor, interpreted within the Christian feminist interpretive community, reveal about Jesus
as Christ and about women in relation to the divine? Herein lies the acid test for my
hypothesis, for it is the meaning that the Jesus-Sophia metaphor reveals about the incarnation and about the nature of femaleness which will indicate if the metaphor offers the Christian tradition a starting point for a truly inclusive christology.

Revisiting The Premises: Interpretive Communities, Metaphors And Matthew’s Folding Of The Jesus-Sophia Metaphor

A key premise in my test of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor is that interpretation is a process which occurs between the text and the reader. Neither the reader nor the text contains the source of meaning; rather, the two must interact with each other in order to create meaning. The reader’s interpretive community provides the context for the interaction; the historically and politically conditioned assumptions of the interpretive community focuses the reader’s interaction with a text in order to produce meaning in accord with the community’s aims.

The Matthean community’s folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor demonstrates how the aims and assumptions of an interpretive community shape its members’ interaction with a text. The members of the Matthean community disagreed with their parent community over proper interpretation of the Torah. In order to legitimate themselves as halachic interpreters over and above the Pharisees and Scribes, they sought to legitimate their crucified religious leader, Jesus of Nazareth by folding the Jesus-Sophia metaphor. The community’s identification of Jesus with Sophia, the personification of divine Wisdom who came to abide in the law, encouraged the community’s members to find meaning that attributes christic roles to Jesus of Nazareth and legitimates him as the definitive interpretation of the Torah. As followers of Jesus, they thereby identified themselves as privileged interpreters of the law.

Though among the first to fold the Jesus-Sophia metaphor, Matthew’s community did not reveal the absolute meaning of the metaphor. The Jesus-Sophia metaphor, like any
metaphor, is not a static source of meaning. The tensive and trans-temporal characteristics of a metaphor encourage varied cultures and people of succeeding times to use metaphors to accommodate new experiences, relationships and insights. New interpretations allow the metaphor to communicate its original intent, yet build upon that meaning and reveal new knowledge that coheres with or negates that meaning. The tensive character of metaphors makes it most probable that folding the Jesus-Sophia metaphor within another interpretive community might reveal knowledge which Matthew’s community did not find, and which further enriches human understanding of the mystery of the incarnation. Though Matthew’s folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor apparently takes no note of Sophia’s femaleness when identifying Jesus with her, and reveals nothing about women in relation to the divine, his identification of the male Jesus with the female Sophia may yet yield new meaning about links between the incarnation and the female sex. It is the hope of the Christian feminist interpretive community that such a link might offer the basis for a non-androcentric christology.

**Christian Feminism’s Criteria For A Non-Androcentric Christology**

Chapter three outlines the general assumptions of the Christian feminist interpretive community which propels the community to develop a non-androcentric christology; from these assumptions, I make three summary observations. One, Christian feminism alleges that the Christian tradition’s excessive focus on the maleness of Jesus posits an ontological maleness on to God, thus accruing honor, normativity and superiority to men in theology, language and praxis. Two, Christian feminism contends that the Christian tradition has perpetually disregarded women’s experience as a valid hermeneutic source for approaching the incarnation. Three, Christian feminism insists that the Christian tradition, in theology and praxis, has continually ignored the christomorphic nature of women.
From these summary observations, I can outline the Christian feminist interpretive community’s criteria for a christology which would avoid androcentrism. Such a christology would decenter maleness as a constitutive element in interpreting the christic nature of Jesus of Nazareth, and of those who are capable of imaging and acting in christic roles. A non-androcentric christology would explicitly name the christomorphic nature of women by using women’s experience as a valid hermeneutic source for interpreting the mystery of the incarnation and by employing female symbols and metaphors to express God and God’s relationship to humanity in the incarnation. Hence, a non-androcentric christology would remove maleness from the privileged position it occupies in both ontological and functional christologies and would proclaim women as christomorphic, able to act in persona Christi, and fashioned in the image and likeness of God who is both creator and redeemer. To test if the Christian feminist interpretive community’s folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor meets these criteria, I now turn to the final questions of my method to determine what the metaphor reveals about Jesus as Christ and about women in relation to the divine.

What Does The Jesus-Sophia Metaphor Reveal About Jesus As Christ?

Correcting Ontological Christology. The Jesus-Sophia metaphor locates Jesus’ origin in and derives his identity from divine Wisdom. Sophia’s characteristics and nature are attributable to Jesus: pre-existence, agency in creation, one who reveals the knowledge of God, and indeed divinity itself.¹

Christian feminism’s folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor further acknowledges that an identification of the male Jesus with the female Sophia, read ontologically, points to gender fluidity within the mystery of the incarnation. This fluidity breaks the “necessary ontological connection” between the male Jesus and the male “Father God,” for the metaphor explicitly
recognizes that God who is able to be imaged fully as female incarnated herself in a male human being. Sophia’s incarnation in human existence demands a “theologically astute understanding of incarnation which does not (however implicitly) envision it as the act whereby an invisible and all-powerful male person becomes visible in the world.”

In this way, the Christian feminist interpretative community’s folding of the metaphor “widens the theological playing field for discourse about Christ” by challenging the near exclusive and literal use of male metaphors in the liturgical and doctrinal language of the Christian tradition. Jesus-Sophia does not replace Father-Son, Logos and other metaphors which reflect an androcentric emphasis; these metaphors continue to be necessary because no one metaphor can fully reveal the always ineffable God. Rather, the Jesus-Sophia augments and complements these metaphors by explicitly bringing femaleness into the tradition’s speech about God and the incarnation. In this way, the metaphor sparks human imagination to conceive of God imaged male and female. Only through a mixture of metaphors can language enrich human understanding and expression of a God who is ultimately inexpressible.

Correcting Functional Christology. Functional christology, which focuses on the salvific work of Jesus, rests upon and in turn implies an ontological christology which understands Jesus as Sophia incarnate. The lens of the wisdom tradition permits the power of the Sophia metaphor to focus the significance of Jesus’ actions: his deeds are the deeds of Sophia (Mt. 11:9). He echoes Sophia’s invitation upon all to take up his yoke; he, like she, is the definitive interpretation of the law. Like Sophia, Jesus invites all to his banquet, and he promises life to those who follow his ways. Via his miracles, healings, parables, dinners and teachings, he invokes Sophia’s goodness drawing near and her commitment to right order and justice. As a male human being, he mirrors the actions of God imaged powerfully and fully as a female. It is not a similarity in gender but rather a similarity between his deeds and hers that makes it
unambiguous to Jesus' followers that he is divine Wisdom incarnate, present to and calling forth all of humanity.

Furthermore, the Christian feminist interpretive community's folding "rescues" women's salvation by dislodging maleness as an obligatory pre-condition for christomorphic nature. Feminist analysis argues that any christology which views maleness as necessary in the incarnation implies that God incarnated in male flesh does not include women's humanity, and thereby effectively places women outside the loop of salvation (see Ch.2). The gender fluidity of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor, however, decenters maleness as a constitutive element of the incarnation, rightly subordinating the biological sex of Jesus to his humanity. The Jesus-Sophia metaphor offers an inclusive interpretation of Jesus' humanity: God who has expressed God's self in human history in a human reality, in solidarity with all of humanity, female and male. What is assumed is human nature, male and female; what is redeemed is humanity in all its diversity.

What Does The Jesus-Sophia Metaphor Reveal About Women In Relation To The Divine?

In folding the Jesus-Sophia metaphor, the Christian feminist interpretive community looks for meaning which affirms women's christomorphic nature by explicitly recognizing femaleness at the center of the mystery of the incarnation. The community also seeks, in its folding, to endorse women's experience as a source for hermeneutics, thus enlarging the range of activity and experience one can rightly consider as imaging and representing Christ. If Christian feminism's folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor can make these two contributions towards a non-androcentric christology, the metaphor might ultimately negate the dualistic anthropology found in Mulieris Dignitatem. The Jesus-Sophia metaphor may suggest instead a new understanding of what it means to be male and female, thus challenging the Christian tradition to new forms of thought and praxis in regard to women's nature and vocation.
Affirming Women's Christomorphic Nature. Just as the gender fluidity revealed in the Christian feminist interpretive community's folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor discloses God imaged fully as female, so too does this fluidity disclose the christomorphic nature of women.

Christian feminism's folding of the female Sophia metaphor with the historical male Jesus provides women with direct and explicit claim to their christomorphic nature by expressly acknowledging femaleness at the heart of the incarnation. The blend of female and male imagery in the Jesus-Sophia metaphor challenges Mulieris Dignitatem's prescription that the masculinity of the bridegroom symbol restricts women from acting in persona Christi. To bear a natural resemblance to Christ is to imitate the deeds of Jesus-Sophia; when women participate fully in the life of Christ, when they follow Jesus-Sophia as a disciple, and when they serve and love empowered by the Spirit, they are acting in persona Christi. Maleness or femaleness are both understood explicitly to be in the image of the redeemer God as Jesus-Sophia embodies in humanity God's compassionate love, inclusive justice and renewing power for all. In this way, Sophia's incarnation in Jesus continues on in his community of followers, body of Christ, "christa and christus alike." As this community mirrors the deeds of Jesus-Sophia, it reflects the incarnate and redeemer God who is creator of male and female, savior of both, and imaged by both together.

Endorsing Women's Experience As A Hermeneutic Source. By affirming the christomorphic nature of women, the Jesus-Sophia metaphor not only recognizes that women can and do act in persona Christi, but also that their experience can be a valid hermeneutic source for approaching the incarnation. Drawing a direct connection between the incarnation and the wisdom tradition broadens access to the Christian tradition, which has, in the institutional church and its teaching, long marginalized the female sex. The wisdom tradition concerns
itself not primarily in the momentous events of history, but rather in the ordinary occurrences of everyday life. Sophia herself is an example: under no one group’s control, she is derived from lived experience and available to all who seek her. By relying on the wisdom tradition, and Sophia especially, as hermeneutic keys to unlock the mystery of the incarnation, women can contemplate their own life experiences and everyday struggles as christic reflections of the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. As the characteristics of the wisdom tradition are brought to bear on christology in Christian feminism’s folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor, women’s lives, experiences, friendships and love can all be recognized as christic in character. In this way, the Christian feminist interpretive community’s folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor highlights new manners of approaching the mystery of the incarnation which are less associated with patriarchal control and more calibrated with women’s lived experiences.

In addition, the evocative nature of a metaphor acts upon and broadens human imagination as the Jesus-Sophia metaphor suggests a range of activities which one can rightly consider christic. The deeds of Sophia, adopted by Jesus as his own, include many activities familiar to the lives of women: making friends, holding celebrations, teaching and loving, and seeking to gather the lost and needy in maternal love, and acting with passion and compassion. In this way, the Jesus-Sophia metaphor endorses women’s actions as vehicles for comprehending the actions of the incarnate God dwelling among and in solidarity with humanity.

Offering A New Anthropological Model. In naming the christomorphic nature of women, and endorsing their experience as a source for interpreting the incarnation, the Jesus-Sophia metaphor effectively challenges ecclesial notions of what it means to be female. The dualistic anthropology found in Mulieris Dignitatem is no longer applicable as the Christian feminist
interpretive community's folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor suggests new understandings of the significance of humanity experienced in maleness and femaleness.

Firstly, the Jesus-Sophia metaphor widens the anthropological playing field for women. Sophia's femaleness challenges *Mulieris Dignitatem*'s prescription of motherhood and virginity as the two paths towards women's vocation and human fulfillment. Sophia, a female image for God, performs a variety of roles and functions. Though she may behave like a mother hen, gathering all under her wings, motherhood is not the only manner in which she acts. She assists in creation, and she has continued responsibility for the coherence of the cosmos. She promises prosperity to those who find her. She speaks publicly and legitimates sovereign's rule. She metes out justice to the wicked and punishes those who betray her. She abides in the Torah, the single most important document in the Jewish tradition. In all these roles, Sophia provides a model of a powerful, active, public, creative female. For women, she augments the traditional Marian model of mother and virgin as she reflects the diversity of women’s experience.

Secondly, as the Jesus-Sophia metaphor broadens *Mulieris Dignitatem*'s understanding of the variety of ways that women might find human fulfillment, and as it decenters maleness as a constitutive element of the incarnation, the metaphor also raises the question of the role biological sex plays in constituting each human being. The dualistic anthropology of *Mulieris Dignitatem* elevates sex above all other characteristics so that it serves as a determinative factor of human personality and vocation; indeed, *Mulieris Dignitatem* seems to suggest that humans exist one of two natures, either male or female. But the gender fluidity of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor suggests that maleness or femaleness may not be so determinate after all.

Johnson proposes that the Jesus-Sophia metaphor reveals that all people possess one human nature "celebrated in an interdependence of multiple differences." These differences
recognize factors such as race, gender, social location and other like characteristics as constitutive to the formation of each human being. The endless combinations of these factors permit each human being their uniqueness. Alter just one of these constitutive factors, and the result is an entirely new person. Likewise, elevate sex above all other factors, a fault Johnson and other feminists charge against androcentrism and patriarchal systems, and one misses the variety of ways to be human.

Johnson describes this approach as a “multi-polar anthropology.” Unlike androcentric constructions, a multi-polar anthropology does not understand maleness to be normative. Nor does it view sex as the primary constitutive element of personhood, as does dualistic anthropology. By allowing for an endless combination of anthropological constants, a multi-polar anthropology accords respect to differences between people and permits humans to relate via their differences. It does not limit the variety of human experience along gender lines.

Applied to the incarnation, Johnson’s multi-polar anthropology does not ignore Jesus’ maleness; rather, her model understands his sex as one of his many anthropological constants, combining with his race, religion, and social and historical locations to make up his unique human person. Her multi-polar anthropology supports and affirms the meaning Christian feminism finds in the Jesus-Sophia metaphor: maleness is neither the constitutive factor of Jesus’ humanity, nor is it necessary to image Christ. A multi-polar anthropology emphasizes again that it is Jesus’ humanity, not his maleness, that is central to his salvific work. Sophia incarnated in human history in the male Jesus partakes in the one human nature common to each person. The humanity of Jesus is but a distinct crystallization of our shared humanity which can be multiplied in so many ways.
Does The Hypothesis Prove True?

The Christian feminist interpretive community's folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor supplies the Christian tradition with a much needed linguistic tool for naming the christomorphic nature of women and for describing the image of the redeemer God, the incarnate Jesus, in female imagery and within female experience. The Christian tradition's excessive focus on maleness is corrected; maleness is decentered as a hermeneutic tool for approaching the incarnation and as a necessary element of christic roles and function. The hypothesis proves true as folding the Jesus-Sophia metaphor within the Christian feminist interpretive community offers Christian women, many of whom are long starved for language which explicitly recognizes that the female sex too is capable of being *in imago Christi* and acting *in persona Christi*, with affirmation of what they have long known about themselves as redeemed by Christ, as loved by Christ, as members of Christ's body, as capable of bearing Christ's suffering and revealing Christ to others.

Johnson's work is valuable in that it finds within the Christian tradition the source for a non-androcentric christology, thus affirming what many women knew by faith to be essential to the Christian message. However, I question her work in regard to her gender analysis of the crucifixion and the Christian feminist interpretive community's assumptions about women's experience. I also believe her work poses exciting challenges to the Christian community in regard to the weaving together of Christian feminism and the wider Christian tradition, and leaves the Christian feminist interpretive community with a summons to further mine the richness of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor.

Gender Analysis Of The Crucifixion

Johnson's political analysis of the crucifixion coheres with other liberation theologies which view Jesus' death as a result of his subversive message which threatened the ruling
class. I believe, with some reservations, that this is a valid reading of the crucifixion. However, Johnson emphasizes gender in her analysis, seeking to find meaning in the maleness of Jesus and the "maleness" of the ruling class that killed him. The goal of her gender analysis is to demonstrate that Jesus' death at the hands of the male ruling class and his subsequent resurrection announces the end of patriarchy as divinely ordained. To do this, she associates men only with the ruling class, and she explicitly names men as Jesus' crucifiers.

Her position that men have dominated, abused, oppressed and even killed others, especially women, via patriarchal structures is quite correct. However, to name men as solely responsible for the crucifixion offers a simplistic and misandrist reading of the politics of first century Judea. Johnson's analysis does not account for the women who were likely in the crowd asking for his crucifixion, or for the women who surely belonged to the dominant class, albeit in private, less influential roles: Herodias did order the death of John the Baptist. Johnson focuses only on women as outcasts, the marginalized faithful followers of Jesus. While this focus points up the truth that the incarnation, death, and resurrection announce that women's oppression is forevermore intolerable, it fails to note that the lines between gender and power cannot be so clearly drawn. Such a failure is seriously problematic for a theology seeking to recognize biological sex as but one of the many characteristics which contributes to the uniqueness of each human person. Likewise, her analysis fails to account for the men who were also among Jesus followers, and who were loved by him (a fact she readily recognizes). Rather than espousing a multi-polar anthropology, Johnson's gender analysis seems to cast men and women into dualistic roles where women occupy the traditional position of morally superior beings.

Johnson does better when she finds meaning in the maleness of Jesus as the means to proclaim the end of patriarchy. The locus of the revelation, the center of the liberating
message, then rests on Sophia's self-revelation and not on the surrounding circumstances. To borrow Ruether's phrase, the crucified Jesus is the antithesis of the patriarchal ideal of the powerful male, symbolizing the "kenosis of patriarchy." Johnson herself points out that for men, the Jesus-Sophia metaphor reveals that something more than stereotypical models of male gender construction is possible. The man Jesus, Sophia incarnate, did not define his self-identity and relationships in accord with patriarchal assumptions. Rather, in his inclusive ministry and actions, in his liberating message, in his public and private emotional struggles, in his scandalous service to the outcast and undervalued members of society, and in his selfless love, Jesus-Sophia offers men a new model of acting, and encourages them to seek out the diversity of human experience. Again, Johnson asserts that Jesus-Sophia, incarnated as a male and thus endowed with certain social privileges, chose to preach and act out a style of authority based on service and compassion reveals most strongly Sophia's love for humanity and the model of human love towards each other and our God. If feminist theology can find any significance in maleness in the story of the cross, it can find it in the one who was crucified. Jesus-Sophia's ultimate sacrifice on the cross symbolizes the self-emptying of male rule and domination; Sophia pours out new life in the resurrection and announces a new human existence based on gracious compassion and unconditional and unyielding love.

Women On The Margins Of Public Discourse

Johnson notes well that the variety of experiences among women makes it impossible to define authoritatively what is "women's experience." However, she points out that the term "women's experience" is not an abuse of language, insofar as it indicates that all women share a common social location on the margins of public discourse. As she describes it, the aim of Christian feminism is to bring women's speech and experience to the fore.
Feminist analysis has accurately and helpfully revealed the overriding androcentric assumptions and focuses operative in many fields of study and in most organizational structures. However, the successes and effects of feminism have also begun to challenge and alter “male reality” in these same disciplines and structures. The outpouring of publications, conferences, and courses offered in feminist theology and in the growing number of theological degrees conferred upon women evidences the major contribution feminism has made and continues to make to theology. As Christian feminists, such as Johnson, continue to place the feminist agenda at the center of all theological endeavors, they claim for themselves central ground.

Feminism’s success will now begin to challenge its own assumptions. In the next generation of feminism, in theology and elsewhere, it is most likely that it will no longer be possible to make an a priori assumption about the place from which a person speaks based on the person’s biological sex. Women will not all speak from the margins of public discourse. Some women already speak from centers of the academy, and all other locations that contribute to the public discourse. More women will join them there.

The effects of these changes on Christian feminism are not yet clear. Many Christian churches, most notably the Roman Catholic church, continue to resist the movement of women into positions of institutional decision-making, pastoral leadership, or liturgical celebrants. Christian feminism may find itself in the increasingly contradictory position of being marginalized within the institutional church, yet at the front and center of theology and in the spiritual lives of many women and men. How will Christian feminism understand the center ground and public discourse then? Since not all women in all places will be speaking from the margins, what then can the Christian feminist interpretive community say about women’s experience that might accurately include all women? Will a changed assumption
about women’s experience and social location alter the meaning the Christian feminist interpretive community finds in texts, symbols, and metaphors such as Jesus-Sophia? Such questions are beyond the scope of this project, yet are crucial to the future work of Christian feminism.

The Task Ahead For Christian Feminism

The personification of divine Wisdom in the Sophia metaphor is a rich source for theology, but also an often neglected source. When Suggs set out to examine the role of wisdom christology in Matthew’s gospel, he aimed to “rescue Matthew’s wisdom christology from the footnotes of scholarly research.”16 Development of this image of God as a female acting subject is scarce in church teaching and pastoral reflection. In short, Johnson’s work superbly opens up for the Christian tradition a new manner of speaking about and understanding God who came to dwell among us in the incarnation.

Like the Matthean interpretive community’s folding of the Jesus-Sophia metaphor, the Christian feminist interpretive community’s folding is only a beginning. The task ahead for feminist theology is to highlight the depth of imagery and symbolism within the Jesus-Sophia metaphor, all the while weaving that meaning into the language of the Christian tradition, particularly at an institutional level.

For just as Matthew’s community folded the Jesus-Sophia metaphor to make the political point that their halachic interpretation superseded that of the Pharisees and Scribes, the Christian feminist interpretive community also possesses a political aim in its folding. Christian feminism aims to correct what it perceives as the androcentric focus and dualistic anthropology operative in the christological language and teachings in the Christian tradition. The challenge for Christian feminism in offering the Jesus-Sophia metaphor as a basis for a non-androcentric christology is that the wider Christian tradition, particularly the institutional
church, may not perceive the need for such a christology. The institutional church itself is another interpretive community, with its own political aims and historically and culturally conditioned assumptions. While the institution shares in the Christian feminist interpretive community's belief that women are equally created in the image and likeness of God, it also rejects Christian feminism's critique of an androcentric bias within its own teaching. Often when two communities such as these differ in the interpretation of a metaphor, one will label the other's interpretation as aberrant, or find new meaning which contributes to its own understanding. Will the wider Christian tradition, especially at an institutional level, take up the Jesus-Sophia metaphor as a basis for a non-androcentric christology, or dismiss the Christian feminist interpretive community's folding as amiss? The question lies outside the scope of my project, but is key for the feminist community as it advances the Jesus-Sophia metaphor as the basis for a non-androcentric christology. Much will depend on how willing the members of the wider Christian tradition are to accept Christian feminism's aims and assumptions, and how ably Christian feminists, participating in both communities, contribute to their interweaving. Both the Christian feminist interpretive community and the institutional church might be guided by Anne Carr's reminder that the task of theology is not to affirm or negate specific metaphors and symbols, but to interpret them anew within a particular community. This interpretation takes place with the theologian fully aware that no one metaphor wholly depicts God, and that metaphors can only be interpreted anew in succeeding historical situations.

Thus, the Christian feminist interpretive community must continue to interpret the Jesus-Sophia metaphor anew, especially as its own aims and assumptions evolve. Encouraged by Johnson's work, Christian feminism must proceed to lift the Jesus-Sophia metaphor out of the footnotes of the Christian tradition in order to unleash the evocative power of the
metaphor upon human imagination. In this way, the Jesus-Sophia metaphor illuminates the incarnate God imaged fully as female. Human understanding of the ineffable God is enriched by this powerful female symbol as it explicitly affirms the christomorphic nature of women, and confirms the experience of women who have understood themselves as fashioned in the image and likeness of the redeemer God. Christianity’s extraordinary claim that God entered human history uniquely and concretely is upheld in a most non-androcentric manner, as the blend of gender imagery in the Jesus-Sophia metaphor points to God who is incarnate in humanity, male and female, imaged by both and redeemer of both together. The person Jesus is Sophia, revealing and known: “Wisdom is justified by her deeds.”

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1 Johnson, “Jesus, Wisdom of God,” 292: She states: “All of the confessional assertions of classic christological doctrine can be essentially expressed in categories of personified Wisdom; in fact, biblical wisdom texts are the richest and most suggestive for the mystery of the incarnation.”

2 Ibid., 284.


6 Johnson, “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” 129.


9 Ibid., 110-112; cf. She Who Is, 155-6.


11 Johnson, She Who Is, 163.

12 I agree with the liberation perspective which rejects Jesus’ death as a repayment for humanity’s sins. Liberation theologies are quite correct to point out that Jesus’ death and resurrection proclaims that unjust, dominating structures are sinful and must be overcome. However, such interpretation often places too much emphasis on the circumstances surrounding the crucifixion and often not enough on the incarnate God’s loving entrance into humanity and loving sacrifice on the cross.

13 Johnson, She Who Is, 158.
Sexism and God-Talk, 137.

Johnson, "Redeeming the Name of Christ", 125.


See Elizabeth Johnson, "Feminism and Sharing the Faith: A Catholic Dilemma" from *Warren Lecture Series in Catholic Studies, no. 29* (OK: The University of Tulsa, 20 February 1994), 5 and Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, reprinted in *Origins* 18117 (1988), 265: “both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree, both are created in God’s image.”

Carr, “Is a Christian Feminist Theology Possible?”, *Theological Studies* 43 (June 1982), 293.


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