THE WAY OF

wisdom

Essays in Honor of

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Sophia Christology:
The Way of Wisdom?

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In an age when medical technology is making it possible for people to choose the
gender of their baby at conception, it may seem reasonable to some that people
should also be entitled to choose the gender of their god. Within the last few
decades some Christians, who have the intention of presenting the gospel as re-
levant to the social issues of our times, have rediscovered the ancient conceptualiza-
tion of Jesus as the incarnation of God’s wisdom, appealing to, among other
things, Paul’s references to Christ as “the power of God and the wisdom of God”
(1 Cor 1:24 NIV). Because the Greek word for wisdom is the feminine noun
sophia, and because wisdom was personified as a woman in the OT book of
Proverbs, the identification of Jesus as the incarnation of the female, preexistent
Wisdom-Sophia has provided feminist theologians with an effective means of
“re-gendering” the gospel of Jesus Christ for modern society. As Roman Catholic
theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson expressed it,

The combination Jesus Christ/Sophia leads to a healthy blend of
female and male imagery that empowers everyone, and works beauti-
fully to symbolize the one God who is neither male nor female, but cre-
ator of both, delighter in both, savior of both, and imaged by both.¹

Although some feminist theologians have denounced the Christian faith as
hopelessly androcentric,² others wish to uphold the historic Trinitarian confe-
sion of Christianity and to reclaim within it neglected elements that validate the
co-equal status of women and men in Christ’s redemptive work.³ Sophia
Christology claims to have rediscovered in the NT itself an early understandings of
Jesus as the incarnate Wisdom-Sophia of God that was presented to show the
KAREN H. JOBES

feminine principle of God as an acceptable complement to the masculine metaphors of son and king. This earliest understanding of the identity of Jesus in feminine terms—so it is claimed—was later suppressed and eventually supplanted by the masculine language for Christ that has dominated Christianity for two thousand years.

The apologetic and evangelistic concerns of this agenda are expressed, for instance, by James M. Robinson when he writes,

Perhaps such a Wisdom Christology, precisely because of the non-exclusivity of its beginnings, would be useful in our society today, when to leave a male deity at the top of our value structuring seems often more like the deification of the omnipotent despot of the ancient Near East than an honoring of God, more a perpetuation of patriarchalism than a liberation of women and men. If we, like Jesus, can be inspired by the feminine aspect of God, we may be able to bring good news to our still all too patriarchal society.5

The re-gendering of Christ as Sophia has found appeal not only among theologians with feminist concerns, but also among the laity of the church, as evidenced by the Re-imagining Conference held in November 1993 in Minneapolis.6 This conference, which was later denounced by several participating denominations, was billed as an opportunity to re-imagine Christianity in terms that are more suitable to the spiritual needs of women. For example, the traditional Christian sacrament of the bread and wine of Holy Communion was replaced by a ritual that substituted milk and honey with a prayer offered to “Our maker Sophia.”7

Johnson observes that Jesus’ historical maleness has been used in ways hurtful to women to “reinforce an exclusively male image of God,” an image that has been further used to “legitimize men’s superiority over women in the belief that a particular honor, dignity, and normativity accrues to the male sex because it was chosen by the Son of God ‘himself’ in the incarnation.”8 Moreover, she argues that if traditional Christology were correct in its conceptualization of the necessary maleness of the Savior, the possibility that women can be saved would be jeopardized:

If maleness is essential for the christic role, then women are cut out of the loop of salvation, for female sexuality is not taken on by the Word made flesh. If maleness is constitutive for the incarnation and redemption, female humanity is not assumed and therefore not saved.9

Since the NT gospels clearly do not exclude women from the redemption Christ achieved on the basis of their gender, Johnson sought a theological basis
for woman’s redemption by finding a female aspect in Christ’s incarnation. For her and others, this theological basis is found in Sophia as God’s wisdom incarnate in Jesus.

The evangelical church must address both the soteriological and social concerns raised by feminist theology if it hopes to effectively engage the intellectual claims of our times with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Sophia Christology is offered as a rediscovery of a very early apostolic understanding of Jesus reflected in the NT and rooted in the Wisdom traditions of Judaism. But does it indeed provide a biblical basis for a feminine aspect to the incarnation? Does Wisdom-Sophia in the Jewish tradition provide the basis from which an identification of Jesus and Sophia could later be developed? And is a female aspect to the incarnation necessary as a theological basis for the redemption of women? These are some of the concerns that this article seeks to answer.

I. The Hellenistic Background of Sophia Christology

The revival of interest in Sophia in the twentieth century as a means of relating Christian faith to the values of our society parallels the apologetic use of Sophia by the Jews during the Hellenistic age (ca. 300 B.C.–A.D. 200), although the Jews of that day were not concerned with issues of gender. When God’s covenant people found themselves in exile scattered among the pagan nations, they faced a problem not unlike that faced by the global Christian church today: how to relate their faith to the surrounding pagan culture—a culture that was largely apathetic at best, or hostile at worst, to their basic convictions—and how to do so in a way that would give them sufficient intellectual and social standing to make their faith viable and attractive in the marketplace of ideas.

Wisdom-Sophia provided a point of contact for their apologetic purposes. Greek philosophers generally understood wisdom as knowledge needed for living toward life’s highest good. But the Jewish people themselves held claim to the reputedly wisest man who ever lived, King Solomon (1 Kings 3:12),10 whose writings were preserved in the books of Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes. Employing these writings, Jewish apologists elaborated on the teachings of Solomon to urge that true wisdom was to be found in the knowledge of Yahweh, the One, True, Living God who had created all.

From the resulting body of Wisdom literature, proponents of Sophia Christology have identified various texts as representing a development of the Jewish Wisdom tradition inherited by NT writers, who used it to describe the pre-existence of Jesus Christ. This trajectory of thought begins in the OT with Proverbs, is developed in the deuterocanonical books of Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon, reappears among early Christians in the reconstructed Q document,
KAREN H. JOBES

and culminates in the NT with the identification of Jesus as God's Wisdom-Sophia incarnate in the writings of Matthew, Paul, and John.

A. The Hebrew Proverbs

One of the claims of Sophia Christology is that the Jewish Wisdom tradition provides a more inclusive point of contact between Christianity and other religions because the book of Proverbs itself in scripturated universal principles of wisdom that were not unique to ancient Israel. It is true, of course, that the book of Proverbs does lack explicit concern with Israel's covenant relationship to Yahweh, including the Torah as Yahweh's law revealed at Sinai and Israel's election; nevertheless, it is also clear that the book presumes that particular socio-religious background by presenting its teachings as those of Yahweh's theocratic king, Solomon. Bruce Waltke, whom we are honoring with this work, defines wisdom in Proverbs as designating "a fixed, eternal, religio-social order, an order that God created, established and upheld. Its synonyms are 'law,' 'commandment,' 'fear of God.'" Even if Proverbs shares the social function, genre, literary conventions, language, and even some precepts with ancient Near Eastern Wisdom literature more broadly, its teaching nevertheless presumes the covenant relationship with Yahweh, the only source of genuine wisdom.

Wisdom-Sophia first appears as a female personification in Prov 1:20-33 in the instructions a father is giving to his son. The father exhorts his son to turn from the deceptive Strange Woman, or harlot, whose way leads to death, and to instead embrace Wisdom-Sophia, whose way leads to life. Lady Wisdom is introduced as a mediatrix of Yahweh's revelation with the highest authority. Throughout Proverbs, the literary device of female personification vividly represents the two ways set before Israel: to embrace Wisdom is to enter into and abide in an exclusive covenant relationship with Yahweh; to pursue the harlot is to turn away to others gods and forfeit righteousness and life (cf. Deut 30:19).

But why does Proverbs present Wisdom as a woman and not as a man? As Waltke points out, the answer lies in linguistics, not in the history of religions. The feminine grammatical gender of the Hebrew noun for wisdom—hokmêh (occasionally hokmôt)—facilitated the female gender of the literary personification, but grammatical gender must never be used to implicate sexual gender. However, female personification provided a vehicle for a subsequent understanding of Wisdom-Sophia as a female consort of Yahweh. For polytheistic groups wanting to embrace Israel's religion, this presented an opportunity for identifying Wisdom-Sophia as a goddess, but for monotheistic Judaism it presented an apologetic problem.

Proverbs 8:22–36 presents an exegetical crux for Sophia Christology, which takes the personified Wisdom-Sophia to be an active agent of creation who can later be identified as the preincarnate Lagos of John 1:1:

82
Sophia Christology: The Way of Wisdom?

The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works,
before his deeds of old;
I was appointed from eternity,
from the beginning, before the world began. . . .
Before the mountains were settled in place,
before the hills, I was given birth. . . .
Then I was the craftsman at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,
rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in mankind. . . .
For whoever finds me finds life
and receives favor from the LORD.
But whoever fails to find me harms himself;
all who hate me love death. (Prov 8:22–23, 25, 30–31, 35–36 NIV)

The primary support for the active role of Wisdom-Sophia in creation is taken from the phrase, “I was the craftsman at his side.” The Hebrew word translated in the NIV as “craftsman” occurs only twice in the OT, and it can be pointed to read either “craftsman” (taking it as the noun ʾamōn) or “favored child” (taking it as the qal passive participle, ʾāmun).16

Although most English translators today support the translation “craftsman,” those who produced the ancient Greek translation (the Septuagint, or LXX) during the Hellenistic era adopted neither pointing but instead seem to interpret rather than translate the Hebrew. They used a Greek participle harmozousa, which means “to be in harmony with,” “to fit together with,” possibly introducing Stoic influence.17 Exactly what the translators intended by this rendering is a matter of considerable debate. However, three other Jewish translators of antiquity—Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion—each took the Hebrew word to mean that Wisdom was God’s child (tithenoumena) who frolicked beside him as he created the universe.18 So understood, the now-grown woman (Wisdom-Sophia personified elsewhere in Proverbs) is not a craftsman in the act of creating but a witness to the moment of creation and to all of history since. In such an understanding, the teachings of Yahweh’s Wisdom-Sophia are to be accepted by all people, both Jew and Greek, as trustworthy and true because of “her” longevity and cosmic vantage point, not because she was an agent of creation.

B. The Greek Translation of Proverbs

The Septuagint text of Proverbs was probably translated early in the Hellenistic period and contributes to our understanding of how Wisdom-Sophia was understood by the Jews of the Greek-speaking Diaspora. Moreover, it is this Greek translation of Proverbs that provides the specific lexical basis from which Sophia
Karen H. Jobes

Christology has taken its name, for the translators of Proverbs rendered the feminine Hebrew noun hakmāh most often, though not always, with the Greek word sophia (wisdom), which also in Greek also happens to be a grammatically feminine noun. The common gender of the Hebrew and Greek nouns facilitates carrying the female personification of Wisdom into the Greek translation.

When the various Greek translations of the Hebrew Scriptures were produced, significant changes were sometimes introduced to prevent a misunderstanding of Israel’s theology when their Scriptures were read in the new polytheistic context of Hellenism. Feminist theologians who refer to Proverbs seldom recognize the differences between the Hebrew version and its Greek translation, which must be considered an important step in any development of the Jewish Wisdom tradition in the Hellenistic period. A given expression might be completely unambiguous in the monotheistic context in which the original text was produced, but in translation that same expression might possibly be misconstrued by a culture that did not share Israel’s religious assumptions. Thus a comparison of the Hebrew Proverbs with its Greek translation yields insight into how the Jewish translator of the Hellenistic period understood the role of Wisdom.

In a recent study of the Greek translation of Proverbs, Johann Cook finds that one of the translator’s primary interests was to warn the reader of the inherent dangers of foreign wisdom, such “wisdom” that would have tempted the Jews under the increasing pressure of Hellenization. While comfortably using Greek style and rhetoric, the translator nevertheless does not accommodate the message of Proverbs to Greek ideas about wisdom, on the contrary, the translator amplifies the warnings implicit in the Hebrew text against compromise and apostasy.

Because the Greek word for wisdom is feminine, as is the Hebrew, the Greek translation is able to preserve the literary personification of Wisdom as a woman. However, in the creation poem of Prov 8:22–36 Cook finds the most conspicuous difference between the Hebrew text and its Greek translation to be that the Greek makes God the explicit subject of creation and makes no reference at all to Wisdom-Sophia in this regard. In four verses (Prov 8:23–25, 31) the Greek translator has intentionally changed the verb to eliminate any possible ambiguity that would suggest Wisdom-Sophia as a hypostasis responsible for creation. Moreover, in 8:25 the Hebrew reads, “Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I [Wisdom-Sophia] was brought forth,” whereas the Greek explicitly changes the verb to the third person and active voice with God as the subject: “Before the mountains were settled, before the hills he begets me.” Any ambiguity about Wisdom-Sophia’s activity in creation is resolved by showing her as a passive witness, possibly to avoid reading the literary personification as a reference to the Greek hypostasis of Wisdom.

On the other hand, the Greek translation of v. 22 exalts the privileged place
Sophia Christology: The Way of Wisdom?

Wisdom-Sophia holds in relationship to Yahweh as his special creation for his redemptive work in the world ("The Lord created me as the beginning of his ways, for the sake of his works"). As Cook notes, the translator takes pains to protect God as the sole agent of creation but underlines the superiority of the Jewish Wisdom tradition with respect to other cultural systems that vied for the hearts of people.21

Therefore, rather than embracing a Greek concept of Sophia, with its constellation of Greek cultural connotations, the Jewish translator of the Greek version of Proverbs appears to be upholding the idea that true wisdom is to be found only in Yahweh's revelation to Israel. The teachings of Solomon represented in literary personification are to be trusted by all peoples because they are cosmic in scope and as old as creation itself.

C. Sirach

The book of Sirach, also known as Ecclesiasticus, is a second composition of Hellenistic Judaism important to the development of Sophia Christology. Originally written in Hebrew in Jerusalem ca. 180 B.C., it was translated into Greek in Alexandria some fifty years later. Apparently Sirach was an important religious book to Hellenistic Jews; today it is included in the collection of books known as the Apocrypha or deuterocanonical literature.

Sirach is clearly dependent on the book of Proverbs, and it endorses a wisdom that is rooted in the revelation of Yahweh to Israel. Like Proverbs, Sirach begins, "The fear of Yahweh [not Astarte, or Isis, or Plato!] is the source of wisdom" (Sir 1:14). Moreover, in a time when many different voices competed for the right to define wisdom, Sirach emphasizes that obedience to Yahweh is life's highest good and that the practice of the Torah (Law) is the way of wisdom:

Whoever holds to the law will obtain wisdom. (Sir 15:1 NRSV)

The whole of wisdom is the fear of Yahweh, and in all wisdom there is the fulfillment of the law. (Sir 19:20 NRSV)

The wise will not hate the law, but the one who is hypocritical about it is like a boat in a storm. (Sir 33:2 NRSV)

Chapters 1 and 24 of Sirach clearly depend on ch. 8 of Proverbs. The personification of Wisdom-Sophia in Sir 24:1–33 is so similar to Prov 8 in structure, theme, and even wording that it is most likely a deliberate development of the Wisdom motif found there.22 Like the Greek translator of Prov 8:22, the author of Sir 24 agrees that Wisdom-Sophia had no active role in creation but has been created by God to serve his purposes throughout the whole world. He further partic-
KAREN H. JOBES

ularizes Wisdom by identifying the dwelling place of Yahweh’s Wisdom-Sophia on earth as in Jerusalem—not in Athens or Alexandria:

Then the Creator of all things gave me a command,
and my Creator chose the place for my tent.
He said, “Make your dwelling in Jacob,
and in Israel receive your inheritance.”
Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me,
and for all the ages I shall not cease to be.
In the holy tent I ministered before him,
and so I was established in Zion. (Sir 24:8–10 NRSV)

Immediately following this literary personification of Wisdom-Sophia, Sirach explicitly identifies her with Israel’s covenant law: “All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law that Moses commanded us as an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob” (Sir 24:23 NRSV). Sirach then develops the implications of such an exclusive concept of wisdom for Israel’s new sociopolitical setting in a polytheistic and pluralistic culture. Contra Johnson, who finds a universalizing tendency in the Jewish Wisdom-Sophia that escapes the temple and priesthood, Sirach stresses a conservative stance, calling for a wisdom that is centered on Torah with its particular expression in the Jerusalem temple and priesthood, not in natural theology prompted by Greek ideals.

D. The Wisdom of Solomon

A quite different portrayal of Wisdom-Sophia is found in the apocryphal book Wisdom of Solomon (hereafter Wisdom), a pseudonymous work possibly composed as late as the Roman period under the emperor Caligula (A.D. 37–41). The remarkable similarities between Wisdom of Solomon and the works of Philo, the Jewish philosopher of first-century Alexandria, show that the author of Wisdom of Solomon (hereafter Ps-Solomon) was attempting to relate the teachings of Solomon to Greek philosophical concepts.

The nature of Solomon’s Wisdom-Sophia as transformed by Greek philosophical categories is clearly portrayed in ch. 7 of Wisdom of Solomon:

I [King Solomon] learned both what is secret and what is manifest,
for wisdom, the fashioner of all things, taught me....
For wisdom is more mobile than any motion;
because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.
For she is a breath of the power of God,
and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;
therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her.
For she is a reflection of eternal light,
a spotless mirror of the working of God,
Sophia Christology: The Way of Wisdom?

and an image of his goodness. 
Although she is but one, she can do all things, 
and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; 
in every generation she passes into holy souls 
and makes them friends of God, and prophets. (Wis 7:21–30 NRSV)

Over against the ancient Greek translations of Proverbs and Sirach, Ps-Solomon understands Wisdom-Sophia to be the “fashioner [technites] of all things” (v. 22), giving her a more independent role in creation. Furthermore, she is one who “pervades and penetrates all things” (v. 24), giving her a pantheistic quality comparable to the Stoic concept of logos. Ps-Solomon does not merely develop the same thought found in the Greek versions of Proverbs; rather, he presents Wisdom-Sophia in terms of a Stoicising neoplatonism that would have been unacceptable to the Jewish translator of the Proverbs into Greek.26

The more active role of Wisdom-Sophia in creation and her existence as a “pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty” (v. 25) move Wisdom of Solomon away from the orbit of biblical Judaism as Ps-Solomon attempts to harmonize Jewish Wisdom tradition with the concepts in Greek philosophy of that day. Rather than being identified as the Torah of Yahweh’s covenant (as in Sirach), Wisdom-Sophia in Ps-Solomon’s work is portrayed as a hypostasis, a supernatural entity that occupies an intermediary role between God and creation.27

This attempt to relate monotheistic Judaism to Greek culture took what was originally a literary personification of Wisdom-Sophia in the Scriptures of Israel and used it as an apologetic vehicle for reconciling Jewish Wisdom with Greek thought. As David Winston points out, Wisdom-Sophia “was the perfect bridge between the exclusive nationalist tradition of Israel and the universalist philosophical tradition which appealed so strongly to the Jewish youth of Roman Alexandria.”28 Moreover, by relating the particularism of Israel’s tradition to a universalist philosophy, Israel’s religion could also be related to other parochial religions whose particulars were understood to be an expression of those same universals. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza observes, “The apologetic and missionary needs of Hellenistic Judaism compel the author of the Wisdom of Solomon to incorporate concepts and materials of the Isis myth and cult into his theological reflection.”29

Wisdom-Sophia could function as the perfect bridge between the parochial claims of Judaism and the cosmopolitan culture of the Greco-Roman world because Ps-Solomon portrayed her as a divine emanation in terms comparable to those used to describe the divine principle of the logos of Stoicism. The logos was the Stoic conception of an all-penetrating divine essence that pervades and orders the universe and reaches into each person’s mind, making each human being a fragmentary part of the cosmic consciousness. Following Philo, Ps-Solomon understands Torah as a particular expression of the divine Wisdom-Sophia that is
in harmony with the cosmic order and communicates virtues to humanity. Therefore, Ps-Solomon allows that what the Greeks called logos, the Jews also knew previously as sophia.

Such an apologetic may have had evangelistic interests. Ben Witherington reads Ps-Solomon as attempting "to forge a new but risky marriage of mainly Jewish ideas with some Greek ones... in order to show his audience that whatever is really of worth that they might be seeking in Hellenistic religion or culture can in fact be found in Judaism." However, by portraying the revelation given to Israel in the language of universal religion, the exclusive claims of monotheistic Judaism were put at risk of compromise by allowing them to be read within the context of a pantheistic cosmology and anthropology that rejected the particular and exclusive claims of Yahweh.

Sophia Christology understands Proverbs, Sirach, and Wisdom of Solomon to form a trajectory in the development of Wisdom-Sophia that was later used by NT writers to explain the preexistence of Christ. However, Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon present two quite different ways of relating the Jewish faith to the Gracce-Roman culture, for they reflect the deep conflict that divided the Jews of that period over the appropriate response to Hellenization. Whereas Wisdom of Solomon represents "a marriage between Judaism and Hellenism," Sirach is a "conservative backlash against Hellenization."

The above observations lead to the following question: which, if either, Wisdom tradition is reflected in the NT?

II. Sophia Christology in the New Testament

A. Background

"The figure of divine wisdom in Prov 8 and in the Wisdom of Solomon is theologically identical to what the New Testament describes as the Logos, or 'Son' of God." Too often sweeping statements such as this one are accepted and allowed to stand as the foundation for today's Sophia Christology. They are questionable on at least two points. As just argued above, the concept personified by Wisdom-Sophia in Prov 8 in both its Hebrew and Greek versions and in Wisdom of Solomon are not the same. Furthermore, contrary to the above quote, the New Testament as a whole does not so identify Jesus as the logos. The identification is found only in John's Gospel and then only in the Prologue (see discussion on John below).

Studies of the fuller corpus of Hellenistic texts show that there was not one but perhaps as many as five different castings of Wisdom-Sophia in Judaism at the turn of the era. The Wisdom-Sophia so often identified with Jesus is a modern construct made up of a pastiche of images taken out of context. Most of the
Sophia Christology: The Way of Wisdom?

passages cited come from texts that present fundamentally different, and probably incompatible, portrayals of wisdom and its relationship to Yahweh, creation, and humanity. In effect, feminist theologians approach the NT after first having constructed a Sophia who is a divine hypostasis, co-eternal with God and an agent of creation. Johnson argues that Wisdom-Sophia at the time of Jesus was understood as "a personification of God's own self. . . . The wisdom literature . . . presents the divine presence in the woman's Gestalt of divine Sophia."³⁴ For Johnson, this means that

whoever espouses a wisdom christology is asserting that Jesus is the human being Sophia became; that Sophia in all her fullness was in him so that he fully represents and manifests all that God is in creative [sic] and graciously saving involvement in the world; therefore that his very deity is the deity of Sophia, since Sophia is God's gracious goodness reaching out to and active in the world.³⁵

Schüssler Fiorenza, herself an early influence in the development of Sophia Christology, recognized that Wisdom-Sophia was a ubiquitous religious motif but that there was no single basic wisdom myth present in the many different portrayals of Wisdom-Sophia in Jewish, Jewish-Hellenistic, and gnostic writings. Such a basic myth "is a systematic reconstruction and reflects more the concern of the reconstructing scholar than that of the texts."³⁶ Rather than finding a unified understanding of Wisdom-Sophia, she sees "reflective mythology" in the Hellenistic texts, which is

a form of theology appropriating mythical language, material, and patterns from different myths, and it uses these patterns, motifs, and configurations for its own theological concerns. Such a theology is not interested in reproducing the myth itself or the mythic materials as they stand, but rather in taking up and adapting the various mythical elements to its own theological goal and theoretical concerns.³⁷

Schüssler Fiorenza goes on to describe the theological concerns of Jewish interpreters in the Hellenistic period as

the post-exilic community's problem of theodicy and its missionary interests in the face of the renewed Isis cult, Philo's concern for the transcendence of God, or the gnostic's longing for salvation. The mythological elements found in these writings should not be reduced to one basic myth but should be seen in their different functions within distinct theological contexts.³⁸

Today feminist theologians are doing reflective theology when they appropriate the language and literary images of Hellenistic Wisdom-Sophia but take them up
and use them for their own theological goals and concerns, specifically that of finding a female face for God. Such gender concerns are a thoroughly modern use of Wisdom-Sophia.

In 1970 M. Jack Suggs published a work in which he argued that the source document Q understands Jesus in his prophetic role as a child of Wisdom-Sophia but that Matthew’s Gospel develops the association by actually identifying Jesus as Wisdom-Sophia incarnate. Subsequently, the title Sophia-Jesus began to be used by feminist theologians as a reference to the feminine aspect of the incarnate God. This usage marks a curious step in the development of Sophia Christology, since it involves the confusion of a literary device, the personification of Wisdom-Sophia, with a historical person, Jesus of Nazareth. Even if one were to agree with Johnson that Wisdom-Sophia was a personification of God himself, one cannot achieve gender parity by identifying Sophia with Jesus. Such parity might be achieved only if Jesus, like Wisdom-Sophia, was also a literary device, merely a male personification of God himself. Then one could perhaps argue that after two thousand years of using male personification, the church should now use the alternative female personification in the interests of gender equity. This possibility seems to be suggested in Johnson’s comment that “the figure of personified Wisdom offers an augmented field of female metaphors with which to interpret the saving significance and personal identity of Jesus the Christ, and the choice of metaphors matters.”

Human gender is a part of the created order and has no metaphysical correlate in the Godhead. God is neither male nor female. But this does not mean that we can choose language of either gender when speaking of him. For when God entered creation in the historical incarnation of Jesus, he disallowed the popular theory that all language about God is necessarily metaphorical, and that, therefore, a female metaphor is as appropriate as a male metaphor. God did not simply step into the narrative world of the gospel texts; he stepped into human history. Jesus is not a metaphor for God’s presence, but God in the flesh. Commenting on the frequently repeated claim that “Jesus was the ultimate ‘parable’ or ‘metaphor’ for God,” Oxford theologian Janet Martin Soskice writes,

Such a statement may be appropriate from a pulpit, but is out of place in a work whose object is to clarify the function of metaphor and parable within a text. In such a context, to say that Jesus was a metaphor or a parable is either to have an odd Christology or, more likely, poorly conceived definitions of metaphor and parable.

The female personification of Wisdom-Sophia in the canonical Wisdom books is a literary device used to characterize God’s revelatory acts in both creation and redemption; “she” has neither metaphysical reality nor historical
embodiment. Jesus Christ should not be renamed Sophia-Jesus because he is not merely an idea in the history of religions recently made passé by feminist ideology; according to the witness of the NT, he is the Lord of history to whom all social movements must someday give an account.

This is not to say, however, that first-century concepts of Wisdom-Sophia were unimportant to discussions about the person and work of Jesus Christ. The apostles had to understand and interpret the unique historical event of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in categories of religious thought and symbols that existed during and immediately after his lifetime. Jesus himself may have referred to certain aspects of his person or work by using well-known categories of the Jewish Wisdom tradition. In fact, given how ubiquitous the category of Wisdom was within the ancient world, it would be surprising indeed if it had not played a role in emerging christology. But not just any idea associated with Wisdom in the Hellenistic world can be equated with God's truth as revealed in Christ. Concepts of Wisdom found in books such as Wisdom of Solomon—books that would not have been considered canonical by the Jews at the time of Christ—cannot be quickly identified with biblical wisdom.

The apostle Paul related wisdom not to Christ's incarnation in general, but specifically to Christ's crucifixion (e.g., 1 Cor 1:21–24, 30; cf. Fee's article in this volume). Feminist theologians find Wisdom-Sophia had no role in atonement in the literature of Hellenistic Judaism, even though atonement was an assumed precondition for attaining wisdom in the writings of ancient Israel. The later Hellenistic development of Wisdom-Sophia in the Diaspora, far from temple and sacrifice, is congenial to those who today eschew the very concept of sin and atonement as an outdated idea that is not central to the message of Christianity. Theologian Nancy Cocks has been quoted as saying, "The idea that Jesus Christ substituted for humankind on the cross and atoned for what we do is seen by some feminists as abusive. It suggests that those in power are able to punish those with less power. Sophia is a more inclusive way of looking at God." Unfortunately, such a Sophia Christology offers a Christianity eviscerated of the heart of the gospel: the cross of Jesus Christ. For the sake of a well-intentioned but misguided inclusiveness it offers religion but no reconciliation to God.

B. The Prologue of John's Gospel

The first-century understanding of Jesus as Sophia is said to reach its fullest biblical form in the high christology of John's gospel, most especially in the Prologue (John 1:1–18). Johnson writes, "The figure of divine Sophia shines through the Logos terminology; at the point of fullest development they are theologically identical. . . . Jesus is Sophia incarnate; Jesus is Logos incarnate." The full equivalence of Sophia and Jesus is allegedly presented in the Prologue, where the logos
that has become incarnate in the human person of Jesus is understood as synonymous with sophia. This claim of synonymy is supported by the observation that everything said of the logos in the Prologue, with the exception of identity with God and the incarnation in flesh (v. 14), had already been said of Wisdom-Sophia in previous Jewish writings. Some scholars even identify the original form of the Prologue as a hymn to Sophia that was later applied to Christ.

However, if the development of Wisdom-Sophia in Hellenistic Jewish writings provided such a fine fit with the apostolic understanding of Jesus that culminates in the high christology of John’s gospel, it is certainly strange beyond comprehension that the Greek word sophia does not occur once in John’s Gospel or in the Johannine Epistles. This conspicuous absence raises the question whether the author (whom I will refer to as John, following tradition) is intentionally distancing his christology from associations with Wisdom-Sophia because the use of that category to interpret the preexistence of Jesus had already developed in directions the evangelist refused to go. If so, the full flowering of that trend may be seen in the second-century emergence of a distinctively gnostic form of Sophia Christology. This suggests that the Wisdom-Sophia trajectory found in Wisdom of Solomon was developed even further by those who sought to accommodate Jesus Christ to Greek philosophy.

What is undeniably clear is that John’s Prologue does not say that in the beginning was Sophia, and Sophia was with God and Sophia was God; nor does it say that Sophia became flesh and dwelt among us. If John meant to identify Jesus with the personification of Wisdom-Sophia as directly and fully as feminist theology claims, his choice of words could not have been more confusing. So thoroughly absent is Wisdom-Sophia in the Fourth Gospel that Wayne Meeks concludes, “In the Fourth Gospel there is no trace of the usual feminine Sophia; she has become entirely the masculine Logos, the Son of Man.”

The question of why the Prologue identifies Jesus Christ with the logos instead of with sophia is generally answered by claiming that sophia and logos were used so interchangeably that they were virtually synonymous and that John chose the masculine noun logos instead of its feminine synonym sophia because Jesus was male. In this way, some feminist interpreters attribute male chauvinism as the motive for the replacement of earlier feminine categories by the male metaphors later adopted at Nicea as the foundational statements of christology. Probably such an understanding unfairly projects male chauvinism onto the NT writers, because the same shift from the feminine sophia to the masculine logos is found in the works of Philo, who was not a Christian and whose writings predate the Gospels. Thus, even before the Christian era there apparently was a shift away from using Wisdom-Sophia to describe God’s relationship to the universe. This previous shift suggests that any chauvinism perceived by modern eyes was
not motivated by the peculiar issues of christology in the church nor by the male-
ness of Jesus. It may rather imply that ancient writers, such as Philo, recognized
Wisdom-Sophia to be merely a literary personification that derived its feminine
aspect simply from the grammatical gender of the word (as do all literary person-
ifications in languages where nouns have gender) and not from any metaphysically
feminine aspect of God.

Moreover, the two terms sophia and logos were certainly not synonyms in
the lexical stock of koine Greek. In Jewish Wisdom writings they were sometimes
used to refer to related concepts, but in no case is sophia (wisdom) explicitly
identified with the logos of God.²⁰

Even if one were to accept the premise that sophia and logos were complete-
ly synonymous concepts for the author of John’s Prologue, the argument that the
masculine noun was chosen because Jesus was male completely overlooks the fact
that Jesus is described with feminine nouns elsewhere in John’s Gospel. In the
predicate nominative construction of John 14:6, Jesus says, “I am the way and the
truth and the life,” where all three nouns are feminine (hodos, aletheia, and zoë).
This example is particularly interesting because Truth, like Sophia, was a hypostat-
ized female entity in classical Greek thought,²¹ yet John does not fear using that
feminine noun in explicit identification with Jesus. Therefore, John’s avoidance of
sophia in reference to Jesus suggests that it was something other than the fem-
inine gender that disqualified its use. Moreover, his use of feminine metaphors
elsewhere is evidence that male chauvinism was not his motivation. The predicate
nominative in John 14:6 further implies that connotations associated with truth
at the time the Fourth Gospel was written were more compatible with Jesus’ iden-
tity than were those associated with wisdom. In light of this, John’s complete
avoidance of the word sophia as an identifier for Jesus demands that we must
consider the possibility that he was unwilling to take the very step that modern
Sophia Christology has taken—namely, to claim that Wisdom-Sophia is the pre-
existent feminine divine being who became incarnate in Jesus.

Given the complete absence of the word wisdom in John’s gospel, the recent
commentary entitled John’s Wisdom by Witherington represents a bold applica-
tion of the wisdom motif to this gospel.²² According to Witherington, “recog-
izing that Jesus is being portrayed as God’s Wisdom, indeed Wisdom incarnate . . .
is the key to understanding” John’s presentation of Jesus (emphasis original).²³
His argument is not limited to the Prologue, where allusions to wisdom have long
been recognized, but is based on perceived textual parallels between motifs, sym-
bols, and patterns used throughout the gospel with what is said of Wisdom-
Sophia in various Jewish Wisdom texts. For instance, Witherington observes that
Jesus is characterized in the seven statements as bread, light, the door, life, and the
true vine. According to Witherington, “All of these things are said at one point or
another to come from or characterize personified Wisdom” (emphasis original).54 However, his conclusion that therefore Jesus is Wisdom-Sophia incarnate is questionable. His own supporting example from Wis 7:26 actually states that Wisdom-Sophia is but a reflection of eternal light, not the light itself as is claimed for Jesus.

Furthermore, surely the terms wisdom and life, as well as light and vine, were too ubiquitous in religious discourse to be used today as compelling evidence for John’s direct dependence on or specific reference to any one of them. It is questionable whether most of the parallels Witherington cites between what is said of Jesus and what had previously been said of Wisdom-Sophia constitute true literary parallels. Moreover, perceived literary parallels alone do not necessarily constitute a relationship of equivalence but rather possibly one of negation or supercession. For instance, the two statements “Sophia is the light of the world” and “Jesus is the light of the world” are syntactically parallel, but they need not be understood as equating Sophia and Jesus; rather, the second can be understood as a negation and denial of the first. Although Witherington’s work offers many excellent insights, he presses the identification of Jesus with Wisdom beyond what the nature of the parallels can bear.

But previous to Witherington’s work, other scholars had also observed parallels between what is said of the logos in the Prologue and what is said of Wisdom elsewhere. For example, Raymond Brown has summarized the numerous parallels between Wisdom-Sophia and Christ in John’s Prologue:55

- She existed with God from the beginning.
- She was an emanation of God’s glory, and Jesus also revealed God’s glory.
- She is a reflection of the eternal light of God.
- She descended from heaven to dwell with humanity.
- She ascended to heaven after being rejected by humanity.
- She teaches the things that are above.
- She speaks in first person, just as Jesus did, saying, “I am . . .”
- She leads people to life and immortality.
- She offers her blessings in the symbols of food and drink.
- She calls those who listen to her children.

Observe, however, that these alleged parallels between the logos and Wisdom-Sophia are offset by some significant contrasts. For instance, in Prov 8 Wisdom-Sophia was created by God and witnessed the creation of the universe; the logos was not only with God, but was God, and was the agent of all creation. Jesus was not a child of Wisdom-Sophia as some theologians would claim; rather, the preexistent Christ created the Wisdom-Sophia of Prov 8 and all that she rep-
Sophia Christology: The Way of Wisdom?

resents. In Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom-Sophia is "a reflection of eternal light" (Wis 7:26 NRSV); in the Prologue the logos is the light itself. Sophia Christology would argue that these differences develop and advance Wisdom-Sophia in Christian thought, but such significant contrasts could also make the point that the logos in John's Prologue is a completely different entity. Moreover, Sophia Christology makes much of parallels between John's Prologue and Hellenistic Jewish Wisdom writings, but it gives lesser consideration to the parallels with the creative and prophetic word of the Lord in the OT.

Given that the Prologue exhibits parallels with both Jewish Wisdom tradition and ancient Israel's prophetic tradition, it would be a mistake either to ignore one or to pit one over against the other. The author apparently intended a more diffused use of his background material. Even the parallels with the Wisdom corpus cited by Brown are gleaned from several different texts—Proverbs, Job, Baruch, Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon, and Enoch—each of which presents different views of Wisdom-Sophia when read in context (e.g., differences between Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon as discussed above). Therefore, it appears that John has neither any single text in mind as the background for the Prologue nor a unified concept of Wisdom-Sophia; rather, he is alluding to a kaleidoscope of ideas generally associated with Wisdom-Sophia. But the question is, were they indeed intended to identify Wisdom-Sophia with the preexistent Christ (as has been maintained), or were they rather intended to contrast his excellence over anything previously attributed to Wisdom-Sophia? The observation of parallels does not so readily admit the identification of Jesus with Sophia as assumed by Sophia Christology.

If feminist theologians are correct that Wisdom-Sophia actually was one of the earliest conceptualizations for the preexistent Christ in the first century, then the allusion made to the Wisdom motif in the Prologue could, in fact, be read as a correction of errant Sophia theology. In other words, we can construe much of the evidence presented for identifying Jesus with Sophia as exactly the opposite: the Prologue is, in fact, a polemic against viewing Jesus Christ through the lens of Jewish Wisdom as refracted by Greek philosophy—an apology for presenting him as the one who subsumes and supersedes all previous ideas of wisdom. The relevant dialectic would then be represented by the following set of questions and answers: Who is the active agent in creation? Not Wisdom-Sophia, but Jesus the incarnate God, Creator and Sustainer of all things. Who is the light of the world? Not Wisdom-Sophia, but Jesus Christ, the genuine Light. Who is the source of life? Not Wisdom-Sophia, but the resurrected Jesus Christ, who is truly and eternally alive.

If this reading of John's Prologue is correct, it represents not a development of the Wisdom motif but a marked discontinuity between Johannine christology
and the previous Wisdom-Sophia traditions. The personification of Wisdom-Sophia in Proverbs as a metaphor for God’s purposes in relation to creation, humanity, and salvation may have been properly understood in its original historical setting in monotheistic Israel, but the use of Wisdom-Sophia had developed nonbiblical connotations in polytheistic Greek culture, even among the Jews. Toward the end of the first century, in a culture greatly enamored of wisdom, John needed to exhort his readers to look to Christ as life’s highest good, not to the wisdom of the world. Only in Jesus Christ will everything that wisdom was thought to offer—and much more, even eternal life—be found.

C. Summary
In summary, I have argued that Sophia Christology is methodologically and exegetically flawed at several points:

1. The exegesis of Prov 8:30 that casts Wisdom-Sophia in an active role in creation is mistaken. Wisdom personifies the creative and redemptive reach of God into this world that was first expressed in his verbal word, Torah, and that finds its ultimate expression in the cross of Christ.

2. The Jewish Hellenistic texts do not present a unified concept of Wisdom-Sophia. The Sophia identified with Jesus is a modern construction made of images gathered from many disparate texts.

3. The apologetic use of Wisdom-Sophia by the Hellenistic Jews and possibly by the early Christians was a way to recommend the monotheistic faith to a polytheistic culture enamored of wisdom. Gender concerns were not in view, and the feminine personification of sophia was completely governed by the grammatical gender of first the Hebrew and then the Greek noun for wisdom. Modern feminists have latched onto the language of sophia and then have reconstructed it to address gender concerns when it had no such purpose in late-Jewish/early-Christian usage.

4. Sophia Christology confuses a literary personification with an actual person and justifies it by the erroneous assumption that all language for God is necessarily metaphorical.

5. The identification of Jesus with Sophia is primarily based on observing parallels between NT texts and Jewish Wisdom texts. This methodology is questionable because even genuine parallels do not necessarily imply a relationship of identity; they may instead imply a relationship of negation and supercession.

6. In the canonical texts, Wisdom-Sophia was not a universalizing impulse used to embrace peoples of many religions; such use today tends to compromise the exclusive claims of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

7. The accusation that the earliest Christian understanding of Jesus as Wisdom-Sophia was later masculinized by chauvinistic orthodoxy is a projection
Sophia Christology: The Way of Wisdom?

of modern prejudices back on patristic history. The "masculinization" of sophia is found in non-Christian writings that predate the NT.

8. Some of the NT passages quoted to support Sophia Christology, such as 1 Cor 1:22-24 and John 1:1, may be understood instead as resisting, not supporting, the identification of Jesus with Wisdom-Sophia.

III. Is There Another Way?

Regardless of how one evaluates the modern feminist movement, Sophia Christology raises a theological question that should be of interest and concern to Christians who still believe that vicarious atonement is central to the gospel of Jesus Christ: Can a male savior save women? As Jay Wesley Richards points out, this question finds its impulse not in feminism but in historic Christian orthodoxy. The Cappadocian father Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 389) argued that what is not fully assumed in the incarnation is not redeemed. This axiom arose in the context of his argument with Apollinaris over the question of whether Jesus had a human mind. Gregory argued that if the incarnate Christ did not have a fully human mind, he would not have an essential property of human nature, and therefore he would not be qualified to save human beings.

Feminist theologians, such as Johnson, apply this axiom to gender. If female gender is not assumed in the incarnation, can female human beings be saved by a male savior? Feminist theologians tend in at least two directions at this point. Some deny the need for atonement altogether. Others who seek to work within historic orthodox Christianity articulate Sophia Christology in terms that attempt to find in the incarnation a female aspect in which woman's salvation can be theologically grounded. Although there is neither time nor space to enter into this debate fully, I offer here a few preliminary observations on an issue raised by Sophia Christology that deserves to be developed further elsewhere.

Throughout, the NT teaches that women are indeed redeemed by Jesus Christ, but no verse is more to the point than Gal 3:28, where Paul writes with startling certainty, "There is neither . . . male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." And so the question I would pose is not, Can a male savior save women? but rather, How can a male savior save women? How can we affirm the historic formulation of the necessity of Christ's full humanity and ground the redemption of women in a savior who did not embody femaleness, if gender is an essential property of humanness? The incarnation of Christ as a male human being raises important questions about the relationship of human gender to essential human nature.

The question raised by feminist theologians presumes an understanding that gender is an essential property of humanness. This presumption creates a
KAREN H. JOBS

pressure to somehow find gender parity in the incarnation by identifying a female counterpart to Jesus’ maleness. Another possibility offers itself: the efficacy of the male savior for both male and female human beings necessarily implies that gender be a contingent, rather than essential, property of humanness. In other words, Christ’s vicarious atonement implies that men and women are united by our human nature more than we are divided by our gender differences.

Perhaps it is natural to think of one’s gender (as opposed, for instance, to the color of one’s eyes) as so constituting one’s being that it must be an essential property. Many of us may not be able to imagine ourselves embodied as the opposite gender, or as genderless beings, and may therefore conclude that gender is in fact an essential property of humanness. In addition, the fact that every human being does exist in this world as either male or female (even if one changes one’s sexual identity) can also be viewed as implying that gender is an essential property of humanness. But this confuses the properties essential to individuation with the properties essential to humanity as a kind. My femaleness may be an essential property of myself as an individual, but it is nevertheless a contingent property of my humanness.

I would therefore argue that “genderedness” is an essential property of humanness but that maleness and femaleness as such are contingent properties. If so, then both male and female embody the essential properties of humanness, making both equally normative as human beings. Therefore, the incarnate Christ had to have gender to be fully human, but his maleness was a contingent property of his humanness. Jesus therefore fully exemplifies essential humanity for both women and men, although incarnated as male.

The fact that there is not “male and female” in Christ means the female human being is united with Christ no differently than is the male human being; it also means our essential humanity is more constitutive of our metaphysical existence than is our gender. The contingent property of gender may nevertheless be a part of our eternal identities because the resurrected Christ apparently retained his gender, at least in appearances in this space-time continuum. If the efficacy of Christ’s atonement for women necessarily implies that gender is a contingent property, then the male must not be thought of as the paradigm human being from which the female is metaphysically derivative and secondary. The way one understands the relationship between human gender and essential human nature has far-reaching implications for both theology and practice.

To consider the gender of Jesus as a contingent property is not to say that his maleness is unimportant, nor is it to say that androgynous or female concepts and language may be applied to him. If gender is a contingent property of humanness, then it is true that a female savior could in principle have saved both men and women. But God stepped into human history as a man, and the significance of
Sophia Christology: The Way of Wisdom?

that choice must be respected. Nevertheless, when God became fully human with male gender, he equally dignified and honored the female gender because no man was involved in the conception of Jesus Christ at all. All of Jesus’ fully human nature came from a woman, his virgin mother, Mary. Thus, the virgin birth also necessarily implies that the female fully embodied the essential humanness communicated to the male person of Jesus Christ necessary for his salvific role.

Sophia Christology is a modern impulse that appropriates ancient language and uses it for contemporary purposes. Its search for a female aspect of God is misguided and unnecessary both as the theological basis for women’s salvation and as an apologetic for evangelism in a gender-gender-conscious society. In a world still filled with voices competing to define life’s highest good, the exclusive claims of the Word who was God and became flesh and dwelt among us rises above the cacophony as the one and only way of true wisdom.

Notes

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2 For example, Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation (Boston: Beacon, 1973).


7 Work on women’s spirituality from a feminist perspective is vast and varied. See, e.g., Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology (Boston: Beacon, 1983); Patricia Wilson-Kastner, Faith, Feminism, and
Karen H. Jobes


9 Johnson, "Redeeming," 120.


13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 This point is sometimes lost on English speakers because the English language does not include grammatical gender for nouns. For instance, Spanish speakers would never think of _la casa_ (feminine noun meaning house) as something female, but were _casa_ to be personified in Spanish, it would be natural to portray it as a woman.

16 Most English translations read "craftsman," but Martin Hengel takes "favourite child" as the preferred pointing, _Judaism and Hellenism_ (Philadelphia:
Sophia Christology: The Way of Wisdom?

Fortress; 1974), 153.


18 In the christological debates of the fourth century, the Arians used the LXX version, while those whose view became the orthodox Christian position preferred the text of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion.

19 Cook, Septuagint of Proverbs, 292.

20 Ibid., 224.

21 Ibid., 246.


26 Cook, Septuagint of Proverbs, 239.

27 Winston, Wisdom of Solomon, 34.

28 Ibid., 37. Even if one dates Wisdom of Solomon earlier in the Ptolemaic period, the point would still stand.


30 Ben Witherington III, Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 103.
KAREN H. JOBES

31 Ibid., 112.
32 Ruether, Sexism, 117.
34 Johnson, “Jesus,” 274–75.
35 Ibid., 280.
36 Fiorenza, “Wisdom Mythology,” 33. Dunn also finds methodological problems when concepts about wisdom from different contexts are interpreted as equivalents; see Dunn, Christology, 170.
38 Ibid., 33.
40 Johnson, “Redeeming,” 122.
43 “Sophia Emerges,” Vancouver Sun, 4.
44 Johnson, “Jesus,” 288–89.
Sophia Christology: The Way of Wisdom?

(1986): 161–86.

47 This observation emerged out of conversation with Robert H. Gundry and has also been raised as an objection to seeing Sophia Christology in the Johannine corpus by Andreas J. Köstenberger in his review of Ben Witherington III, "John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel," *JETS* 42/1 (March 1999): 154.


50 See Dunn, *Christology*, 219. Witherington attempts to establish the synonymous use of *logos* and *sophia* by observing their occurrence in synonymous parallelism in Wis 9:1–2. But even if they were used interchangeably there, such parallelism does not establish similar interchangeability in John 1:1, especially since, as noted above, *sophia* does not occur in John’s Prologue. See Witherington, *John’s Wisdom* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 53.


52 Witherington, *John’s Wisdom*.

53 Ibid., 20.

54 Ibid., 22.


57 Johnson, "Redeeming," 120.

58 Of course it should be noted that the issue of race raises the same question. Can a non-Chinese Jesus save the Chinese? Is gender a more or less essential property of humanness than race?