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FOR SEVERAL years now I have spent countless hours in the company of the Wisdom Woman, reflecting on her, and on the world she has created. There are many texts in the bible in which wisdom is personified. I will explore some of these texts, to show how they present wisdom in divine categories, that is, she is described in language and concepts that indicate that the bible is presenting her as a feminine expression of God.

There are various senses in which Biblical scholars and theologians use the term ‘wisdom’. Sometimes it means those books of the bible that are designated wisdom literature, such as the Book of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Sirach, Baruch and the Wisdom of Solomon. Sometimes the term ‘wisdom’ simply means a quality or an attribute, either of human beings or of God. At other times the term ‘wisdom’ is used of personified wisdom, or Sophia, the Greek form of the word, and it is this personified wisdom who is the subject of my article. When I am referring specifically to personified wisdom I will use the name Sophia to save confusion.

The wisdom literature remains largely a marginalized body of biblical literature. Partly this is because the themes of the wisdom literature are not always so overtly ‘religious’ as, for example, the books of Exodus or the Prophets, and the literature deals more with themes about creation, and partly because some of the wisdom literature is deuto-cano-nical, that is, it is not accepted as Sacred Scripture by all the Christian traditions. Yet the popularity of the books of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon in the medieval period is well attested and the early Christian writers, including Paul and the writer of John’s Gospel, were well aware of them and drew upon these texts to express their christologies.

The biblical wisdom books contain five great poems in which Wisdom is personified as a feminine figure. The poems are to be found in Job 28, Proverbs 8-9, Sirach 24, the Wisdom of Solomon 6-9 and Baruch 3-4. These poems are hymns in praise of Sophia describing her activities, usually in relation to creation. The interpretation and understanding of these poems have been described as ‘one of the most thoroughly debated problems in the whole of the wisdom literature.’ I will begin by looking closely at two of these poems, one from the Book of Proverbs and the other from the Wisdom of Solomon. I will also refer briefly to some other wisdom texts relevant to the topic. A second part of the article will be devoted to looking at the way New Testament writers used categories from the Sophia texts and applied them to Jesus. The two main texts I will look at in this New Testament section will be the hymn in Colossians 1:15-20 and the Prologue to John’s Gospel. In my conclusion I will make some comments on the significance of the Sophia texts for theology.

Proverbs: In Harmony with Creation

The first poem I will look at does come from a canonical book, the book of Proverbs. In the book of Proverbs the poem in question is to be found in Chapter 8:22-9:5 and it reads:

8:22 The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.
23 Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
24 When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water.
25 Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth—
26 when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world’s first bits of soil.

27 When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, 28 when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, 29 when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth,

30 then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, 31 rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

9:1 Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars. 2 She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table. 3 She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls from the highest places in the town, 4 ‘You that are simple, turn in here!’ To those without sense she says, 5 ‘Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. 6 Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.’

The poem falls within chapters 1-9 of the book of Proverbs in which the Wisdom woman summons humankind to a life in harmony with creation. In the poem Wisdom is presented as a woman, but she is no ordinary woman. Her existence precedes the created world. She originated before the sea and mountains, before the heavens and the sky. In Hebrew poetical language, to exist before the created world is in effect a claim to eternity. Thus in the book of Daniel, when God is described in Aramaic as the Ancient One, that does not mean that we should picture God as very old, but as eternal, indeed as eternally young. When Sophia claims in verses 23-30 of this poem to have existed before the mountains and the seas, she too is the Ancient One.

In Prov 8:22 the Hebrew word qanani is translated into our English translations of the bible as ‘created’ and so our texts read, ‘Yahweh created me at the beginning of his work’. In Hebrew, however, the word qanani can also mean ‘Yahweh brought me forth at the beginning of his work’ or ‘Yahweh begot me’, or ‘formed me’, ‘acquired me’, or ‘possessed’ me. In other words, the text is ambiguous about the origins of Sophia. Whether or not she was created by Yahweh, she is not as other works of creation. She is brought forth before the world, i.e., she is pre-existent to it. Her existence at least coincides with Yahweh’s existence as creator. That means that if God is eternally creator, then Sophia is eternally creator.

In verses 24-26 the ancient world-view of the cosmos is indicated: thus the underworld is presented as the primeval ocean, the mountains are the pillars of the heavens and the foundation pillars of the earth. Sophia is brought forth before the world. The divine passive, ‘I was brought forth’ evokes an image of her as Yahweh’s daughter. Biblical scholars are not sure if the Hebrew word amon in verse 30 should be translated as ‘artisan’ or ‘little child’. In our English translations we are told that Sophia was beside God as an artisan or master worker and thus she is presented as an architect of the created world. But if the word ‘amon’ means little child, then the verse may actually describe Wisdom as being beside God like a little child. The whole poem may be presenting Sophia as God’s beloved daughter, being brought forth from God and participating with God in the creation of the world. The poem thus contains delightful imagery in which Sophia moves between the heavenly realm of a loving parent and the world of humankind. She is daily God’s delight, and in

Marie Turner is a lecturer in Old Testament at Catholic Theological College and Flinders University of South Australia. Her research interests include theologies of creation and the wisdom literature.
turn, she delights in the human race. She is in a state of joyous play in God’s presence, rejoicing in God’s work of art, the world of humankind.

In the next part of the poem we are told that Wisdom has built her house, prepared her banquet, and sent out invitations to come and eat of her bread and wine. To do so is to find wisdom and insight. Her house with its seven pillars is a cosmological image, again depicting the ancient view of the cosmos in which the pillars separate the waters above and below the earth, keeping the created world from being overwhelmed by the abyss and the heavens. This section of the poem, then, shows Sophia as building and dwelling in her cosmological house and inviting all who would find wisdom to come to her banquet.

When we think of creation texts of the Bible we think first of the Genesis narratives, and yet, Proverbs 8-9 is one of the most beautiful of the creation texts. Sophia, beside God at creation, spans the distance between God and the world and human beings. She invites us to eat of her bread and drink her wine and is so doing, to gain insight and indeed life itself.

**The Wisdom of Solomon: In Love with Sophia**

The second poem that I want to explore comes from a deuto-canonical book, the Wisdom of Solomon. While the Wisdom of Solomon is not accepted as canonical by the Protestant tradition, which refers to it as apocryphal, it is accepted as Sacred Scripture by Catholics and Orthodox and therefore the majority of the world’s Christians. The poem is taken from Chapters 7:24-8:4 of the book and it reads:

24 For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.

25 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.

26 For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of God’s goodness.

27 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;

28 for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom.

29 She is more beautiful than the sun, and excels every constellation of the stars. Compared with the light she is found to be superior, for it is succeeded by the night, but against wisdom evil does not prevail.

8:1 She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well.

In this poem, Wisdom is described as a breath of the power of God, a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty, a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of God’s goodness. The description of Wisdom as a breath of God’s power reminds the reader of the reader of the breath of God at creation, or the Christian reader of the Holy Spirit. This similarity to the Holy Spirit is affirmed in verse 25 where she emanates from God the Pantocrator, the Creator of all things, and while remaining in herself she dwells in holy souls, making them friends of God. The mention of Spirit, the language of remaining, and the reference to friends are echoed in the Gospel of John in Jesus’ farewell address to the disciples whom he calls friends, whom he adjures to remain in him as he in them, and to whom he promises to send the Spirit who will dwell in them.

Sophia is described as an emanation of God’s glory. In the Old Testament, the word ‘glory’ is used most frequently to indicate the majesty of God. Thus the ‘kabod Yahweh’, as the Hebrew has it, the glory of God, rests on Mount Sinai and it fills the Tent of Meeting and even Moses cannot enter. In the Old Testament there is an idea that humankind cannot experience the glory of the utterly transcendent God face to face and live. In Exodus 33 Moses asks to be shown God’s glory. God
promises to allow God’s goodness to pass before Moses, but warns him that he cannot see God’s face, for to look on the face of God is to die. In the Wisdom poem, on the other hand, Sophia as the emanation of the glory of God who passes into holy souls, is able to mediate the presence of God to humankind. Through her, God’s glory is able to be experienced by humankind and indeed all creation, for a later part of the poem tells us that God’s immortal spirit, that is, Sophia, is present in all things.

The use of the word ‘image’ for Sophia as the image of God’s goodness reiterates this theme of mediation between God and the created world. The Greek word used here for image is ‘icon’. The Eastern and Orthodox traditions of Christianity have a rich theology of icons as mediating the presence of God. Jaroslav Pelikan refers to the ‘intricate relation between image and idea in philosophy and theology, above all in Byzantine (or for that matter, Russian) philosophy and theology’.2 A more poetic description of the icon is ‘Theology in Colour’.3 We may go one step further with Sophia as the perfect eikon of God in that in her person as icon of God she mediates the reality that is God. The religious philosopher John Manoussakis explains the absolute necessity of the icon. He says that a God who lacks a face is impersonal. A God without a face is radical otherness and cannot be experienced by humankind. He goes on to claim that ‘an encounter with the divine without relation, that is, without some form of iconic representation, would not be different in any way from an encounter with …utter destruction’.4 As the experience of Moses reminds us, there is a yearning within us to experience God and yet at the same time we cannot look on the face of God and live. The description of Sophia as icon of God speaks into this theology of the utterly transcendent God. As icon of God, Sophia is the one who is able to bridge the gap between the radical otherness of God and the world of humankind and all creation.

In this poem from the Wisdom of Solomon Sophia is identified as the teacher of philosophy, the arts and the sciences but she is not an intellectual abstraction. There is an erotic power in Solomon’s address:

2 I loved her and sought her from my youth; I desired to take her for my bride, and became enamored of her beauty.
3 She glorifies her noble birth by living with God, and the Lord of all loves her.
4 For she is an initiate in the knowledge of God, and an associate in God’s works.

The ambiguities in the text are noteworthy. Solomon is depicted as a young man falling in love with Sophia and seeking her for his bride, the one to come home to at the end of the day. Yet in these lines she is also depicted as bride of Yahweh, the one beloved of God, the one who shares the life and the knowledge of God and the one who works side by side with God. The Greek text uses the term ‘symbiosis’ of her way of living with God. She has a symbiotic relationship with God, that is, she shares the very life of God and the knowledge of God. She is the one who works side by side with God at creation. Indeed, the Greek text is more explicit. It tells us that she chooses the works of God. The text is not clear whether this means she chooses to work with God or whether she actually chooses what works God will do.

Wisdom 10:4 depicts Sophia as saviour. She is the one who delivered Adam from his transgression, she delivered Noah from the flood, and she rescued the Israelites through the miracle at the Sea. As the New Zealand scholar Alice Sinnott points out, this attribution to Sophia of the central act of liberation in the Old Testament is astounding5. As Sinnott says,

This female personification of the creative and saving power of God in the world is active and present in creation, all-knowing, all-powerful, omnipresent, renewing all things, working in history to save her chosen people, guiding and protecting them through their struggles and crises, and carrying out functions attributed in other scripture texts to God. She
can give instruction concerning ontology, cosmology, physics, astronomy and biology, because she was responsible for their creation (7:17-22) and she is responsible for the regulation and oversight of the cosmos (7:24; 8:1).  

What is clear from the poem is that Wisdom is presented in divine categories and because of her intimacy with God she is able to mediate relationship with the divine to Solomon and indeed to all of humankind.

**Wisdom Revealing God**

Apart from these two major poems, there are other texts from the biblical literature that speak of Sophia in divine categories. In Sirach 24 Sophia utters the following lines:

3 ‘I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and covered the earth like a mist.
4 I dwelt in the highest heavens, and my throne was in a pillar of cloud.
5 Alone I compassed the vault of heaven and traversed the depths of the abyss.
6 Over waves of the sea, over all the earth, and over every people and nation I have held sway.

There are several striking theological elements in this poem. The first is that Sophia describes herself as coming forth from, or originating in, the most High God. The second striking element is that she speaks of dwelling in the highest heavens, with her throne in the pillar of cloud. In the book of Exodus the pillar of cloud is the imagery used to describe God’s presence with the Israelites during their wanderings in the desert. Indeed, in the whole of the Old Testament, it is only in reference to God that the throne and the pillar of cloud are used in conjunction with each other. As Sheppard reminds us, the combination of these two images of throne and cloud and the assignment of them to Sophia can achieve the intended effect only when the reader is familiar with the sacred wilderness traditions. Thus, certain familiar language about God in the Old Testament is here applied to Sophia.  

The third striking element of the lines quoted concerns the description of Sophia as alone encompassing the vault of heaven, and treading the depths of the abyss. In Job 9:7 it is Yahweh who says, ‘I...alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the Sea’. The implication from these lines, then, is that Sophia is once again described in language and concepts appropriate to the divine.

Thus, in the lines quoted we are being presented with feminine images of God as Wisdom or Sophia. The nature of these texts as poetry raises the issue of whether they can be taken as theological texts which are revelatory of the nature of God. Do they simply portray an attribute of God, namely God’s wisdom, in poetic terms, or do they reveal God in God’s relationship to humankind and the cosmos?

First we must lay to rest the argument that wisdom as feminine is simply the result of grammatical gender. In Greek the word for wisdom is *Sophia*, in Hebrew it is *Hokmah* and in Latin *Sapientia*, all of which have grammatical feminine gender. English does not have feminine grammatical gender for abstract concepts, but refers to them in the neuter gender. In English, then, the pronoun for wisdom as an attribute of the wise person would simply be ‘it’ and not ‘she’.

Yet in all the wisdom poems where Wisdom is depicted in divine categories, she is almost invariably personified as a woman, albeit no ordinary woman. There is no other attribute of God so consistently personified. As Roland Murphy, the wisdom scholar tells us, ‘literary personification is not rare in the bible, but the case of Lady Wisdom is unique in its intensity and scope’. She is God’s wife, God’s daughter, God’s beloved, God’s co-creator, God’s mediator to the created world. Of course, these images are metaphorical, as all human language about God is metaphorical. We have no other way of speaking about God. Metaphor works best when a familiar concrete concept, in this case woman, is used to get the message across about the abstract concept, in this case God’s wisdom. Poets and writers commonly personify abstract concepts. Thus
in Shakespeare we hear of jealousy as a green-eyed monster, and we speak of Old Father Time and Jack Frost. In film, we may have seen the movie, ‘Death Takes a Holiday’ or its more recent re-make, ‘Meet Joe Black’, in which Brad Pitt plays Death as a person, an attractive young man with whom the leading female star falls in love and learns to trust Death as a comforting presence. This personification of Death stands in a long tradition in which Thanatos, the Greek term for Death, is depicted in ancient sculptures as a beautiful young man.

Does the personification of Wisdom, the one who gives immortality, speak of something theologically more profound than a literary device to describe an attribute of God? Can Wisdom/Sophia be termed a hypostasis? This term is a very complex one and is used in Trinitarian theology to try to speak of the mystery of the persons of the Trinity. In the context of the wisdom poems, biblical scholars use it to describe a metaphor that, as Celia Deutsch defines it, acquires ‘the quality of personal entity,… a kind of quasi-independent existence’.9 Generally the word is taken to mean a revelatory form of a deity. Sophia can thus be described as revelatory of God.

Behind the figure of Sophia, scholars detect the influence of the Hellenistic Goddess Isis, or the Egyptian Ma’at or the Canaanite Astarte. The sages may be extolling the praises of Sophia to counteract Isis in particular and to encourage Jews in a Hellenistic world to recognize the richness and vitality of their own tradition.10 Yet at no time do the sages of Israel compromise their monotheism, that is, their belief in the one God. At no time does Sophia become a separate figure detached from God. When she reaches her full status as an independent personality, she is at the same time most closely connected to God as the self-revelation of the divine, depicted in language and categories that can only be applied to God.

The noted German scholar Gerhard von Rad broke new ground when he moved away from the conventional view of scholars that wisdom is merely a goddess substitute or a personification of an attribute of God.11 In von Rad’s thesis Lady Wisdom, the voice of creation speaking to humankind, is a bearer of revelation. As Wisdom, she is the self-revelation of God’s creation and signifies the mystery implanted there by God. For von Rad, this is a real, cosmological process, the bestowal of something special on creation that now mysteriously inhabits it. But she is also orientated towards humankind. She is the active influence of the environment, the ordering power that affects and corrects us. Von Rad argued that the personification of this mysterious order was not merely a decorative, stylistic device, but was actually determined by the subject in question. This was because this primeval order, indeed God’s glory reflected back from God, actually addresses humankind. As such, personification was the necessary mode of expression.

In more recent years Roland Murphy, the Dominican biblical scholar, pressed von Rad’s thesis even further. In challenging von Rad’s identification of wisdom with the order in creation, Murphy argues that the very symbol of the wisdom woman, courted and eventually married, precludes order as the correct correlation. Wisdom, because of her origins and authority, is rather the revelation of God who calls to humankind throughout the realm of the created world.

In a note of caution Claudia Camp suggests that women reject the androcentric view of the male sage desiring and possessing the Woman Wisdom and instead speak of her as a sister or an intimate friend.12

To conclude this section of my article, I would argue that the poetic texts in which Wisdom is depicted go far beyond a decorative stylistic device, as Von Rad reminded us. Nor is she an attribute of God, namely God’s wisdom, implanted in creation. Rather, the texts are revelatory of the mystery of God’s relationship with humankind in and through the created world, a relationship that is mediated by Sophia as feminine expression of God.
I am not alone in this conviction. Contemporary scholars such as Roland Murphy, Kathleen O’Connor, Elizabeth Johnson and Denis Edwards, stand in a long tradition of writers who have recognized in these texts theological truths which reveal to us the nature of God. Indeed, this tradition goes right back to the New Testament itself.

Agent of Creation: Wisdom and the New Testament

Since the texts of the New Testament which have been influenced by these wisdom writings and by personified Sophia are too numerous and profound to deal with in this article, I will be selective. I will offer some general comments on the way the wisdom texts have been employed by the New Testament writers and will look in detail at two of them, namely the Prologue to the Gospel of John and the Pauline letter to the Colossians.

In the New Testament Jesus is presented as the agent of the new creation, in language and themes taken from the Old Testament wisdom texts. Thus in the first letter to the Corinthians chapter 8:6 Paul states:

...for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

In this text Paul is asserting that Jesus is the lord of all creation. Through Christ’s death and resurrection he embodies the creative power of God.13 Sophia of the Old Testament and Christ of the New is the same divine power of God active in creation and salvation.

In the Letter to the Hebrews Chapter 1:2-3 the connection with the wisdom of the Old Testament is made even more explicit. The writer tells us that God has spoken to us by a Son ‘whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being and he sustains all things by his very word’. As James Dunn says, ‘the passage is a striking expression of Wisdom christology’. Hebrews uses the word ‘radiance’ (hapasugasma in Greek) which is the same word used of wisdom in the Wisdom of Solomon 7:26 where it is said that Sophia is the reflection of eternal light. This point becomes significant when we realize that this is the only usage of this word in the whole of the Greek translation of the Old Testament. It is very likely then that the writer of Hebrews had this very text from the Wisdom of Solomon in mind when he or she speaks of Jesus in these terms. In this text Christ is again the agent of creation, as Sophia is in the Old Testament. Thus both Sophia and Christ are agents of creation, both are the radiance of God’s glory, and both are pre-existent of creation.

Jesus as agent of creation, the one in whom and for whom all things exist, is the subject of the hymn to be found in Colossians 1:15-20. This is another of the hymns which scholars generally term, wisdom-christological hymns. Scholars believe that these hymns were in circulation amongst the early Christians even before Paul and the disciples who used his name wrote their letters. Possibly the hymns were sung or recited in Christian liturgical celebrations. These wisdom-christological hymns describe the risen Christ in terms taken from the Jewish wisdom writings.

The hymn reads:

1:15He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

The hymn is constructed in two sections. The first, verses 15-18a, deal with Christ’s pre-
existent role in creation, and the second section, verses 18b-20 deal with his role in redemption. Another way of expressing the themes of the two sections would be to say that the movement of the poem is from his role in the old creation to his role in the new creation. We do not know who the writer of the poem was. It is possible it was Paul, but unlikely. Probably the writer was an unknown Jewish Christian, who took various qualities of Sophia and applied them to Christ in his relation to the cosmos. In its original form the hymn probably envisaged a disruption in cosmic harmony, and saw Christ as the divine agent in creation but now also the divine agent in reconciliation, restoring harmony to the cosmos.

The line that describes Christ as the image of God is influenced by the wisdom literature rather than the Genesis literature where Adam is the image of God. The word *eikon* is used in conjunction with the phrase ‘the firstborn of creation’, taking us back to the Proverbs text where Sophia claimed that she was the first of Yahweh’s works. ‘Firstborn of creation’ is used not to indicate temporal priority, but priority of rank and the guarantee of a future harvest, as it were. In Greek the word for firstborn is *prototokos*. The word was employed frequently in the Greek Old Testament to indicate not simply temporal priority but sovereignty of rank. Thus Christ, as the firstborn of creation, guarantees all future creation and as the firstborn from the dead, he guarantees the resurrection of all believers. According to Col 1:15-16, therefore, Christ is sovereign over creation, first within creation, and the divine agent of creation. His role in redemption is paralleled with the theme of creation. The praise of Christ’s supremacy over the church as his body matches the praise of his supremacy over the realm of creation. When Christ is called the beginning, the term ‘firstborn from the dead’ signifies that it is his position in the new creation that is intended. He is to be pre-eminent in everything in the new creation on account of his resurrection from the dead. As the pre-existent agent of creation and the one in whom the fullness of God dwells, he spans the distance between God and the world of humanity, just as Sophia spans the distance between the creator and the world of humankind. The Old Testament Sophia and the New Testament Christ are the manifestations of the divine in the world of humans.

While many more New Testament passages are influenced by the wisdom literature, the final one I want to look at is the Prologue to the Gospel of John.

The Prologue reads:

1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of humankind, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. 15 (John testified to him and cried out, ‘This was he of whom I said, “He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.”’) 16 From his fullness we have
all received, grace upon grace. 17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

In the fourth Gospel the masculine Greek term logos, meaning the word, has replaced the feminine term, wisdom, or Sophia. In the ancient world the Logos was considered to be the principle of reason pervading the entire cosmos and it was thought of as a male principle. Yet, while wisdom became subsumed into the Logos, the self-same categories used of Sophia are applied to Christ. One reason for the masculine logos is to fit the male historical Jesus, although there is no sound theological reason for doing so. The concept of wisdom is a theological one and need not have been shifted to suit the historical male Jesus. At the same time, however, the Gospel writer uses categories of wisdom even as he speaks of Jesus as the logos, that is, the word.

Thus in the Prologue Jesus comes forth from God and all things came into being through him. We have seen that this is Sophia’s role in Proverbs. In Baruch, Israel is warned to walk towards the shining of Sophia’s light, or she will be given to the Gentiles. In the Prologue Jesus is described as the light who has come into the world, but is rejected by his own people. He is described as having tented among his own. In Sirach, the Creator commands Sophia to pitch her tent among the people of Israel. In the Prologue to John Jesus is described as the one who has the Father’s glory and makes it manifest to human beings. In the Wisdom of Solomon it is Sophia who is a pure emanation of the glory of God. As Raymond Brown, the noted Johannine scholar, says,

In the Old Testament presentation of Wisdom, there are good parallels for almost every detail of the Prologue’s description of the Word...Jesus is divine Wisdom, pre-existent, but now come among [people] to teach them and give them life. 14

The wisdom themes continue in the rest of the Gospel. In the Old Testament Sophia is the one who teaches people of the things that are above, she utters truth, she gives instructions as to what pleases God, and she leads people to life and immortality. In the Fourth Gospel these are the functions of Jesus as the one who reveals the Father, the one who is the way, the truth and the life. Sophia uses symbols of bread, water and wine, and invites people to eat and drink. Jesus uses these symbols for his revelation, but those who eat and drink of Sophia’s bread and wine hunger and thirst for more, whereas those who partake of Jesus’ food and drink never hunger or thirst again. Sophia’s disciples are referred to as her children or her friends. In John’s gospel the disciples of Jesus are called his children or his friends.

While ‘word of God’ is the preferred term for Jesus in John’s Gospel, it need not continue to carry its ancient masculine overtones. There is a connection between word and wisdom made also in the wisdom literature. In the Wisdom of Solomon 9:1-4 Solomon addresses God thus:

O God...who..made all things by your word
And by your wisdom ..formed humankind,
........................................................................
Give me the wisdom who sits by your throne.

It is the nature of biblical poetry that the first line is synonymous with the second line. Thus in these two lines ‘wisdom’ and ‘word’ are equated. It is through God’s word or wisdom that all things are created. Again in Sirach 24 wisdom tells us that she ‘came forth from the mouth of the most high’, imagery that invokes the concept of ‘word’. By the usage of both terms, word and wisdom, in parallelism, the gender borders disintegrate or deconstruct.

There are numerous other places in the New Testament where Jesus is equated with Wisdom. He is couched in wisdom terms in particular in Romans, Corinthians and the Gospel of Matthew, but the examples are too numerous to deal with here. Enough has been said to show that when the New Testament writers sought categories to describe the ete-
nal word of God become incarnate on earth in the person of Jesus, they found appropriate categories in Sophia. In conclusion therefore, I would now like to draw out the significance of the wisdom texts I have been dealing with and sum up the way in which God is presented as Wisdom, both in the New and Old Testaments.

**Conclusion**

In the great wisdom poems I have explored, Sophia is much more than a simple literary personification of an attribute of God. As Elizabeth Johnson says,

> Sophia is a female personification of God’s own being in creative and saving involvement with the world. The chief reason for arriving at this interpretation is the functional equivalence between the deeds of Sophia and those of the biblical God. What she does is already portrayed elsewhere in the Scriptures as the field of action of Israel’s God under the revered, unpronounceable name (YHWH), Adonai, the Lord.15

What, then, do the personification texts tell us about the nature of God and why is specifically the personification of God’s wisdom that is revelatory?

First, they can call our attention to the existence of a significant body of biblical texts which depict God in female imagery. These texts are not small isolated verses but whole chapters of biblical books and indeed complete books of the Bible. To ignore these books and conceive of God in solely male imagery is tantamount to denying an important aspect of the revelation of the nature of the divine. These texts from the ancient world offer us feminine imagery of God which is not confined to mothering and nurturing roles. Sophia is creator, saviour, scientist, organizer, and philosopher. The breadth of her descriptions means that we have access to a body of sacred texts which present God in female imagery that is not stereotypical, but traverses gender barriers.

Second, it seems to me that the question of why it is specifically God’s wisdom that is personified and revelatory is tied to the connection the texts have with creation theology. Von Rad was not wrong in his connection with wisdom and the order in creation, although he did not go far enough. It is specifically wisdom that is personified because it is in the realm of the created world that God’s wisdom is at work and is to be made known to human-kind. In the English translations of John’s Gospel we are told that the Word came to what was his own and his own people did not accept him. In Greek the text indicates that the Word came to his own home. We often talk of the word made flesh and think rightly in terms of the second person of the Trinity becoming incarnate and thereby taking on board all that makes us human, yet how often do we think of the world as a place where God feels at home precisely because it has been made by God?

Often these personification texts come in the deutero-canonical literature. Not all Christian traditions include these books in their canon of Scripture and those that do often marginalize these texts through neglect. It is in these books, and in particular in the Wisdom of Solomon, that the feminine image of God, Sophia, is most clearly expressed. The books are revelatory of the nature of God but also of the nature of all creation as the home of God. It is vital that the books take a central place in our consciousness if we are not to lose sight of what they tell us of the nature of God and the world.

My final point is that it is appropriate that poetry, the highest form of language, should be the vehicle for the texts about Sophia. Through the poems Sophia calls for a response from those she addresses. To answer her call is to answer the invitation of the God she reveals. Later Christian writers, in the light of Jesus Christ, drew theological implications from these texts that were at one and the same time cognizant of her divine status and yet forgetful or even contemptuous of the feminine imagery. As such, they replaced her with the Logos, male principle of reason. Because of the equivalence made in the wisdom literature...
between word and wisdom, both terms can be read inclusively.

There is an ambiguity in the Sophia texts which means that she stands up to no clear-cut definition. Perhaps that is why she comes to us in poetry. At times she refers to God as her creator, at other times she is begotten of God and yet again she is present with God at creation. There are texts where she is to be found by those who seek her and in other texts, such as Job 28, only God knows the way to her. She dwells in the highest heavens, yet she pitches her tent in Israel. When all the texts are explored, our analysis completed and our theology articulated, the mystery of God is never exhausted and Sophia remains elusive. Solomon desired that when he entered his house he would find rest and companionship with Sophia. While a beautiful and appealing image, it is a stereo-typical one of the woman waiting at home for the man to return. A more appropriate image I would like to leave you with is one of the God, not domesticated in the home of the wise King Solomon, but the God who is the artist, the philosopher and the scientist and who delights in each one of us and in her work of creation as she reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other.

NOTES

6. Ibid, 24
10. Sinnott, 30