

## THREE MODERN FACES OF WISDOM

by Ben Witherington, III

In a lengthy book I have traced the development of the Biblical Wisdom tradition. There Wisdom was seen to take many faces and forms.<sup>1</sup> I looked at the development of Biblical Wisdom in both form and content during the crucial period of 960 B.C. to A.D. 100. This development involved a movement from personification in Proverbs 8 and elsewhere in early Jewish literature to a localization of Wisdom as primarily found in Torah, and finally in the early Christological hymns (especially John 1), to the idea of Wisdom becoming incarnate or essentially embodied in a particular person, the Son of God.

Also examined was how OT wisdom seems primarily to be expressed in such forms as aphorisms, dialogues, or extended instructions from a parent to a child, or a teacher to a pupil. Yet, there were some few examples of parables in the OT corpus and other forms of narrative wisdom speech such as that found in the prologue and epilogue to the book of Job. In the ministry of Jesus the parable apparently becomes the primary wisdom vehicle for expressing his thoughts, with a significant quantity of aphorisms also to be found in the arguably authentic teaching of Jesus. It was also noted how in the Christological hymns some of the forms and content used in the Wisdom hymns in the sapiential literature were taken over and used to speak of the career of the Christ. All of these developments in form and content reflect a living, growing body of literature which was both oral and written in character.

Striking is the fact that by and large this whole corpus is a form of material that intends to force the hearer into reflective thinking by the use of figurative language — whether by simple comparison, simile, metaphor, extended analogy, parable, or even personification. Biblical Wisdom literature then primarily engages in the art of moral persuasion, using an indirect method and a pictographic form of speech to lead the hearer or reader to a particular conclusion. Beyond simple reflective thinking the sages were urging their audiences to certain sorts of attitudes and actions towards God, fellow human beings, everyday life in general, and the whole of creation.

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In the light of what I have learned in tracking the pilgrimage of Biblical Wisdom, I intend in this essay to take one further step and examine some of Wisdom's modern faces and forms. The approach will be to critique these works in light of what has been learned from the Biblical Wisdom material. I will be confining myself to three recent attempts to consciously appropriate Biblical Wisdom material in the service of various modern concerns such as inter-faith dialogue, the constructing of a modern Wisdom Christology, and finally the use of Wisdom material to construct a feminist Sophia theology. Close scrutiny will be given to the following works each in turn: 1) John Eaton's *The Contemplative Face of Old Testament Wisdom* (Phila. Trinity Press Int., 1989); 2) Leo D. Lefebure's *Toward a Contemporary Wisdom Christology, A Study of Karl Rahner and Norman Pittenger*. (Lanham Md.: Univ. Press of America, 1988); and 3) Susan Cady's, Marian Ronan's, and Hal Taussig's *Wisdom's Feast: Sophia in Study and Celebration* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989).<sup>2</sup>

## I. Well-Traveled Wisdom

John Eaton's book *The Contemplative Face of Old Testament Wisdom* is certainly one which in various ways the Biblical sages would have been proud to own. He argues convincingly that there are numerous themes and motifs common to Wisdom literature originating in widely differing settings and contexts. In one sense this is hardly surprising since it is characteristic of Wisdom literature that it focuses on the recurring ordinary and even extraordinary experiences humans have when interacting either with nature or other human beings.<sup>3</sup> Eaton's book is also written with an eloquence and clarity of style that reflects a person who has taken to heart the urging of the sages to learn the art of speaking (and writing) well. This perspicuous form is somewhat beguiling for in the end, as will become apparent, the author wishes for the reader to draw conclusions about Wisdom to which few if any early Jewish or Christian sages would have assented.

The trajectory of Eaton's work is not the same as my study *Jesus the Sage and the Pilgrimage of Wisdom*, for his aim is not to illuminate Wisdom in general by means of the elucidation of the Biblical tradition, but rather by a "sample of the world's wisdom treasures . . . to illumine our appreciation of the old Hebrew Sages."<sup>4</sup> This in itself is a worthy goal, but as becomes apparent the presupposition behind this approach is not merely that Biblical Sages drew on international wisdom material, which is certainly true, nor even that there are notable and striking parallels between both the form and the content

of Biblical and extra-Biblical wisdom material which is also indisputable, nor even that there is some wisdom and truth in all of the great world religions which most would agree on, but that ultimately there are no *definitive* revelations of Wisdom or the God of Wisdom.

Eaton believes there are numerous worthy human approximations of true Wisdom which transcends them all, and that various of these non-definitive revelations are inspired by God. This becomes especially clear in the book's last page where one hears:

As Christians enter afresh into this heritage of witness to Wisdom, they can go beyond the shallowness and glibness with which the Incarnation is often presented today. Here is an invitation to the immense depths in the message that the Word became flesh; an invitation also to proclaim it afresh in terms of the profoundest intuitions of all the world's artists and lover's of truth . . . Wisdom will not let the religions close out the air and spaces, the great lights and darks and deeps, the myriad creatures which like us are in the hand of God. So Wisdom calls to the great religions, make disciples one by one, takes them each on a personal pilgrimage, not to end in isolation, but in the communion of infinite love.<sup>5</sup>

In short Eaton attempts to use Wisdom literature, which does indeed have a more universal or international character than other portions of Biblical literature, to get beyond the scandal of particularity especially as it is found in the world's three great monotheistic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). This effort, while in some respects laudable in view of the way "particularity" has been used as a justification for the mistreatment of people of other faiths, is in the end misguided.

The three great monotheistic religions are historical religions, religions deeply rooted in what they believe are God's particular and unique acts in human history through a Moses, or a Jesus, or a Mohammed. They are not primarily philosophies of life or methods for achieving inner peace. In all three of these great monotheistic religions Wisdom literature is used in the context of and ultimately in the service of the particularistic agendas of these respective faiths. Thus in early Judaism, Wisdom is said to begin and end with the fear of Yahweh, not just any conception of God, and in due course it is urged that Torah, a revelation for a particular people, is the very embodiment and definitive revelation of Wisdom. In early Christianity Wisdom is so particularised that it is virtually identified with one person — Jesus Christ. Likewise in Islam, wisdom literature is seen as

something which supports and expounds the unique and particular revelation in the Koran, and which aids and enhances the highly particularistic confession "There is one God Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet."

It is not enough to note Wisdom parallels between religions. One must also ask how that similar sounding material is used and in what sort of contexts. In the three great monotheistic religions wisdom is not finally seen as an alternative to particularism but as a tool for expressing and expounding it. Nor is particularism merely tacked on to a more international corpus of literature. Eaton as much as admits this when he says

It was often supposed that the tradition changed from a secular to a religious outlook, from advice for self-advancement to a piety of fearing God, from a wisdom that is only human skill to a divine Wisdom that seeks and blesses us, or from brief detached proverbs to longer poetic discourses. But many of the supposedly later characteristics match features of teaching far earlier than Hebrew wisdom, especially in Egypt. It is better, then, to think of the tradition in Proverbs as the unfolding of a philosophy and world-view which did not change in essentials.<sup>6</sup>

This means two things: 1) The international wisdom literature early Jews, and later early Christians and even Moslems borrowed especially from Egypt and made their own was *not* purely secular to begin with. Indeed the categorization of ancient wisdom as either secular or sacred is an anachronism, an imposing of later western categories (not unlike the Enlightenment distinction between the natural and the supernatural) on near eastern sages who basically would not have agree with such distinctions. Von Rad was basically right to argue that "the experiences of the world were for her [Israel] always divine experiences as well, and the experiences of God were for her experiences of the world."<sup>7</sup> 2) The use made of international wisdom by the early sages of the three monotheistic religions by and large seems to be a matter of "plundering the Egyptians," i.e. the taking and reshaping of such international Wisdom to serve one's own particular faith and its agendas. It was not really a sort of early inter-faith dialogue, or an indirect way of suggesting that all religions are ultimately one. The Biblical sages who produced Wisdom literature would surely have repudiated any attempts to use their literature in a manner which lessens or dismisses the scandal of particularity, for that is just the opposite of the way they have used international wisdom ideas and forms.

Things become even more difficult when one attempts to compare or draw close parallels between near-eastern monotheistic wisdom with far eastern wisdom which often works in the service of some form of pantheism or even ancestor worship. Here the contexts are even more radically different from one another than is the case with wisdom in the three monotheistic faiths, and to take the far eastern wisdom out of its context skews both its intent and its trajectory. For instance, the Taoist agenda hardly comports with the Biblical Wisdom teaching when it urges: "Banish wisdom, discard knowledge, and the people will benefit a hundred-fold."<sup>8</sup>

A wise sage of the twentieth century, G.K. Chesterton, in the course of a discussion about comparisons made between Buddhism and Christianity, once said the following:

There is a phrase of facile liberality uttered again and again at ethical societies and parliaments of religion: "the religions of the earth differ in rites and forms, but they are the same in what they teach." It is false; it is the opposite of the fact. The religions of the earth do *not* greatly differ in rites and forms; they do greatly differ in what they teach . . . It is exactly in their souls that they are divided . . . They agree in machinery; almost every great religion on earth works with the same external methods, with priests, scriptures, altars, sworn brotherhoods, special feasts. They agree in the mode of teaching; what they differ about is the thing to be taught.<sup>9</sup>

Obviously, this broad generalization will need some qualification, especially in regard to wisdom literature, as Eaton has ably shown. My point is however, that the argument of Chesterton is essentially correct. The way the major world religions differ is more profound and essential to their being than the ways in which they are similar, and simply concentrating on certain wisdom parallels both alleged and real to the neglect of the differences only obscures the larger issues. At the end of the day orthodox Jewish, Christian, Moslem, or Buddhism sages will have to agree to disagree on various fundamental issues that are at the very heart of their respective faiths.

If art is a mirror of the human soul, it is a striking fact that these various religions have produced very different sorts of great art. Consider again what Chesterton has to say in the following rather long quote.

Even when I thought . . . that Buddhism and Christianity were alike, there was one thing about them that always perplexed me;

I mean the startling difference in their type of religious art. I do not mean in its technical style of representation, but in the things that it was manifestly meant to represent. No two ideals could be more opposite than a Christian saint in a Gothic cathedral and a Buddhist saint in a Chinese temple . . . the Buddhist saint always has his eyes shut, while the Christian saint always has his eyes wide open. The Buddhist saint has a sleek and harmonious body, but his eyes are heavy and sealed with sleep. The medieval saint's body is wasted to his crazy bones, but his eyes are frightfully alive. There cannot be any real community of spirit between forces that produce such symbols so different as that . . . The Buddhist is looking with peculiar intentness inwards. The Christian is staring with frantic intentness outwards . . . It is just here that Buddhism is on the side of modern pantheism and immanence. And it is just here that Christianity is on the side of humanity and liberty and love . . . I want to love my neighbor not because he is I, but precisely because he is not. I want to adore the world, not as one likes a looking-glass, because it is one's self, but as one loves a woman, because she is entirely different. If souls are separate love is possible. If souls are united love is obviously impossible. A [person] may be said to love himself, but he can hardly be said to fall in love with himself, or if he does it must be a monotonous courtship . . . Love desires personality therefore love desires division. It is the instinct of Christianity to be glad that God has broken the universe into little pieces, because they are living pieces. It is her instinct to say "little children love one another" rather than to tell one large person to love himself. This is the intellectual abyss between Buddhism and Christianity; that for the Buddhist . . . is the fall of [humanity], for the Christian is the purpose of God, the whole point of his cosmic idea . . . The oriental diety is like a giant who should have lost his leg or hand and be always seeking to find it; but the Christian power is like some giant who in a strange generosity should cut off his right hand, so that it might of its own accord shake hands with him.<sup>10</sup>

Chesterton has touched on several critical points here that have direct bearing on the discussion of wisdom literature and Eaton's treatment of it. It is the characteristic of the three great monotheistic religions, that they do not try to resolve the problem of the one and the many by some sort of pantheism. All three agree that while God may be and is in sometimes and some ways immanent in human history and human lives, that God is essentially transcendent and distinct from

both creation and creature, not least because God existed before there were any creation and creatures. No one who has read the Biblical Wisdom corpus carefully can deny that this sort of theology which asserts the essential distinction between creator and creation exists in this literature. Indeed it is one of the major motifs of Biblical Wisdom literature. Under such circumstances then, contemplation in the three great monotheistic religions which relies in part on this Wisdom theology, must be essentially a journey outward, not a journey inward.

Another reason why there is so much stress placed in Biblical Wisdom on what may be called creation theology is that it was believed that God had implanted a moral structure and order into both human affairs and indeed into the affairs of the natural world as well.<sup>11</sup> It is by close examination of these external aspects of creation and creaturely behaviour that one may learn something by analogy about *the* greatest distinct external reality beyond humankind — God. In this world view the One remains transcendent One, but the many may have fellowship and communion with that One, without either being absorbed into the One, or on the other hand without the One simply being thought of as inherently immanent in all things and beings. It is this healthy tension between the One and the Many that characterizes these monotheistic faiths.

In this context mysticism amounts to communion with the One, indeed an experiential communion that goes beyond human description or understanding, while not going against that understanding. What mysticism does not amount to in the monotheistic religions is either a gained awareness that there is a little bit of God in all things, or that God and I are in the end one being. Thus, in the end one must reject what seems to be the larger underlying thesis of Eaton as incompatible with the Biblical world view that was shared by both early Jewish and Christian sages, and later by Moslem sages. The scandal of particularity can not be overcome through comparisons with other world religions' wisdom literature. It does not follow from this however that there is not much of great merit to be learned from Eaton's work, and I must now turn to a discussion of various aspects that are most helpful as I seek to discern possible modern faces of Biblical Wisdom.

It is one of the great merits of Eaton's work that he offers balanced judgments about various thorny issues that constantly arise in the discussion of Wisdom literature. The evidence of this is clear in his refusal to see Biblical Wisdom in simplistic secular versus sacred categories. Rather as he says "The fear of the Lord" . . . is a pervading value in Israelite wisdom."<sup>12</sup>

The fact that Wisdom was often generated in the court or royal circles does not suggest its basically secular character for as Eaton says

The connection with the government does not mean that the teachings would be a kind of early Civil Service manual. The ancient point of view was that government in society depended on the divine order that animated all creation. What rulers were desired to learn, first and foremost, was the way of right and true harmony with this cosmic order . . .<sup>13</sup>

Eaton also offers a very careful handling of the personified Wisdom material in Proverbs and later early Jewish sources. He is, in my judgment quite right *not* to see this material as early evidence for goddess worship, or the suppression of the same in early Israel, but rather "This Wisdom, then is the Creator's thought, plan and skill which gives form and order in the universe."<sup>14</sup> It is then a personification of an attribute or even an activity of God. The personification is feminine no doubt in part because of the form of the word *hokmah*, but also perhaps in part because male sages in a patriarchal culture would often personify something beautiful and winsome by drawing on the images, ideas, and ideals they associated with the human female. Proverbs 31, which may well be about Woman Wisdom, is perhaps a paramount example of this sort of approach. Personification is a means of making something which is in itself rather abstract more concrete and approachable or personal. It is very doubtful that the sages were trying to argue for "a feminine dimension" to God by using such language. The goal was to say something about God's Wisdom and *its* character, not about God *per se*. In short the Woman Wisdom personification was not an attempt at theologizing, but rather of personalizing an otherwise abstract activity or attribute of God.

Eaton also rightly, in my judgment, points out another plausible reason for the personification of Wisdom. The sages wanted their disciples to have a personal, indeed intimate, relationship with Wisdom. They wished for their followers to be ravished by and in awe of the grand design and order that God had and implanted in creation.<sup>15</sup>

Eaton is also right to stress that in Biblical Wisdom the call to contemplation or meditation on Wisdom was not seen as antithetical to the call to action. Indeed the word often translated "meditate" in a Wisdom or Torah psalm like Ps. 119, *sib*, indicates a vocal activity, a recitation, not merely a silent reflection upon something and in Ps. 1 the word *haga*, also translated meditating has as its basic meaning the making of a murmuring sound.<sup>16</sup> In the Biblical world of the sages even contemplation involved a doing. Furthermore, the call to contemplation was not seen as an end in itself, but often as the right and wise preparation for action. This means that in the Biblical tradition



the aim or function of contemplation is often somewhat different than is the case in far eastern wisdom, where withdrawal from the world into inner self and inner peace is often a major function of contemplation.

The Biblical sages believed that the ultimate source of peace and Wisdom lay outside the individual and could be gotten at by reflection on the created and creaturely world and finally on the Divine Being beyond one's own being. While it may be true in some far eastern wisdom that "Beyond discursive reasoning, one contemplates till the gap disappears; one dies to self, becoming one with what is contemplated, and so with universal reality,"<sup>17</sup> this is at most only partially true of what the Biblical sages saw as happening in contemplation. Communion one could have with God, a real spiritual bond, but the creator-creature distinction could never be finally dissolved in any system of thought in which the deep awe and reverence for the Divine Other was an essential trait.

It is also notable that in Biblical Wisdom, apart perhaps from some portions of Ecclesiastes, history is not trivialized by urging mere resignation to whatever happens.<sup>18</sup> To the contrary, the sages offer up different courses of actions which can lead to different outcomes — vindication or punishment, long life or a short miserable existence, much trouble or peace of mind. Though there were obvious exceptions to such generalizations, as Job makes painfully clear, nonetheless under certain normal conditions there was truth in what the Biblical sages urged. They were not for the most part fatalists in the way they viewed human life. To the contrary they thought different courses of action normally led to different consequences precisely because there was a moral structure to reality.

Finally, Eaton is right in not hastily dismissing the possibility that at least some of the Biblical sages were groping toward a positive view of the afterlife, beyond the usual "Sheol is the land of the dead" sort of thinking. Indeed as he points out one might well expect such a development precisely because in Egyptian wisdom material there is evidence of such a view of the afterlife. If Israel borrowed from the treasures of Egyptian wisdom, and it did, it should not be surprising to find the first signs of a groping toward a similar view of the afterlife as well.<sup>19</sup>

One may be grateful for Eaton's fine and well-written effort to force us to think again about Biblical wisdom in the context of international wisdom literature. Even if one may disagree with some of the conclusions to which Eaton sees this project as leading, nonetheless he is raising many of the right sort of questions, offering balanced judgments, and in the end forcing the reader once again to wrestle with the larger

issues of the dialectic between context and content in the study of Biblical Wisdom Literature.

## II. *Logos* Logic

On first blush it might seem that an investigation of the theologies of K. Rahner and N. Pittenger would not prove very fertile ground for a discussion of the modern faces of Wisdom, or to put it another way the influence of Biblical wisdom material on modern theologizing. Apart from some adaptation of the concept of *Logos* Christology as it is found in Jn. 1 and in the teachings of some of its subsequent exponents like Justin Martyr, there is very little conscious reflection on the sages or wisdom traditions in the works of these two scholars. Yet L. Lefebure has unearthed some interesting data to show how the influence of a Wisdom sort of approach to life has affected these thinkers and it will bear further scrutiny.

After a cursory presentation of some major aspects of the Wisdom literature, drawing selectively on some of the scholarly discussion, Lefebure launches into a full scale study of first Rahner then Pittenger in two Chapters which make up the real heart and bulk of this book. His motivation for examining the Wisdom material is that he believes it has great relevance for current discussions on a host of theological issues, particularly the matter of Christology. He remarks "It is my contention that the understanding of Jesus Christ as the incarnation of Lady Wisdom can offer a basis for expressing his significance for Christians today."<sup>20</sup>

His motivation for choosing these two influential Catholic theologians for his study is apparently because Lefebure finds them intriguing and they are two notable figures in his own faith tradition. In point of fact a host of other theologians even just among Catholic theologians might have been chosen who more directly and extensively draw on the Biblical Wisdom corpus of literature (e.g. E. Schillibeeckx, H. Kung, R. Schnackenburg). Nonetheless, Lefebure does unearth some interesting data from the writings of Rahner and Pittenger.

There are certain fundamental assumptions that undergird Lefebure's work, for some of which he seems especially indebted to Rahner. For instance, there is repeated evidence of Lefebure's commitment to religious pluralism, relativism, and universalism. This leads Lefebure to interpret a crucial text like Proverbs 8.22 to mean that God acquired Wisdom, following B. Vawter,<sup>21</sup> rather than that God possessed or created Wisdom,<sup>22</sup> to avoid subordinating *Hokmah* totally to Yahweh. Lefebure goes to some lengths to avoid the particularistic

emphases of various Biblical Wisdom texts.

This agenda also leads Lefebure to understand Jn. 1 to mean that Jesus is the incarnation of Woman Wisdom, a general ordering principle revealed previously in all of creation and ultimately in all religions. Jesus on Lefebure's view is not *the Logos per se* but only perhaps the clearest or highest manifestation of the Logos/Woman Wisdom. Consider for example the following argument of Lefebure:

Jesus as the epiphany of the Logos can transform human lives precisely by being the effective presence of the creative, revelatory, and salvific power of the cosmos. If the Logos who is incarnate in Jesus is also present throughout all of history offering life and light to humans, then we do not have a "moralism" based simply on human efforts . . . . On the basis of a Logos Christology, both Rahner and Pittenger will challenge Bultmann's restriction of the area of grace to the historical proclamation of the Gospel; both will insist that the availability of salvation outside of an encounter with Jesus or the Christian Church in no way implies a Pelagian reliance on the sufficiency of human efforts alone.<sup>23</sup>

The last sentence of this quote is especially telling. Lefebure is at least in part attracted to Pittenger and Rahner because of their arguments against historical particularity in regard to the matter of salvation. It is striking how Lefebure wants to talk about the Logos who is incarnate in Jesus, rather than as Jesus. Further, one may also note here and throughout Lefebure's analysis of Rahner and Pittenger the deliberate blurring of the distinction between a doctrine of creation and redemption, such that it is assumed that the natural theology one can deduce from examining creation or general human experiences, both religious and otherwise, can in itself be saving.

Missing from this whole discussion is the repeated NT emphasis on active faith in Jesus Christ as *the* means of salvation for the world, and the impetus for the missionary orientation of early Christianity. Likewise missing is the Pauline assumption encapsulated in Rom. 1 that not only have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, but that Gentiles outside of Christ, though they have had revealed to them the reality and power of God in creation, have exchanged the truth about God for various forms of idolatry and false religion.<sup>24</sup>

Instead Lefebure, following the lead especially of Pittenger, but also of Rahner, wishes to speak of "anonymous Christians," by which is meant people who are saved in other faith traditions with no conscious faith in or affirmation of Jesus as Saviour.<sup>25</sup> Again this argument is

ultimately grounded in the assumption that Jesus is but a, even if the most perfect, revelation of the Logos of God.

In many ways it is ironic that Lefebure, or for that matter Rahner, should choose Johannine Christology as the starting point for a wisdom theology of universalism, for it is precisely in this Gospel where one hears most strongly and clearly "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except by me." (Jn. 14.6). Not only is Lefebure's exposition of John 1 not consonant with Johannine theology elsewhere in this Gospel, it is also not the most plausible reading of Jn. 1, either as a pre-Johannine hymn fragment, or as it is used in the Fourth Gospel.

In Jn. 1, the sort of universalism Lefebure is interested in championing is clearly not the thrust of that particular passage. It is Jesus as the Logos, not the Logos *in* Jesus that is seen as the universal saviour in Jn. 1, and this sets the tone for what follows in this Gospel. The point of the passage is to say that the Logos, who took on a human nature, and thus became Jesus, was and is God. This Logos pre-existed as God though the Logos was not the exhaustive representation of the deity.

The Logos is seen in this early Christian hymn as a pre-existent divine being, not merely a personification of the attributes of God and/or God's creation. The point of the passage is to argue for a certain sort of particularism, not a *primus inter partes* state of affairs.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, it would be skewing the whole drift of the Biblical trajectory of Wisdom to argue from the Wisdom corpus for a sort of universalism. If anything, the Biblical Wisdom material became more particularistic as time went on, as is shown not only in the works of Ben Sira or the Wisdom of Solomon but especially in the NT attempt to make Jesus "the Wisdom of God" climaxing with Jn. 1. Yet even in the earliest layers of aphoristic Wisdom in Proverbs there is already seen the evidence of a stress on a particular God, Yahweh, and that that God's resources and instructions are in essence the alpha and omega of Wisdom.

My point is that this sort of Wisdom approach not only does not do justice to NT passages dealing with Wisdom, but it is also very doubtful that it does justice to the OT and Intertestamental Wisdom corpus either. There is a significant misreading of the Biblical data when Lefebure, quoting J. D. Levenson, wishes to maintain that

In all likelihood the Wisdom teachers considered the gods of the gentiles, or at least of the sagacious and ethical gentiles as not different in kind from YHWH, the God of Israel. Perhaps they thought the different gods were really only different names for the one all-pervasive reality, which can be intuited in general human experience.<sup>27</sup>

In light of the evidence carefully reviewed in my book *Jesus the Sage*, this judgment can only be seen as modern wishful thinking, anachronistically projected back on the early Jewish sages. These sages were in fact, to a very significant degree, upholders of the particularistic Israelite religion of their day, and they used international wisdom material in the service of that agenda. Even in Ecclesiastes and Job, despite heavy criticism of false assumptions about life that certain sorts of Wisdom teaching had generated, one does not leave the context of an essentially Yahwistic faith.

Yet another underlying assumption of Lefebure's work is that the sages neglected, minimized, or even in some cases rejected the claims of special revelation in an Israelite context, in favor of the scrutiny of human and natural experience as the proper guides for behaviour and faith. Lefebure also seems to argue that the sages believed that special revelation came to Israel mainly if not only in the form of Woman Wisdom, perhaps in creation, but also in the sage's instructions.

To draw such a conclusion neglects a crucial factor — even within the earliest collections of Biblical Wisdom material there is evidence that the sages did not see themselves as offering an alternative world view to that of the legal, prophetic, and historical traditions of Israel. Their concern was to speak about ordinary recurring human experiences, as an additional source of guidance to the other sacred traditions. This seems to come to light in a saying like Prov. 29.18 where we read “Where there is no prophecy/vision the people cast off restraint, but happy are those who keep the torah.” D. Kidner has argued that the law, the prophets, and the Wisdom traditions overlap here. Certainly there is no sense here, or elsewhere in Proverbs that they are seen as competitors.<sup>28</sup> If the the Law is not in focus in this saying (Torah may well mean simply “instruction” here) the saying may well be suggesting that Wisdom instruction is offered when there is no current revelation/prophesy/vision to guide the people at the moment.

To suggest that the Wisdom tradition provides resources for those who wish to reject the claims of special revelation, and put in its place reasoned reflection on current experience is surely to try and appropriate this literature in a way that the Biblical sages would have rejected. They were not simply trying to teach that people must “recognize the complexity and ambiguity of human experience and to discern for themselves what stance is more helpful at any given time.”<sup>29</sup> They were also imparting a body of instructions, many of which they saw as clear and immutable directives regardless of one's circumstances. In particular teachings about reverencing Yahweh, and

listening to such authority figures as parents, kings, and sages appear in Proverbs over and over again. There is a delicate balance in this literature between an encouragement of individual discernment and an affirmation of the necessity of hearing and heeding various sorts of wisdom traditions and wise people. Furthermore, as has been pointed out repeatedly, from at least the time of Ben Sira on, there is a strong stress on revelatory Wisdom, Wisdom that comes to the sage by means of divine inspiration. It may even be that the Woman Wisdom figure in Proverbs reflects the first tentative steps in this direction already.<sup>30</sup>

At many points Lefebure's analysis of Rahner and Pittenger is telling. He is especially on target when he critiques both of these Catholic theologians for their failure to articulate the political dimension of Biblical teaching, and in particular their failure to appropriate the material found even in the Wisdom corpus that demands justice and equity from rulers, judges, and individual believers as well. Though the sages were no revolutionaries, they were nonetheless critical, sometimes severely so, of various unjust aspects of the status quo in Israel. That their criticisms are part of an in house discussion, may well have made it more telling for it is likely that a good portion of the OT Wisdom material arose from royal circles, perhaps even from the King's counselors as the sayings found in Prov. 25.2ff. would lead one to suspect.

Lefebure has done a fine job of highlighting the political implications of the Wisdom literature.<sup>31</sup> He is right to urge that "while the sages did not envision the transformation of the political and economic structures of their society, their repeated demands for justice contained principles for the criticism of political structures of society."<sup>32</sup>

Lefebure also is most helpful in pointing out the internal weaknesses and inconsistencies of Rahner's arguments for the definitive and normative character of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as a religion meant for all people on the one hand, and his arguments that God intends for salvation to reach people in their own various religious contexts and traditions.<sup>33</sup> This seems to be a case of having one's cake and eating it too.

A further major contribution of Lefebure's study is both his telling analysis of the influence of A.N. Whitehead on theologians like N. Pittenger, but also his illuminating discussion of how process theology provides a certain substratum or basis for modern feminist theology, including Sophia theology as well. He maintains that "what unites Whitehead and feminist thought is 'the emphasis in both on experience as a process of becoming in which entities are engaged in self-creation.'"<sup>34</sup>

The way this appropriation is played out is made clear in the works

of feminist scholars like M. Thie, M. Suchocki, S. G. Davaney, and P. Washburn to mention but a few. What is seen as especially crucial about process theology is its rejection of the idea that there are certain eternally given unchanging and authoritative teachings, traditions, or truths by which believers must always be bound. Rather some feminists and process thinkers share in common a "dedication to process rather than stasis, to egalitarian structures of social order rather than monarchical ones, an openness to the future a critique of concepts of absolute power and authority, a new view of interrelationships."<sup>35</sup>

Lefebure argues that the way that Wisdom material is used in this sort of feminist context is that

The wisdom tradition's use of experience as a critical principle of evaluation offers a precedent for contemporary critical feminist reflection upon the Bible. Fiorenza argues that the criterion for feminist Biblical interpretation "is not a revealed principle or a special canon of texts that can claim divine authority. Rather it is the experience of women struggling for liberation and wholeness."<sup>36</sup>

Yet Lefebure is quite right to point out that this hardly does full justice to the Wisdom tradition. While "Fiorenza's use of experience as a critical counterbalance to the received tradition finds precedent in the sages, . . . the sages themselves would probably not acknowledge a sharp dichotomy between reflection on experience and claims of revelation . . . Moreover the later wisdom tradition did acknowledge a genuine divine revelation in the events of the history of Israel."<sup>37</sup> It is doubtful that even the earliest Jewish sages doubted or disputed such a view. Indeed, it is highly unlikely that sages especially in the royal court would have been likely to reject or dispute the sacred historical traditions which provided the very basis for the Israelite monarchy.<sup>38</sup>

Students of Biblical Wisdom material will find a good deal of very stimulating discussion on Wisdom, and its uses in the modern era, especially in the final Chapter of Lefebure's study. Especially his discussion of the Feminist appropriation of both Pittenger (and Whitehead, and Cobb) and the Wisdom literature is enlightening and it prepares for the analysis of a fullscale treatment of Sophia/Hokmah by three feminist scholars, to which I intend to turn in the final section of this Chapter. As a parting comment on Lefebure's study however, one may well question whether the modern attempt to appropriate the Biblical Wisdom tradition in the service of modern agendas of religious pluralism, relativism, and universalism in fact does justice to those tradi-

tions. Indeed it often seems to be a matter of defacing and distorting rather than faithfully re-presenting the true face of the Biblical Wisdom traditions. In the end, even the Logos ideas as they are enunciated in Jn. 1 do not seem to support the logic of these sorts of arguments.

### III. Hagia Sophia?

Certainly the most controversial of the three books being examined in this final Chapter of our study is *Wisdom's Feast*, which is a 1989 revision and expansion of the 1986 book by the same writers entitled *Sophia: The Future of Feminist Spirituality*.<sup>39</sup> Like its predecessor this book, though written primarily for the educated lay person, intends not only to draw on the fruits of the scholarly debate about certain portions of the Biblical Wisdom corpus but to take the next step of appropriating some Wisdom material for the Church in the service of promoting a certain kind of feminist spirituality, in particular Sophia spirituality. Not surprisingly then, over half the book is devoted to presenting sermons, Bible studies, liturgies, poems, and songs that use and promote that sort of appropriation of Wisdom. The primary concern here will be to engage the book at the level of whether or not the use being made of Biblical Wisdom material in *Wisdom's Feast* is consonant with its original meanings, purposes, and trajectories. In short, is this book based on a sound exegetical and theological understanding of the Biblical data or does it amount to a misappropriation of this data?

The authors of *Wisdom's Feast* make clear that they are particularly indebted to scholars who may fairly be said to represent a vocal radical minority in the scholarly community's discussion of Wisdom literature. In particular this work relies heavily on various works of Burton Mack, including *Logos und Sophia: Untersuchungen zur Weisheitstheologie in hellenistische Judentum*, and his later study *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic*.<sup>40</sup> It also draws from J. C. Engelsman's *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine*<sup>41</sup> as well as various of E. Schussler Fiorenza's important works, especially *In Memory of Her*.<sup>42</sup> Often there seems to be an uncritical reliance on various of these sources without a meaningful interaction with scholars dealing with the same data that come to strikingly different conclusions.

The authors of *Wisdom's Feast* make quite clear that there are certain key texts that are relied on to produce a sophiaology — in particular, Proverbs 1.20-33; 3.18; 4.5-9; 8.1-36; 9.1-6; Wisdom of Solomon 6.12-17; 7.7-14; 7.22-30; 8.1-18; 9.9-11; 10.1-21; 11.1-26; Eccles. 1.9-14; 4.12-18; 6.18-31; 14.20-27; 15.1-10; 24.1-29; 51.13-22;



Baruch 3.29-38; 4. 1-4. From the NT the key texts are the Christological hymns found in Col. 1.15-17, and especially the prologue in Jn. 1; 1 Cor. 1.24-30; 2.6-8; and James 3.13-17. In addition to the use of these texts the authors also insert the name Sophia in place of Jesus in various Gospel texts (e.g. Jn. 13.1-20; Lk. 5.1-11).

It will be seen from the list of texts mentioned above, that a good deal of sophiaology is either based on texts that are for Protestants and Jews extra-canonical and for Catholics deutero-canonical, or is based on texts which do not directly mention a persona or personification called *Wisdom/Hokmah/Sophia*. For example, in James 3.13-18, there does not seem to be any attempt to portray Wisdom as a personal figure or personification, much less a goddess.

In addition to the canonical and extra-canonical resources listed above there is also a reliance on the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, in particular Logion 77 which reads in part "Cleave a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there."<sup>43</sup> This text seems to be crucial for the authors for throughout they wish to insist that Sophia is a divine presence that suffuses all things. In short they either assume or urge throughout this work a pantheistic, or panentheistic view of deity. This concept is frequently conveyed by means of a key term like "connectedness" or by the phrase "the web (or fibers) of life." There is no attempt at critical reflection on whether the Gnostic material, or a panentheistic view of God, might or might not be consonant with a Biblical view of God and Wisdom.<sup>44</sup>

One of the most fundamental assumptions and assertions in this work is that "Sophia is a real biblical person . . . a female goddess-like figure appearing clearly in the scriptures of the Hebrew tradition and less directly in the Christian Gospels and Epistles."<sup>45</sup> Though at times the authors seem to affirm they are speaking about the development of a literary figure Wisdom, or another way of naming the Biblical God elsewhere known as Yahweh or the Father, more often the claim quoted above is made, leaving the impression they believe they are talking about a real and second deity. The issue becomes further confused when the NT data is used and Jesus is either seen as Sophia (called Jesus-Sophia), or in some case the name Jesus is arbitrarily replaced by the name Sophia in various texts. Too often the Biblical data's historical context and content does not receive the careful attention and respect it deserves, but rather the Biblical sources are used as a quarry from which certain gems can be garnered to bolster the larger agenda of promoting panentheistic sophiaology.

Though I have dealt with the issue in some detail in *Jesus the Sage*, it is well if I ask again the question — Is the portrait of Lady Wisdom as painted in texts like Prov. 8 intended to represent a "real person"

or is it rather a personification of an attribute of God or perhaps God's creation, or both? In the first place one must note that various texts in Proverbs use different Hebrew forms for the word Wisdom. For instance, in Proverbs 1.20 the feminine plural noun *bokmot* is used and this is followed by feminine singular verb forms. This may be because here there is what has been called an "abstract plural" (like the word kindness).<sup>47</sup> As OT scholar Kathleen Farmer says "Since the Hebrew plural is often used to indicate an abstract concept, we might conclude from her name that this figure represents all wisdom wrapped into one symbolic character."<sup>48</sup> Using the sort of logic found in *Wisdom's Feast* however one would think that the reader would be obliged to think of several deities (due to the plural noun here), and because of the gender of the word, female ones.

In Proverbs 8.1 there is the noun *bokmah*, feminine singular in form followed by feminine singular verb forms. Yet it seems that the author of Proverbs is talking about the same thing in both Proverbs 1 and 8, despite the variety of forms. This should caution us against making too much out of either the form or gender of nouns in a language in which all such substantives have variable gendered forms.

In fact, there is no likelihood at all that the Biblical writers were talking about a goddess, for various other key words in Proverbs are used as synonyms for *bokmah*, and no one is arguing for a deity called "Torah" (Instruction) or "Binah" (Understanding). Nor presumably would one wish to insist that Dame Folly was a "real person" much less a goddess simply because the technique of personification is used. In Prov. 1.20-33, 8 and 9, Wisdom and Folly are spoken of as comparable though opposite figures that one should alternately follow or flee from. This is why it is that it is both right and reasonable to conclude as K. Farmer does that "In these units both wisdom and folly are personified; they are pictured as if they were women engaging in human forms of activity."<sup>49</sup> In short what one says about one of these figures one must also say of the other for they are both spoken of using the same sort of grammar of discourse.

It is also critical to point out that while it seems likely to be true that the author of Proverbs 8 may be drawing on some of the Egyptian material that describes *Ma'at* in similar terms, it is not sufficient to note such parallels and then assume that because *Ma'at* is treated as a real deity in the Egyptian sources that the author of Proverbs 8 must be making the same ontological assumptions about Wisdom. The crucial question is *how* the author uses such borrowed data, and on that score the evidence is not at all favorable to the conclusion that the author reflected or intended to foster or even was trying to suppress the worship of a real deity called *Hokmah*.

It is frankly surprising considering the main agenda of the book, when we find it admitted near the conclusion of *Wisdom's Feast* that "in Jewish-Hellenism, Sophia was incorporated into the tradition in a way that preserved Jewish monotheism and resisted divine dimorphism — the myth of the divine couple . . ." <sup>50</sup> This is as much as to concede that the Biblical data does not encourage goddess worship, not even under the name of *Hokmah*. <sup>51</sup>

One of the favorite texts often quoted in *Wisdom's Feast* to support the book's agenda is 1 Cor. 1.30. This text however is talking about what Christ was made by God for believers by means of his death and resurrection. <sup>52</sup> The intent is to say something about what Christ became for believers, not to offer reflections on the gender of God and certainly not to encourage goddess Sophia worship. The Paul who wrote 1 Cor. 1.30 is also the Paul who wrote 1 Cor. 8.6, affirming a Christian adaptation of traditional Jewish monotheism.

In 1 Cor 2.7 there is not even a personification of wisdom. Rather there wisdom is said to be something which God decreed before the ages. In the immediately preceding verse Paul has indicated that this *sophia* from God is something that may be contrasted with human *sophia*. As 2.10 makes clear it is something one receives by means of revelation through the Holy Spirit. Even more strikingly in 2.10 Paul says that what the Spirit is revealing is *ta bathe tou theou*, which is then called in 2.11 *ta tou anthropou*, which the JB rightly translates "the qualities of anyone." The context makes clear that an attribute or quality is being discussed. It is not a "divine figure, a mythological person of feminine gender" being discussed here or elsewhere in Paul's letters. <sup>53</sup>

That Jesus is exalted as the embodiment of God's wisdom in various places in the NT, in particular in the Christological hymns, few scholars would care to dispute. As I have traced the trajectory of Wisdom in the Bible, it appears that the focus became more and more particular, until the focus is on one particular human being — Jesus. The Wisdom language is used to add lustre to or to exalt him. It is attempting to say that all of God's Wisdom ultimately points to and is truly embodied in Jesus. The author's of *Wisdom's Feast* as well as other advocates of sophiaology seek to reverse this trajectory by arguing as follows: "Since the early portraits of Jesus, including those in the New Testament, made such extensive use of Sophia's characteristics, it is both justified and in the spirit of that process to put Sophia into the now much more familiar Jesus stories as well." <sup>54</sup> This assumes that Jesus points to, or is a mere manifestation of Sophia, not the reverse.

This is surely to miss the point of the pre-existence language not only in Jn. 1, but also for instance in Col. 1 and Phil. 2 as well. In those

hymns it is the Son of God who pre-exists and is God's Wisdom, and he continues to embody that wisdom once he takes on a human nature and becomes Jesus. What once was seen as a personified attribute in the OT is now seen as a real divine person — the Son of God, who takes on a human nature, and reveals divine Wisdom in person on earth.

At some point the advocates of sophiaology will also have to come to grips with the fact that if one inserts Sophia into various Gospel texts, one is in fact making the rather Gnostic or docetic move of denying the essential humanity and historical character of Jesus. This is certainly to violate the intent and spirit of the Gospel texts, as well as their historical givenness.

There are various tensions or even contradictions to be found in *Wisdom's Feast* if one looks hard enough. On the one hand one is told "to encounter Sophia is to encounter the divine as female"<sup>55</sup> but on the other hand one hears "We do not really mean that God is male when we use masculine pronouns and imagery, and we do not really mean that God is female when we use feminine pronouns and imagery."<sup>56</sup> This latter quote is certainly nearer the mark than the former and it properly raises the issue of God language, to which I now turn briefly before concluding.

The authors of *Wisdom's Feast* may be commended for being one, among now a chorus of many who properly force one to rethink the issue of God language. If the Church wishes to continue to see the Bible as providing a normative guide for the way that it is to speak about God, it must continue to do much more serious reflecting on many matters.

Firstly, the Church must consider meaningfully the issue of whether it is true that *all* language about God is analogical and/or metaphorical. It is clear enough for instance when a Biblical writer says that Yahweh is like a warrior fighting for Israel that an analogy is being drawn. This means that there will be a, or some point(s) of contact between the two things being compared but in other respects they are quite different. Analogies or similes are not straight forward identity statements. One must also bear in mind that Wisdom speech is almost always metaphorical and analogical in character.

Often such analogies, similes, or metaphors are intending to speak about either an activity or an attribute of God without making ontological much less gender claims. C. Westermann's helpful study *The Parables of Jesus in Light of the OT* shows just how often such comparisons are made in the Bible, and how in a vast majority of cases it is an event or activity in one sphere that is being compared to an event or activity in another. Whether activity or attribute is in focus,

the use of feminine or masculine imagery of God in the Bible to speak of these things does not in the final analysis either raise or settle the issue of what sort of gender language *ought* to be predicated of God as a being. Even in the case of an important text like Is. 49.15, it is clear from the context that God is not being called a woman, but rather God's attachment to and pity for God's people is said to be analagous to the attachment and compassion of a mother for her breast-feeding baby. Such language tells us a lot about how God relates to humankind, but it gives very little guidance on the question of whether God ought to be named or addressed using male or female language.<sup>58</sup>

It is one thing to say God *has* certain attributes or performs certain activities, it is quite another to say God *is* such attributes or activities. In short what is predicated of the part is not necessarily predicated of the whole. This means that the predication of feminine *or* masculine attributes or activities to God does not in itself provide any warrant for calling God as a being by certain sorts of female or male names.

In the God language debate a great deal more attention needs to be paid to the issues of the names, not merely the attributes of God. While it may be contended that even names are metaphorical to some extent, it is not clear that this is completely the case. For instance, it is one thing to say that in some respects God is like a father, it is another thing to call God Father, and make that an identity statement.

In the Semitic tradition so often names are not mere labels but rather connote something about one's very nature or character. Thus, it would be very surprising indeed if this were not so in many cases in the Bible when God is named. What Yahweh, for instance connotes, if it is indeed a short form of *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, however is probably not something about God's gender, but probably that God reveals God's character in part through divine future deeds. The fact that God in the Bible is not given a female name (El Shaddai probably not being an exception to this rule) may be very significant. It may say something about how the Biblical writers really viewed the very being of God.

On the other hand, it can and has been argued that the use of male language of God simply reflects the great condescension of the one true God revealing the divine character in a thoroughly patriarchal setting. The real problem with that sort of argument is that *all* or almost all of the surrounding cultures in the ancient near east were strongly patriarchal in character and *yet* many of them called deities by female names. Israelite religion, and for that matter Christianity, stands out from many of its contemporary religious competitors in this regard in that they do *not* give God female names, while nonetheless using female imagery to speak of the actions or attributes of God (cf. e.g. Jn. 3.3,5-7; Dt. 32.18). I doubt that this is because early Judaism and

early Christianity were simply the most androcentric religions of this period of antiquity. Some other explanation needs to be provided to adequately explain this datum. One needs to ask what was it about the experience of the Biblical God shared by both women and men in the Biblical era that led to this remarkable phenomenon? This question deserves far more attention than it is usually given, perhaps because the assertion "all language about God is metaphorical or analogical" is taken without proof as an indisputable truth.

For the Christian person who takes the NT as providing at least a pattern if not a mandate for the way God should be addressed, doubtless the calling of God Father will continue, not least because it appears likely that this is indeed the way not only Jesus addressed God (as *abba*) but also the way he taught his disciples to address God.<sup>59</sup> Yet it must be remembered that the term Father is a relational term. That is, a person is a father only in relationship to his children. One must then ask the question, does relational language say only something about how God acts towards us, or does it also say something about how God is? When speaking of God as an eternal being existing before the creation of the world and before the existence of human beings, would it be appropriate for *us* to call the deity Father, when God at that point had no human children? It would seem not, and if this is the case then our use of the term Father says something about God's role or what God became once there were humans, not what God is in God's divine being.<sup>60</sup>

Marianne Meye Thompson has recently put the matter very well: "By speaking of God as Father, we do not mean that God marries, procreates, or is ontologically male. In fact no responsible theologian would argue (or ever has argued) that God is in essence and being male. God is without gender, for gender belongs to physical bodies."<sup>61</sup>

This brings us back to the original quote above from *Wisdom's Feast* about God being neither male nor female. It seems appropriate to distinguish between the *roles* God assumes in relationship to us, and God's *gender*. The Bible does not seem to insist that God has a gender, much less a male gender. In short the Bible is not lobbying for a male, female, or androgenous deity. R. R. Ruether is also right to warn "We should guard against concepts of divine androgyny that simply ratify on the divine level the patriarchal split of the masculine and feminine. In such a concept, the feminine side of God, as a secondary or mediating principle would act in the same subordinate and limited roles in which females are allowed to act in the patriarchal order."<sup>62</sup> This criticism certainly must be applied to Sophiaology since Wisdom is clearly seen as subordinant to and dependent on Yahweh in so many ways in the OT.<sup>63</sup>

It would appear then that Jesus' use of the *abba* language intended to convey to us that God relates to us like a loving Father would, and that that relationship is a very intimate and positive one. It may of course be objected that for people who have been abused by their human fathers it becomes very difficult to relate to God using the language of father. Indeed it has also been argued that since a patriarchal culture is inherently repressive and abusive of women that one ought to eschew using male language of God for this reason as well. These sorts of cries of hurt and abused individuals must be taken very seriously and treated with great care and sensitivity.

The question I would want to raise is about the appropriateness of doing our theology, or creating our God language primarily *in reaction against* certain abuses or misuses of the predominant language used of God. For example, if the shoe was on the other foot, and a person had been abused by his or her mother, would one also want to argue that one should avoid calling God mother or "she" for this reason? This strikes me as an argument that fails to take note of the time honored dictum *Abusus non tollit usum*. The abuse of something does not rule out its proper use. Thus while it is no doubt true that sometimes male God language has been used in abusive ways, ways that suggested that women are somehow less in the image of God than men, the real question is whether this is always necessarily the case. One will also want to ask should the example of a bad and abusive father dictate to us how a person should or should not talk about God? The answer to this must surely be no, since there are both positive and negative images possible of fathers and mothers. There are both good and bad fathers and mothers and when such language is predicated of God it is understood to mean that God relates to us as the best of all possible parents.

Yet lest one try to circumvent the problems that gender language causes when applied to God by dropping all gender language of God, it must also be urged that the use of gender language of God is important, not least because God as the Bible presents the deity is not merely a force, or a process, but a personal being. To call God merely a parent, rather than say a father, is in the end to de-personalize God. Gender language is perhaps the most personal way one has to describe a being, including God. A human being does not have some sort of neutral core of his or her identity called personhood that is entirely separate from his or her sexual make-up. Gender says something essential about who a person really is, as does one's gender specific roles. It is probable that the Biblical writers thought that by using such language they also were saying something essential about God's character, without wishing to assert God is either a female or a male

being. Working carefully and prayerfully through these sorts of issues is crucial for the future of the Church as it ministers to both women and men. One can only hope that in the ongoing discussion of God-language, Wisdom will inform all the decisions made. It is also my hope that *all* of the Biblical images and names for God will be used in the Church, and in this way at least a less monolithically androcentric picture of God will be conveyed.

In this essay we examined three different faces that Wisdom seems to be taking in our era. We have attempted to critique them in regard to whether they faithfully represent or mis-represent the views and trajectory of the Biblical Wisdom corpus. No doubt the sages would all have been pleased that the struggle to find a wise approach to life still continues in the midst of a chaotic world, even if they may have disagreed with many of the ways the Biblical wisdom material is now being appropriated.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Jesus the Sage and the Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress 1994).

<sup>2</sup> I am well aware that the latter of these three works is not a scholarly but rather a popular work, but it shows how a certain way of thinking about Wisdom matters can develop.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the discussion in the first chapter of *Jesus the Sage*.

<sup>4</sup> Eaton *Contemplative Face*, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Eaton *Contemplative*, p. 142.

<sup>6</sup> Eaton *Contemplative*, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> G. Von Rad *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988 rpr.), p. 62.

<sup>8</sup> Tao Te Ching 19. Cf. Eaton *Contemplative*, p. 66. The following saying he quotes about the necessity of reaching a state of inactivity, by unlearning all one has learned, also hardly sounds like something a Biblical sage might urge.

<sup>9</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City: Image Books, 1959), pp. 128-9.

<sup>10</sup> Chesterton *Orthodoxy*, pp. 130-32.

<sup>11</sup> cf. Von Rad *Wisdom in Israel*, *passim*.



<sup>12</sup> Eaton *Contemplative*, p. 89.

<sup>13</sup> Eaton *Contemplative*, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Eaton *Contemplative*, p. 86.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Eaton *Contemplative*, p. 87.

<sup>16</sup> So Eaton *Contemplative*, pp. 101-03.

<sup>17</sup> Eaton *Contemplative*, p. 40.

<sup>18</sup> Contrast the quote by Eaton *Contemplative*, p. 61 from the Chinese sages — “Resign yourself to the sequence of things . . .”

<sup>19</sup> Eaton *Contemplative*, p. 116.

<sup>20</sup> Lefebure *toward*, p. xiv.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. chap. one of *Jesus the Sage* for a detailed discussion of this issue.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Lefebure *Toward*, pp. 12-13. This has far reaching implications for the way this author treats the Wisdom tradition.

<sup>23</sup> Lefebure *Toward*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. pp. above.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Lefebure *Toward*, pp. 246ff.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. above pp.

<sup>27</sup> This quote comes from Levenson’s *The Universal Horizon of Jewish Particularism* (N.Y.: The American Jewish Committee, 1985), p. 6. Cf. Lefebure’s discussion *Toward*, p. 242.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. D. Kidner *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, & Ecclesiastes* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), pp. 175-76.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. pp 102-103 above.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Lefebure *Toward*, pp. 200ff.

<sup>32</sup> Lefebure *Toward*, p. 209.

<sup>33</sup> Lefebure *Toward*, p. 248.

<sup>34</sup> Lefebure *Toward*, pp. 238-9.

<sup>35</sup> P. Washburn “The Dynamics of Female Experience: Process Models and Human Values,” in *Feminism and Process Thought* (N.Y.: E. Mellen Press, 1981), p. 87.

<sup>36</sup> Lefebure *Toward*, p. 225-6.

<sup>37</sup> Lefebure *Toward*, p. 226.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Chap. 8 of *Jesus the Sage*.

<sup>39</sup> For an interesting discussion of the effect this book is having on the Protestant Church, in particular United Methodists (two of the authors, Cady and Taussig are Methodist ministers) cf. L. Haferd "Some pray to Sophia: United Methodists divided on worship of female" *The Akron Beacon Journal*, Sat. Sept. 1, 1990, pp. B1 and B4.

<sup>40</sup> The former work was published by Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht in 1973; the latter by the University of Chicago Press in 1985.

<sup>41</sup> Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979.

<sup>42</sup> Subtitled *A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, N.Y. Crossroads, 1984.

<sup>43</sup> Used on pp. 136-7 of *Wisdom's Feast*.

<sup>44</sup> The authors cite, but do not meaningfully interact with the helpful work by D. Good *Reconstructing the Tradition of Sophia in Gnostic Literature* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987). Crucial here is the appropriation of texts like Wis. Sol. 7.22ff. with the assumption the author is talking about deity per se, rather than an aspect or attribute of deity or of God's creation.

<sup>45</sup> *Wisdom's Feast*, p. 10.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. the discussion of Proverbs 8 in *Jesus the Sage*, Chapter 1.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. K. Farmer *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Who Knows What is Good?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 51.

<sup>48</sup> Farmer *Proverbs*, p. 28.

<sup>49</sup> Farmer *Proverbs*, p. 20.

<sup>50</sup> *Wisdom's Feast*, p. 166.

<sup>51</sup> It should be noted that the back cover of the book quotes a review from *The Christian Century* magazine which says of the earlier book now incorporated into *Wisdom's Feast* that it is "a provocative, exciting, exploratory attempt to introduce the goddess into the lives of contemporary women." This assessment seems to me to be largely correct. This agenda becomes especially clear near to the end of the book where the writers discuss tactics as to how to slip sophiology in the Church's worship quietly, suggesting that they know that if it is openly presented it will be seen as contradictory to the essence of Christian faith (cf. pp. 192ff).

<sup>52</sup> Cf. pp. above.

<sup>53</sup> *Wisdom's Feast*, p. 162.

<sup>54</sup> *Wisdom's Feast*, p. 147.

<sup>55</sup> *Wisdom's Feast*, p. 188.

<sup>56</sup> *Wisdom's Feast*, p. 163.

<sup>57</sup> I would demur from Westermann's conclusion that this is *always* the case — compare his *The Parables of Jesus in the Light of the OT* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), pp. 150-151. Sometimes surely attributes of God such as God's *besed* are referred to as well as events or actions.

<sup>58</sup> Is. 42.14 is even more clearly an example of a simile where the point of comparison is the activity of groaning not the fact that the analogy is drawn with a woman groaning because of labor pains.

<sup>59</sup> On Jesus' probable use of *abba* cf. my *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

<sup>60</sup> One may wish to debate the issue of the eternality of the Son of God, but that is not directly relevant here, for I am discussing what is appropriate language for us as ordinary mortals to use of God and our relationship to the deity. On any showing, the NT insists the Son of God had a very unique relationship to God, which in many respects goes beyond what a normal human relationship to God can be.

<sup>61</sup> "Speaking of God: a Question of God Language" *Catalyst* 17.3 (1991), pp. 1, 7, 8, here p. 1 and 7.

<sup>62</sup> R. R. Ruether *Sexism and God Talk*, p. 61.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. the exegesis of Prov. 8 pp. 113-14 above. Even in that text Wisdom is not likely seen as an independent co-creating being.

