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# EARLY CHURCH UNDERSTANDINGS OF JESUS AS THE FEMALE DIVINE

The Scandal of the Scandal of Particularity

SALLY DOUGLAS

BLOOMSBURY

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**Early Church Understandings of  
Jesus as the Female Divine**

**The *Scandal* of the Scandal of Particularity**

**Sally Douglas**

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Finally, I am grateful to the early Jesus communities who sang, prayed and celebrated the divine embodied in Jesus in such a scandalous, life-giving way.

## ABBREVIATIONS

ASC	Altered State of Consciousness
B.C.E.	Before Common Era
C.E.	Common Era
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version



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# 1

## THE SCANDAL OF THE SCANDAL OF PARTICULARITY

Jesus' status inflames debate. This has been the case since the historical Jesus started teaching with an assuredness that upset those in religious authority, feasting with social outcasts and the 'other' thus turning them into friends, and enduring, rather than inflicting, suffering, violence and death. In the aftermath of Jesus' state-sanctioned murder this debate was fanned by people claiming to have ongoing experiences not only of the risen Jesus, but also of a new, collective 'risen' life enabled through Jesus.

Central to debates about Jesus' status, which have continued for nearly 2,000 years, is whether in some way Jesus uniquely embodies the divine. The phrase the 'scandal of particularity' has come to signify this. Lesslie Newbigin summarizes this expression:

The Christian tradition affirms that God has made his mind and purpose known to some (not to all) people through events in history – not all events but some, the memory of which is treasured in the Christian tradition. This affirmation is a cause of scandal, what is sometimes called the scandal of particularity.<sup>1</sup>

As Christendom disintegrates in the West, the debate has not burned itself out. Instead a renewed energy has fuelled the quest to discover who Jesus really was. Various individuals and schools of thought pit themselves against one another as they insist that they have discovered the truth. The diversity of these truths about Jesus is demonstrated by recent publications. On the one hand there are those who insist that the evidence reveals that Jesus was exalted to God status through a process of human re-imagining.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand there are those who insist that the evidence reveals that, from the outset, it was believed that God became

1. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), p. 72 (brackets original). Newbigin goes on to explore the implications of this: 'On what rational grounds can one single out particular happenings from the whole seamless robe of history and say: 'Here God acted; here he revealed himself?' Newbigin, *Gospel*, p. 72.

2. Bart Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014).

flesh in Jesus and that Jesus thought of himself in divine terms.<sup>3</sup> What is surprising is that both sides of this debate consistently eclipse a central proclamation of who Jesus is across earliest christological understandings.

The *scandal* of the scandal of particularity is that in various Second Testament and early church texts in which Jesus is celebrated as divine, Jesus is understood and celebrated as the *female divine*.<sup>4</sup> Insufficient attention has been devoted to this and to the question of why this is so. In recognizing the prominence of Wisdom christology and Wisdom soteriology in Second Testament and early church texts and investigating why in the early Jesus movement Jesus is imaged as Woman Wisdom, potent insights are gained that slice through the polemics of contemporary christological debate. In excavating why the church in the second and third centuries began to obscure this understanding, and exploring the implications of re-engaging with this proclamation of Jesus-Woman Wisdom in contemporary context, simultaneously ancient and fresh insights are gained. When the *scandal* of the scandal of particularity is recognized, understandings of the divine, christology, soteriology, church, discipleship, gender, 'other' and self are radically recalibrated.

Before embarking upon this investigation, contemporary christological debate needs to be outlined in order to contextualize the work. It is increasingly popular to argue that Jesus' divinity emerged through a process of accretion. This view is evidenced by Bart Ehrman, 'in early Christianity the views of Christ got "higher and higher" with the passing of time, as he became increasingly identified with the divine'.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Geza Vermes argues that:

By the end of the first century Christianity had lost sight of the real Jesus and of the original meaning of his message. Paul, John and their churches replaced

3. Michael Bird et al., *How God became Jesus: The Real Origins of Belief in Jesus' Divine Nature – A Response to Bart Ehrman* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), see pp. 41–70.

4. Understandings of Woman Wisdom's divinity in Hebrew texts will be discussed in Chapter 2. In English scholars variously refer to σοφία as Sophia, Lady Wisdom, wisdom and personified Wisdom. The term Woman Wisdom is utilized in this work to indicate her presence in the texts under discussion. This title reflects both her importance as a divine wisdom figure in First Testament and intertestamental texts and also acknowledges her female personification, a central attribute of her personhood. The language of First and Second Testament is used to signify the biblical text in this work. The descriptors of Old and New Testament have the unfortunate inference that the new replaces the old. Use of the term Hebrew Bible, while appealing, does not adequately reflect that some Jewish texts were not written in Hebrew, including the Wisdom of Solomon, which is of significance to this research. While not without problems, the descriptor of First and Second Testament acknowledges the faith of the early church that their convictions about Jesus were in accord with, and grew out of, their understanding of Jewish sacred scriptures.

5. Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 353. Earlier Ehrman states that the Jesus movement: 'came up with increasingly exalted things to say about him and magnified his importance more and more with the passing of time. Eventually they came to claim that he was God come to earth', Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 212.

him by the otherworldly Christ of faith, and his insistence on personal effort, concentration and trust in God by a reliance on the saving merits of an eternal, divine Redeemer... Jesus, the religious man with an irresistible charismatic charm, was metamorphosed into Jesus the Christ, the transcendent object of the Christian religion.<sup>6</sup>

Likewise, Robert Funk states that from a 'relatively modest beginning, Jesus was gradually elevated to godhood in the second and third centuries.'<sup>7</sup> This has become a significant view in popular theology.<sup>8</sup> On the face of it, this understanding of a divine escalator, in which Jesus is a charismatic man at the bottom and made into the 'God one' by the time he is conveyed to the top, appears reasonable.<sup>9</sup> However, as will be demonstrated, the textual evidence disrupts this theory.

Earlier than Second Testament and early church texts composed in the first century, Jesus is worshipped as divine. This is evidenced in the hymns and liturgical fragments that are embedded within these sources, which celebrate and proclaim Jesus' divinity.<sup>10</sup> These fragments bear witness to worship practices that

6. Geza Vermes, *The Changing Faces of Jesus* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 263.

7. Robert Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1996), p. 31.

8. As illustrated by John Shelby Spong: 'After much debate over the first several centuries of Christianity's life, theism's capture of this faith system was made complete. Incarnation was defined. Jesus was the God-Man – perfect in divinity, perfect in humanity'. John Shelby Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith is Dying and How a New Faith is Being Born* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 110. See also Val Webb, *Like Catching Water in a Net: Human Attempts to Describe the Divine* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2007), pp. 191–209.

9. This delineation between the good earthly 'man' Jesus and the corrupted 'deity' Christ is, at times, propelled by late twentieth- and twenty-first-centuries agendas. Rejection of the ideology that people will be excluded from God's embrace and condemned if they do not believe that Jesus is the 'God one' in a particular way contributes to the minimization of early church understanding of Jesus' divine particularity. Demonstrating this, Robert Funk states: 'As I look around me, I am distressed by those who are enslaved by a Christ imposed on them by a narrow and rigid legacy ... I have a residual hankering to free my fellow human beings from that bondage, which can be as abusive as any form of slavery', Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 19. While sharing sympathy with this concern, this motivation does not permit the denial of Second Testament and early church evidence that challenges the view that proclamations about Jesus' divinity were a construct of the later church.

10. Just over a century ago, William Bousset pointed out that primitive worship in Jesus communities was 'in general still addressed to God'. William Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), p. 131. However, he also acknowledged that: 'On the other hand, in the Pauline age the custom of prayer in the name of Jesus must already have appeared' and that there is Pauline evidence of 'brief outcries of prayer, [and] sighs of the oppressed and overflowing heart which in worship were addressed directly to Jesus'. Bousset, *Kyrios*, p. 132.

were sufficiently established and familiar in Jesus communities to be quoted in the composition of these texts.<sup>11</sup> As Larry Hurtado states:

A number of New Testament passages are widely thought to incorporate hymnic material from the worship of first century Christian circles (e.g. Phil. 2.6-11; Col. 1.15-20; Jn 1.1-18; Eph. 5.14; 1 Tim. 3.16) ... The first thing to note is how much this hymnic material in the Pauline letters and other early Christian writings is focused on the celebration of Jesus, his significance and work.<sup>12</sup>

Hurtado rightly points out that in this early Christian worship 'There are two distinguishable figures, God and Jesus, but in Paul's letters there is an evident concern to understand the reverence given to Jesus as an extension of the worship of God.'<sup>13</sup> Despite Ehrman's commitment to the view that the earthly Jesus was elevated to 'a divine being' through a process of accretion, he concurs with Hurtado's assessment of these sources and states, 'Christians insisted that they believed in only one God, and yet, they revered Jesus as divine and worshipped their "Lord Jesus" along with God.'<sup>14</sup> Reflecting on Hurtado's work, Ehrman admits that 'virtually right away' in the Jesus movement, Jesus was being 'worshipped as a divine being'.<sup>15</sup>

Ehrman acknowledges the immediacy of this early practice of worshipping Jesus as 'a divine being', yet maintains that it was over time that Jesus was 'increasingly identified with the divine'.<sup>16</sup> He seeks to smooth over this disjuncture by arguing that the first Christians' christological understanding of Jesus was from the perspective of 'adoptionism'.<sup>17</sup> Ehrman states, 'The earliest Christians held exaltation Christologies in which the human being Jesus was made the Son of God – for example, at his resurrection or at his baptism.'<sup>18</sup> This is not the whole

11. See 1 Cor. 8.6; Col. 1.15-20; Heb. 1.3 as well as the prologue of Jn. 1.1-18. These passages will be discussed in detail in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 as will other early church texts that may also have been composed at the same time, or even before some Second Testament texts.

12. Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), pp. 147–8 (brackets original).

13. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus*, p. 151.

14. Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 235.

15. Ehrman recognizes the significance of Hurtado's 'two important books' and summarizes them by stating that they explore the 'dilemma of how Jesus could be worshiped as a divine being so early in the history of the Christian religion – virtually right away – if in fact the Christians considered themselves monotheists, not ditheists (worshippers of two gods)', Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 235 (brackets original).

16. Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 353.

17. Ehrman, *How Jesus*, pp. 230–1. Ehrman does not like the term 'adoptionism', Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 249.

18. Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 249, see also pp. 230–49.

story. While some early texts do indicate an 'adoptionist' christology, other early texts do not. There is, potentially, evidence of an 'adoptionist' Wisdom christology in Mark's baptism account, and, perhaps, *1 Clement* 36.<sup>19</sup> However, in other early texts that celebrate Jesus as Woman Wisdom an 'incarnational' christology predominates, as evidenced in the Colossians hymn in which Jesus is pre-existent and the one who embodies the 'fullness of God'. When reflecting on these ancient sources, care must be taken not to demand that they provide answers to the theological dilemmas of later centuries, or those of the contemporary context. Regardless of how Jesus was understood to *be* divine, whether in an 'adoptionist' manner or in an 'incarnational' manner, or both, the liturgical fragments in Second Testament and early church texts indicate that from a very early period in the Jesus movement Jesus *was* being celebrated as 'a divine being'. While these Jesus communities may not have been able to articulate an understanding of how Jesus was – or came to be – divine to the satisfaction of later christological criteria, this evidence indicates that they worshipped Jesus as 'a divine being' nonetheless.

Despite their contrasting positions, Ehrman and Hurtado are examples of scholars who rightly recognize the early hymn and prayer fragments of Second Testament texts in which Jesus is worshipped as 'a divine being'.<sup>20</sup> However, neither Ehrman nor Hurtado adequately acknowledge, or explore, that in a significant proportion of these fragments in Second Testament *and* in early church texts Jesus is imaged and celebrated as Woman Wisdom. This is evidenced in Ehrman's discussion of 1 Cor. 8.6. Ehrman admits that what is said about Jesus 'sounds very much like what non-Christian Jewish texts occasionally say about God's Wisdom. And God's Wisdom was *itself* understood to be God.'<sup>21</sup> In this acknowledgement Ehrman suppresses Woman Wisdom's personhood and gender, not least through the use of the neuter pronoun, even *as* he reflects that Jesus is likely being imaged as her. The question of why in this text Jesus would be imaged as

19. While not a wisdom text, Rom 1.3-4 is another example of a possible 'adoptionist' text.

20. James Dunn also recognizes that: 'praise being offered *for* the exaltation of Jesus Christ as God's right-hand plenipotentiary would logically and naturally entail that praise be offered *to* the plenipotentiary himself'. James Dunn, *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus? The New Testament Evidence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 41 (italics original). Richard Bauckham also underscores the very early Christian practice of worshipping Jesus in hymns and prayers. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), pp. 127–39. Bauckham states that the worship of Jesus: 'corresponds to the very high christology of the earliest Christian communities, according to which Jesus exercises all the functions of God in relation to the world as Saviour, Lord and Judge ... The one who functions as God shares the divine identity with God, and, naturally, receives divine worship ...', Bauckham, *Jesus and the God*, p. 138.

21. Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 268 (italics added).

Hebrew Woman Wisdom is not entertained by Ehrman.<sup>22</sup> Not only does Ehrman minimize *Woman Wisdom* in the passage; he minimizes the priority of Wisdom christology, by arguing, without sufficient evidence, that this christology is based on an understanding of Jesus being an angel: 'Paul clearly thought Jesus was God in a certain sense – but he does not think that he was the Father. He was an angelic divine being before coming into the world; he was the Angel of the Lord.'<sup>23</sup>

The evidence of First Testament and intertestamental texts demonstrates that *Woman Wisdom* was not understood as an angel.<sup>24</sup> In Charles Gieschen's examination of 'angelomorphic' christology, he discusses understandings of *Woman Wisdom* and rightly points out that *Woman Wisdom* is presented as being 'distinct from the rest of creation'<sup>25</sup> and that 'she is God's companion, even a participant in creation.'<sup>26</sup> Gieschen also recognizes that *Woman Wisdom* is described as being enthroned with God (e.g. Wis. 9.4; 10),<sup>27</sup> and that she proclaims her glory in the midst of the angelic host (Sir. 24.2).<sup>28</sup> Furthermore Gieschen argues that in Proverbs 8.30, the description of *Woman Wisdom* 'beside' God: 'is indicative of more than the position of a typical angel.'<sup>29</sup>

22. Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 268.

23. Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 269.

24. Ehrman briefly discusses understandings of *Woman Wisdom* in First Testament and intertestamental texts, see Ehrman, *How Jesus*, pp. 70–2. While he admits that in *Wisdom Woman Wisdom* does: 'what the Hebrew Bible claims God did (creation; exodus)', he again inserts an angel by arguing that this is also what 'the angel' of God did: 'for example rescuing Abraham's nephew Lot from the fires that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19', Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 72 (brackets original). In light of the ways in which *Woman Wisdom* is imaged across First Testament and intertestamental texts it is misleading to compare these descriptions of *Woman Wisdom* with angels. Ehrman does admit that *Woman Wisdom* was considered as divine, but seeks to diminish the prominence of this understanding: 'some Jewish readers read the passage [Prov. 8.22–36] more literally and took Wisdom to be an actual being that was speaking, a being alongside God that was an expression of God. This view led some Jewish thinkers to magnify Wisdom as a divine hypostasis', Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 71 (italics added). In contrast, the evidence in First and intertestamental texts demonstrates that *Woman Wisdom* is repeatedly imaged as prior to all things (e.g. Prov. 8.22–31; Wis. 9.9–10; Sir. 1.9–10; 24.3), companion with God (e.g. Prov. 8.30; Wis. 8.3), agent in creation and salvation (e.g. Prov. 3.19; 8.30; Wis. 7.27; 8.1; 4; 10.1–11.4), enthroned with God (Wis. 9.4; 10) and superior to the angelic hosts (Sir. 24.2). See Chapter 2.

25. Charles Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence*, *Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums* 42 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), p. 90.

26. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic*, pp. 90–1.

27. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic*, pp. 91; 93–7.

28. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic*, p. 91.

29. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic*, p. 91. Despite this, Gieschen concludes by arguing that: 'angelomorphic traditions were instrumental in the Jewish adaption of Wisdom before

Despite this, in Ehrman's discussion of John's prologue he again minimizes the Wisdom christology of the passage and continues to argue that this author understood Christ as an angel: 'Christ was some kind of angelic being before becoming a human – probably the "chief angel" or the "Angel of the Lord"'.<sup>30</sup> It is only by downplaying the expansive role of Woman Wisdom in First Testament and intertestamental texts, minimizing the presence of Woman Wisdom in 1 Cor. 8.6 and John's prologue, and transposing the view of Jesus as 'an angelic being' over the top of these texts, that Ehrman is able to maintain his view that Jesus was understood to be divine through a process of gradual accretion. When early celebrations, and worship, of Jesus-Woman Wisdom are recognized, his argument for divine elevation collapses.

Ehrman does admit that in the Colossians hymn Jesus is worshipped as 'Wisdom made flesh'.<sup>31</sup> However he does so while continuing to downplay Woman Wisdom's personhood and gender.<sup>32</sup> Rather than acknowledging that this christology aligns with the Wisdom christology of Paul, the early Jesus movement that Paul quotes from, and John's prologue, Ehrman argues that Colossians is the exception to the rule, 'We have now moved into an entirely different realm from the earlier exaltation Christologies'.<sup>33</sup> The Second Testament evidence demonstrates that Colossians is not the exception to the rule. In contrast, the Colossians hymn, as well as other early hymn and prayer fragments in Second Testament and early church texts, are the exception to Ehrman's rule. As will be discussed at length in Chapter 2, texts in 1 Corinthians, Colossians, John's prologue, Hebrews, as well as other Second Testament and early church texts including *1 Clement* and the *Didache*, demonstrate that Wisdom christology and Wisdom soteriology, in which Jesus is imaged as the female divine, were pivotal across many communities in the early Jesus movement. This 'high' christology did not emerge through a

she was identified with Torah'. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic*, p. 103. Gieschen's definition of 'Angelomorphic' elucidates this apparent contradiction: "Angelomorphic" is an inclusive term which means having some of the various forms and functions of an angel, *even though the figure may not be explicitly called an "angel" or considered to have the created nature of an angel*', Gieschen, *Angelomorphic*, p. 3 (fn. 2, italics added). While Gieschen argues that Woman Wisdom's origins were influenced by 'angelomorphic traditions' he is not arguing that Woman Wisdom is understood as an angel in First Testament and intertestamental texts.

30. Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 278. Ehrman acknowledges the 'high' christology of the prologue: 'higher than even in the Philippians poem'. Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 278, and the presence of (Woman) Wisdom in this text. However he continues to depersonalize her and further minimizes the Wisdom christology by focusing on Logos christology. Ehrman, *How Jesus*, pp. 276–7.

31. Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 280.

32. Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 280. Again, Ehrman does not reflect on the paradox that Jesus is celebrated as the female divine.

33. Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 280. Ehrman also acknowledges the presence of (Woman) Wisdom in Hebrews christology (1.2-3). Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 281.



gradual process of accretion. The extant evidence reveals that Jesus is imaged, celebrated and worshipped as the divine from a very early period *and* that in these proclamations Jesus is imaged, celebrated and worshipped as the *female* divine.

Hurtado rightly identifies that hymn and prayer fragments embedded within Second Testament texts provide insight into the christological understandings in the early Jesus movement, and that these practices ran contrary to 'the norms' of Jewish culture. Hurtado states, 'emphasis on Jesus in early Christian worship songs is unprecedented, and constitutes at the least a significant degree of difference from the liturgical practices and pattern characteristic of Jewish groups of the period'.<sup>34</sup> Hurtado also acknowledges the Wisdom christology within the liturgical passages that he cites. However, not unlike Ehrman, Hurtado downplays the personhood and 'womanliness' of Woman Wisdom even as he acknowledges the Wisdom content of these passages. This is evidenced in Hurtado's discussion of the creedal fragment in Hebrews: 'the passage appropriates Jewish Wisdom tradition to assert Jesus' glorious relationship to God (cf., e.g. Wisd. Sol. 7.22–8.1)'.<sup>35</sup> If readers were not familiar with 'Jewish Wisdom tradition' they would not know that in this liturgical fragment Jesus is being imaged as the female divine, Woman Wisdom.

When Hurtado discusses 1 Cor. 8.6 he points out that 'Scholars commonly (and cogently) suggest that this reflects an appropriation of biblical/Jewish traditions about God's Wisdom pictured as God's companion in creation (Prov 8.22–30; Sir 24.9; Wisd. Sol 7.22; 8.4; 9.9)'.<sup>36</sup> Here, again, while admitting the priority of Wisdom christology and that Wisdom is 'God's companion', Hurtado refrains from acknowledging that Wisdom is personified as the female divine. Likewise, when Hurtado discusses John's prologue he states, 'It is widely thought that the use of the term "Logos" in 1.1–18 was influenced by, and was intended to allude to, biblical and Jewish traditions about God's Word and Wisdom, sometimes pictured as the uniquely intimate and efficacious agent of divine purposes'.<sup>37</sup> Hurtado acknowledges the 'uniquely intimate' place of Woman Wisdom in Jewish traditions *at the same time* as consistently obscuring her personhood and gender.

Hurtado and Ehrman are not alone in acknowledging the priority of early church Wisdom christology while *simultaneously* minimizing the presence of Woman Wisdom and the reality that Jesus is imaged as her. As will be discussed in detail, recent work by David Ford and Paul Fiddes also obscures the presence of Woman Wisdom and early understandings of Jesus-Woman Wisdom *amidst* their discussions of the importance of Wisdom christology both in the early church and in contemporary context.<sup>38</sup> For some, it may be a startling reality

34. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus*, p. 149.

35. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus*, p. 499.

36. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus*, p. 125 (brackets original).

37. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus*, p. 367.

38. For example, David Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*, ed. Colin Gunton and Daniel Hardy, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Paul Fiddes, *Seeing the World and*

that in Second Testament and early church texts that preserve hymn and prayer fragments from the early Jesus movement, when Jesus is worshipped as a divine being, he is regularly imaged as the female divine. For others, it may be an equally startling reality that scholars continue to minimize this, even as they acknowledge the priority of Wisdom christology and Wisdom soteriology in these texts.<sup>39</sup>

In recent decades feminist scholars have highlighted and begun to explore the presence of Jesus-Woman Wisdom in Second Testament texts. This is seen in the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth Johnson and others.<sup>40</sup> Their work has not only been crucial in the rediscovery of the significant place of Wisdom christology in the early church, it has also contributed to vital and

*Knowing God: Hebrew Wisdom and Christian Doctrine in a Late-Modern Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). See Chapter 5.

39. Interestingly, Marcus Borg acknowledges the ‘womanliness’ of Woman Wisdom through his transliteration of Sophia. In a qualified manner he acknowledges early understandings of Jesus in relation to Woman Wisdom: ‘The use of Sophia imagery to speak of Jesus is early and widespread in the New Testament. In the synoptics, Paul and John, Jesus is spoken of as the child, prophet, and incarnation of divine Sophia,’ Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 152. As will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2, in Luke’s gospel Jesus is imaged as a child and prophet of Woman Wisdom, however the evidence of other texts indicates that Jesus is predominantly imaged as Woman Wisdom. The strangeness of this early identification of Jesus as the female divine does not appear to strike Borg. Instead, with an emphasis upon Jesus as wise teacher, he argues that: ‘Presumably the historical ground for this is Jesus’ roles as a wisdom teacher and prophet who was also known for inviting all and sundry to banquet with him,’ Borg, *Meaning of Jesus*, p. 152. If Jesus was only, or predominantly, imaged as Woman Wisdom’s prophet or child this explanation would carry weight. However, given that early communities celebrate Jesus as Woman Wisdom, this explanation does not sufficiently account for the paradoxical proclamation that the earthly man Jesus was the incarnation of the female divine.

40. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990) and *Jesus, Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (London: SCM Press, 1995); Elizabeth Johnson, ‘Jesus, the Wisdom of God: A Biblical Basis for Non-Androcentric Christology,’ *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 61 (1985), pp. 261–94 and *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005, originally published in 1992); Martin Scott, *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus* (Sheffield: The Sheffield University Press, 1992); Elaine Wainwright, *Shall We Look for Another? A Feminist Rereading of the Matthean Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998); Sharon Ringe, *Wisdom’s Friends: Community and Christology in the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999); Silvia Schroer, *Wisdom has Built Her House: Studies on the Figure of Sophia in the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: A Michael Glazier Book: Liturgical Press, 2000) and Sandra Schneiders, *Written that You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003). Their work is discussed throughout this research.

ongoing dialogue about the nature of the divine and gender equality in the church. However, the challenges and insight offered by Jesus-Woman Wisdom do not only disrupt assumptions about divine gender and godly patterns of ecclesiology. Re-engagement with Jesus-Woman Wisdom has far-reaching implications, as demonstrated in the recent work of Denis Edwards and Celia Deane-Drummond in relation to ecology.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps it is the expansive implications of this ancient christology and soteriology that has contributed to the ongoing eclipse of Jesus-Woman Wisdom in theological debate.

When the personhood and ‘womanliness’ of Woman Wisdom are acknowledged *and* it is openly recognized that Jesus is imaged as Woman Wisdom, the question that, finally, erupts to the surface is *why* would early Jesus communities celebrate Jesus in the language and imagery of the female divine? It was once assumed that the linking together of Jesus and Woman Wisdom was attributable to the desire to elevate the earthly Jesus to a divine being.<sup>42</sup> However, the reality that Jesus is imaged as Woman Wisdom in earliest preserved expressions of christology – within the hymnic and creedal fragments of the primitive church – indicates that this strange proclamation was being made *before* any process of christological elevation was supposed to have occurred. The motivations in early Jesus communities for imaging Jesus, a man killed in a state-sanctioned murder, with the figure of divine Woman Wisdom must have been significant, and so compelling, that the cultural patriarchal bias against women was temporarily superseded in order to make way for this paradoxical proclamation.

The reasons why this *why* question has been overlooked in the West are manifold. Habits of seeing, and not seeing, beget themselves. Because Jesus-Woman Wisdom is commonly obscured in a variety of ways, there has been little space for the strangeness of this paradox to emerge. This question may also have been overlooked because of the ‘silos’ in which academic work often exists. At times, biblical scholarship can remain focused on the texts at hand, to the exclusion of the broader questions that the texts educe. On the other hand, at times, systematic theology can focus on broader theological questions, without maintaining focus on the biblical texts that form the basis of the theological enterprise. This monograph is the fruit of interdisciplinary research across biblical studies and systematic theology: reflexively paying attention to the biblical texts under consideration, as well as other early church texts, *and* stepping back from these sources in order to attend to the broader questions that they elicit. While there are inherent risks and difficulties in working in this interdisciplinary

41. See Denis Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995) and *Ecology at the Heart of Faith: The Change of Heart that Leads to a New Way of Living on Earth* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006); Celia Deane-Drummond, *Christ and Evolution: Wonder and Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) and *Creation through Wisdom: Theology and the New Biology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000). Edwards and Deane-Drummond’s work is discussed across the chapters that follow.

42. For example Martin Hengel, *The Son of God* (London: SCM Press, 1976), p. 72. See Chapter 3 below.

manner, this approach has created both sufficient depth and space to engage with the immensity of the *scandal* of the scandal of particularity. Through this process the commonalities in the ignition of Wisdom christology and Wisdom soteriology *and* the multivalent motivations for the eclipsing of Jesus-Woman Wisdom across the sources have been able to be recognized, mapped and examined. Furthermore, this interdisciplinary approach has enabled some of the potential implications of this ancient Wisdom christology and Wisdom soteriology in the contemporary context to be investigated at length.

In the chapters that follow, four key movements of exploration are made. Chapter 2 demonstrates and discusses the presence of Woman Wisdom in First Testament, intertestamental, Second Testament, and 'orthodox' early church texts composed before the middle of the second century. In order to investigate the various ways in which Woman Wisdom is imaged in First Testament and intertestamental texts four criteria are utilized that examine explicit and implicit references to Woman Wisdom, how Woman Wisdom is imaged in relation to God, and what her role is understood to be, in these texts. The 'issue' of Woman Wisdom's 'womanliness' is explored, and the strangeness of the celebration of Woman Wisdom's divine being in texts of monotheistic Israel is investigated. Second Testament and early church texts are also examined according to a fourfold criterion. This enables identification of explicit and implicit references to Jesus and Woman Wisdom, and investigation of the Wisdom christology and Wisdom soteriology present within many of these texts.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the question of *why* Jesus is imaged as Woman Wisdom in Second Testament and early church texts. By attending to the ways in which Jesus is imaged, celebrated and worshipped as Woman Wisdom across these sources, the common motivation for this early identification emerges. Five shared, significant features of Woman Wisdom in First Testament and intertestamental texts *and* Jesus-Woman Wisdom in Second Testament and early church texts, are identified and investigated. Through analysis of these common features it is demonstrated that ongoing, collective transformative experiences within early Jesus communities ignited Wisdom christology and the celebration of a 'realized' Wisdom soteriology. Contemporary bias against religious experience is discussed, and it is demonstrated that this does not justify the denial of the significant place of these claimed experiences in, and for, early Jesus communities.<sup>43</sup> Second Testament and early church texts indicate that it was not the select few who were claiming to share in such experiences.<sup>44</sup> The sources also demonstrate that these

43. Hurtado and Colleen Shantz rightly identify contemporary bias against religious and 'mystical' experiences: Hurtado, *Lord Jesus*, pp. 64–78 and Colleen Shantz, *Paul in Ecstasy: The Neurobiology of the Apostle's Life and Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 1–60. See Chapter 3 below.

44. In contrast Ehrman suggests that visions – only of the risen Jesus – were likely received by 'three or four people', for him this is: 'Peter, Paul and Mary, as it turns out', Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 192.

experiences were not limited to visions.<sup>45</sup> The evidence reveals that early Jesus communities claimed and celebrated that they were sharing in ongoing experiences of 'kinaesthetic transformation'.<sup>46</sup> These transformative experiences not only ignited celebrations and worship of Jesus-Woman Wisdom but also enabled these communities to begin, falteringly, to live in deeply counter-cultural ways.

Chapter 4 identifies and investigates the reasons for the veiling of Jesus-Woman Wisdom in the second and third centuries. Drawing from key writers and texts from this period, it is demonstrated that multivalent motivations led to this eclipsing. These include the patriarchal gender bias, the influences of 'Gnosticism' and the impacts of gentile audiences less familiar with Hebrew Woman Wisdom, upon the apologetic imperative. Changing experiences of church in the second and third centuries also contributed to the veiling of Jesus-Woman Wisdom. By utilizing the fivefold criteria of Chapter 3, alongside investigation of textual evidence from the second and third centuries, it will be demonstrated that as the church became increasingly stratified; in ecclesial structure, in liturgical practices and in patterns of exclusion and inclusion, there was increasingly less room for claimed experiences of Jesus-Woman Wisdom. That is, because early Wisdom christology and 'realized' Wisdom soteriology were ignited through transformative experiences, as experiences of church changed, and these earlier experiences were recast as deluded and, at times, heretical, ancient Wisdom christology and Wisdom soteriology were veiled. By osmosis, over time, Jesus communities no longer recognized Jesus-Woman Wisdom in their midst.

Chapter 5 explores the potential validity of 're-recognizing' Jesus-Woman Wisdom.<sup>47</sup> David Ford's 'interrogative field' provides the framework for this assessment of the faithfulness of ancient Wisdom christology and Wisdom soteriology.<sup>48</sup> Ford's six interconnecting questions not only test the 'orthodoxy' of this understanding of salvation, but also provide the apparatus to test the potential fruitfulness of this ancient understanding in the twenty-first-century. Through this examination the simultaneously faithful and wildly accessible nature of this ancient proclamation of Jesus-Woman Wisdom is demonstrated.

45. Again, in contrast Ehrman states: 'My overarching contention is that belief in the resurrection – based on visionary experiences – is what initially led the followers of Jesus (all of them? some of them?) to believe that Jesus had been exalted to heaven and made to sit at the right hand of God as his unique Son', Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 7 (brackets original). While Ehrman states that he is, 'not going to take a stand on this issue of whether Jesus really appeared to people or whether their visions were hallucinations' he goes on to do so: 'I personally do not believe that Jesus was raised from the dead and so I do not believe he "appeared" to anyone', Ehrman, *How Jesus*, p. 187.

46. The term 'kinaesthetic transformation' is employed in order to reflect the descriptions of the kinds of experiences that early Jesus communities repeatedly celebrate. See Chapter 3.

47. By utilizing the unconventional language of 're-recognizing', the reality that Jesus-Woman Wisdom never completely disappeared is acknowledged.

48. Ford, *Self*, pp. 5–7.

The investigation of Jesus-Woman Wisdom in the early Jesus movement, her veiling in the second and third centuries and her rediscovery in contemporary context is summarized in the conclusion. The book ends with reflections about future fields of exploration that engagement with Jesus-Woman Wisdom continues to invite.

The scandal of particularity is not simply that Jesus is understood to be divine. The *scandal* of the scandal of particularity is that across texts of the early Jesus movement, Jesus is imaged, understood, celebrated and worshipped as the female divine. Ancient proclamations of Jesus-Woman Wisdom disrupt prevalent contemporary assumptions about divine gender and church structure. This scandalous understanding of Jesus' particularity also shatters well worn, and commonly rejected, understandings of who God is, how God acts and what this might mean for humanity *and* the very earth. It is this ancient scandalous particularity, which has been veiled by successive generations, that continues to shimmer and overflow with promise, vitality and provocation.



## IS HE SHE?

Before investigating the reasons why Woman Wisdom is significant for and understood in relation to Jesus in the early church, her presence in First Testament, intertestamental, Second Testament and 'orthodox' Christian texts written before the middle of the second century C.E. will be identified and explored. This investigation necessarily covers a wide range of texts, doing so largely at a level of conceptual association and parallel. Within the constraints of the research every exegetical ambiguity and scholarly debate cannot be adjudicated. Instead the purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the presence of Woman Wisdom in these texts and the use of First Testament and intertestamental Wisdom traditions in the development of Second Testament and early Christian christology and soteriology. With regard to First Testament and intertestamental texts the following criteria will be utilized: First, are there explicit references to Woman Wisdom? Second, are there explicit connections made between Woman Wisdom and God? Third, are there implicit connections made between Woman Wisdom and God? Fourth, what is Woman Wisdom's role in this text? The 'issue' of Woman Wisdom's 'womanliness' in these First Testament and intertestamental texts will then be investigated. This will be followed by an exploration of the potential origins and implications of the presence of Woman Wisdom in monotheistic Israel. In the second half of this chapter Second Testament and early church texts that present Jesus in relation to Woman Wisdom will be investigated accordingly: First, are there explicit references to Woman Wisdom? Second, are explicit connections made between Jesus and Woman Wisdom? Third, are implicit connections made between Jesus and Woman Wisdom? Fourth, are Wisdom christology and Wisdom soteriology present in the text? This investigation will demonstrate that Woman Wisdom had a significant role in both Jewish and early Christian contexts, and that Wisdom christology and Wisdom soteriology informed the way in which many first Christians understood and proclaimed who Jesus was, what Jesus achieved, and what Jesus was continuing to achieve.