

## JOHN 1-10

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WISDOM COMMENTARY

Volume 44A

# John 1–10

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A Michael Glazier Book

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*With gratitude for the Wisdom people  
who have been my  
teachers, mentors, and friends.*

ὑμᾶς δὲ εἶρηκα φίλους

*Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM; Francis J. Moloney, SDB;  
Dorothy A. Lee; and Brendan Byrne, SJ.*



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## *Abbreviations*

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by David Noel Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
ABR	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
AGJU	Arbeitskreis zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
AJEC	Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
ATANT	Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments
BAIAS	<i>Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archeological Society</i>
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BDAG	Bauer, Walter, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
BibSem	The Biblical Seminar

BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BMSEC	Baylor–Mohr Siebeck Studies in Early Christianity
BNTC	Black’s New Testament Commentary
<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
<i>BT</i>	<i>The Bible Translator</i>
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
CBET	Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
CNT	Commentaire du Nouveau Testament
<i>CurBR</i>	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>
DCLS	Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Studies
DisBT	Discovering Biblical Texts
ECF	Early Christian Fathers
<i>EDNT</i>	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, ET. 3 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990-1993.
EJL	Early Judaism and Its Literature
<i>EstBib</i>	<i>Estudios bíblicos</i>
<i>ETL</i>	<i>Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
FBBS	Facet Books, Biblical Studies
FCB	Feminist Companion to the Bible
FCNTECW	Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings
FF	Foundations and Facets
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GBS	Guides to Biblical Scholarship
<i>HR</i>	<i>History of Religions</i>
HTCNT	Herder’s Theological Commentary on the New Testament

HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
IDB	<i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> . Edited by George A. Buttrick. 4 vols. New York: Abingdon, 1962.
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
IFT	Introductions in Feminist Theology
Int	<i>Interpretation</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JBQ	<i>Jewish Bible Quarterly</i>
JCTCRS	Jewish and Christian Texts in Contexts and Related Studies
JFSR	<i>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
JSHJ	<i>Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus</i>
JSJ	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods</i>
JSJS	Supplement to the Journal for the Study of Judaism
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
LBS	Linguistic Biblical Studies
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
LTP	<i>Laval théologique et Philosophique</i>
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NCB	New Century Bible
NEA	<i>Near Eastern Archaeology</i>

NIB	New Interpreter's Bible
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIDB	<i>New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> . Edited by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. 5 vols. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006-2009.
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
NT	New Testament
NTL	New Testament Library
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OT	Old Testament
OTM	Old Testament Message
PL	Patrologia Latina
PrTMS	Princeton Theological Monograph Series
QD	Quaestiones Disputatae
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i>
RBS	Resources for Biblical Study
<i>RelStTh</i>	<i>Religious Studies and Theology</i>
SBFA	Studium Biblicum Franciscanum Analecta
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBLRBS	Society of Biblical Literature Resources for Biblical Study
SBLSymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SNTW	Studies of the New Testament and Its World
SP	Sacra Pagina
StBibLit	Studies in Biblical Literature
SubBi	Subsidia Biblica

SymS	Symposium Series
TBN	Themes in Biblical Narrative
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-76.
ThTo	<i>Theology Today</i>
TynBul	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
VE	<i>Vox Evangelica</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WCS	Wisdom Commentary Series
WGRW	Writings of the Greco-Roman World
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>



## Contributors

Mary Ann Beavis is an editor of the Wisdom Commentary series, and coauthor of two volumes in the series: *Hebrews* and *2 Thessalonians*. Mary Ann has master's degrees in religious studies and theology from the University of Manitoba and the University of Notre Dame and a PhD in New Testament studies from Cambridge University (UK). She is professor emerita of religion and culture at St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan (Saskatoon, Canada). She is the author of several single-author and edited books as well as many peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and book reviews. She is the founding editor of the *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*.

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Barbara E. Reid, OP, is general editor of the Wisdom Commentary series and coauthor of the volume on *Luke*. Barbara is a Dominican sister of Grand Rapids, Michigan. She holds a PhD in biblical studies from The Catholic University of America and is the first woman elected to be president of the Catholic Theological Union, Chicago. Her most recent publications are *Luke 1–9*, coauthored with Shelly Matthews, in the Wisdom Commentary series (Liturgical Press, 2021), *Wisdom's Feast: An Invitation to Feminist Interpretation of the Scriptures* (Eerdmans, 2016), and *Abiding Word: Sunday Reflections on Years A, B, C* (3 vols.; 2011, 2012, 2013). She served as vice president and academic dean at CTU from 2009 to 2018 and as president of the Catholic Biblical Association in 2014–2015.

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## Foreword

# *“Come Eat of My Bread . . . and Walk in the Ways of Wisdom”*

*Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*

*Harvard University Divinity School*

Jewish feminist writer Asphodel Long has likened the Bible to a magnificent garden of brilliant plants, some flowering, some fruiting, some in seed, some in bud, shaded by trees of age old, luxurious growth. Yet in the very soil which gives it life the poison has been inserted. . . . This poison is that of misogyny, the hatred of women, half the human race.<sup>1</sup>

To see Scripture as such a beautiful garden containing poisonous ivy requires that one identify and name this poison and place on all biblical texts the label “Caution! Could be dangerous to your health and survival!” As critical feminist interpretation for well-being this Wisdom Commentary seeks to elaborate the beauty and fecundity of this

1. Asphodel Long, *In a Chariot Drawn by Lions: The Search for the Female in the Deity* (London: Women’s Press, 1992), 195.

Scripture-garden and at the same time points to the harm it can do when one submits to its world of vision. Thus, feminist biblical interpretation engages two seemingly contradictory insights: The Bible is written in kyriocentric (i.e., lord/master/father/husband-elite male) language, originated in the patri-kyriarchal cultures of antiquity, and has functioned to inculcate misogynist mind-sets and oppressive values. At the same time it also asserts that the Bible as Sacred Scripture has functioned to inspire and authorize wo/men<sup>2</sup> in our struggles against dehumanizing oppression. The hermeneutical lens of wisdom/Wisdom empowers the commentary writers to do so.

In biblical as well as in contemporary religious discourse the word *wisdom* has a double meaning: It can either refer to the quality of life and of people and/or it can refer to a figuration of the Divine. Wisdom in both senses of the word is not a prerogative of the biblical traditions but is found in the imagination and writings of all known religions. Wisdom is transcultural, international, and interreligious. Wisdom is practical knowledge gained through experience and daily living as well as through the study of creation and human nature. Both word meanings, that of capability (wisdom) and that of female personification (Wisdom), are crucial for this Wisdom Commentary series that seeks to enable biblical readers to become critical subjects of interpretation.

Wisdom is a state of the human mind and spirit characterized by deep understanding and profound insight. It is elaborated as a quality possessed by the sages but also treasured as folk wisdom and wit. Wisdom is the power of discernment, deeper understanding, and creativity; it is the ability to move and to dance, to make the connections, to savor life, and to learn from experience. Wisdom is intelligence shaped by experience and sharpened by critical analysis. It is the ability to make sound choices and incisive decisions. Its root meaning comes to the fore in its Latin form *sapientia*, which is derived from the verb *sapere*, to taste and to savor something. Hence, this series of commentaries invites readers to taste, to evaluate, and to imagine. In the figure of *Chokmah-Sophia-Sapientia-Wisdom*, ancient Jewish scriptures seek to hold together belief in the “one” G\*d<sup>3</sup> of Israel with both masculine and feminine language and metaphors of the Divine.

2. I use wo/man, s/he, fe/male and not the grammatical standard “man” as inclusive terms and make this visible by adding /.

3. I use the \* asterisk in order to alert readers to a problem to explore and think about.

In distinction to traditional Scripture reading, which is often individualistic and privatized, the practice and space of Wisdom commentary is public. Wisdom's spiraling presence (*Shekhinah*) is global, embracing all creation. Her voice is a public, radical democratic voice rather than a "feminine," privatized one. To become one of Her justice-seeking friends, one needs to imagine the work of this feminist commentary series as the spiraling circle dance of wisdom/Wisdom,<sup>4</sup> as a Spirit/spiritual intellectual movement in the open space of wisdom/Wisdom who calls readers to critically analyze, debate, and reimagine biblical texts and their commentaries as wisdom/Wisdom texts inspired by visions of justice and well-being for everyone and everything. Wisdom-Sophia-imagination engenders a different understanding of Jesus and the movement around him. It understands him as the child and prophet of Divine Wisdom and as Wisdom herself instead of imagining him as ruling King and Lord who has only subalterns but not friends. To approach the N\*T<sup>5</sup> and the whole Bible as Wisdom's invitation of cosmic dimensions means to acknowledge its multivalence and its openness to change. As bread—not stone.

In short, this commentary series is inspired by the feminist vision of the open cosmic house of Divine Wisdom-Sophia as it is found in biblical Wisdom literatures, which include the N\*T:

Wisdom has built Her house  
 She has set up Her seven pillars . . .  
 She has mixed Her wine,  
 She also has set Her table.  
 She has sent out Her wo/men ministers  
 to call from the highest places in the town . . .  
 "Come eat of my bread  
 and drink of the wine I have mixed.  
 Leave immaturity, and live,  
 And walk in the way of Wisdom." (Prov 9:1-3, 5-6)

4. I have elaborated such a Wisdom dance in terms of biblical hermeneutics in my book *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001). Its seven steps are a hermeneutics of experience, of domination, of suspicion, of evaluation, of remembering or historical reconstruction, of imagination, and of transformation. However, such Wisdom strategies of meaning making are not restricted to the Bible. Rather, I have used them in workshops in Brazil and Ecuador to explore the workings of power, Condomblé, Christology, imagining a the\*logical wo/men's center, or engaging the national icon of Mary.

5. See the discussion about nomenclature of the two testaments in the General Editor's introduction, page xxxix.



## Editor's Introduction to Wisdom Commentary

### *"She Is a Breath of the Power of God" (Wis 7:25)*

*Barbara E. Reid, OP*

*General Editor*

Wisdom Commentary is the first series to offer detailed feminist interpretation of every book of the Bible. The fruit of collaborative work by an ecumenical and interreligious team of scholars, the volumes provide serious, scholarly engagement with the whole biblical text, not only those texts that explicitly mention women. The series is intended for clergy, teachers, ministers, and all serious students of the Bible. Designed to be both accessible and informed by the various approaches of biblical scholarship, it pays particular attention to the world in front of the text, that is, how the text is heard and appropriated. At the same time, this series aims to be faithful to the ancient text and its earliest audiences; thus the volumes also explicate the worlds behind the text and within it. While issues of gender are primary in this project, the volumes also address the intersecting issues of power, authority, ethnicity, race, class, and religious belief and practice. The fifty-eight volumes include the books regarded as canonical by Jews (i.e., the Tanakh); Protestants (the "Hebrew Bible" and the New Testament); and Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern

Orthodox Communions (i.e., Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach/Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, including the Letter of Jeremiah, the additions to Esther, and Susanna and Bel and the Dragon in Daniel).

## **A Symphony of Diverse Voices**

Included in the Wisdom Commentary series are voices from scholars of many different religious traditions, of diverse ages, differing sexual identities, and varying cultural, racial, ethnic, and social contexts. Some have been pioneers in feminist biblical interpretation; others are newer contributors from a younger generation. A further distinctive feature of this series is that each volume incorporates voices other than that of the lead author(s). These voices appear alongside the commentary of the lead author(s), in the grayscale inserts. At times, a contributor may offer an alternative interpretation or a critique of the position taken by the lead author(s). At other times, they may offer a complementary interpretation from a different cultural context or subject position. Occasionally, portions of previously published material bring in other views. The diverse voices are not intended to be contestants in a debate or a cacophony of discordant notes. The multiple voices reflect that there is no single definitive feminist interpretation of a text. In addition, they show the importance of subject position in the process of interpretation. In this regard, the Wisdom Commentary series takes inspiration from the Talmud and from *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss; New York: URJ Press and Women of Reform Judaism, The Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, 2008), in which many voices, even conflicting ones, are included and not harmonized.

Contributors include biblical scholars, theologians, and readers of Scripture from outside the scholarly and religious guilds. At times, their comments pertain to a particular text. In some instances they address a theme or topic that arises from the text.

Another feature that highlights the collaborative nature of feminist biblical interpretation is that a number of the volumes have two lead authors who have worked in tandem from the inception of the project and whose voices interweave throughout the commentary.

## **Woman Wisdom**

The title, Wisdom Commentary, reflects both the importance to feminists of the figure of Woman Wisdom in the Scriptures and the distinct



wisdom that feminist women and men bring to the interpretive process. In the Scriptures, Woman Wisdom appears as “a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty” (Wis 7:25), who was present and active in fashioning all that exists (Prov 8:22-31; Wis 8:6). She is a spirit who pervades and penetrates all things (Wis 7:22-23), and she provides guidance and nourishment at her all-inclusive table (Prov 9:1-5). In both postexilic biblical and nonbiblical Jewish sources, Woman Wisdom is often equated with Torah, e.g., Sirach 24:23-34; Baruch 3:9-4:4; 38:2; 46:4-5; 2 Baruch 48:33, 36; 4 Ezra 5:9-10; 13:55; 14:40; 1 Enoch 42.

The New Testament frequently portrays Jesus as Wisdom incarnate. He invites his followers, “take my yoke upon you and learn from me” (Matt 11:29), just as Ben Sira advises, “put your neck under her [Wisdom’s] yoke and let your souls receive instruction” (Sir 51:26). Just as Wisdom experiences rejection (Prov 1:23-25; Sir 15:7-8; Wis 10:3; Bar 3:12), so too does Jesus (Mark 8:31; John 1:10-11). Only some accept his invitation to his all-inclusive banquet (Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24; compare Prov 1:20-21; 9:3-5). Yet, “wisdom is vindicated by her deeds” (Matt 11:19, speaking of Jesus and John the Baptist; in the Lukan parallel at 7:35 they are called “wisdom’s children”). There are numerous parallels between what is said of Wisdom and of the *Logos* in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel (John 1:1-18). These are only a few of many examples. This female embodiment of divine presence and power is an apt image to guide the work of this series.

## Feminism

There are many different understandings of the term “feminism.” The various meanings, aims, and methods have developed exponentially in recent decades. Feminism is a perspective and a movement that springs from a recognition of inequities toward women, and it advocates for changes in whatever structures prevent full flourishing of human beings and all creation. Three waves of feminism in the United States are commonly recognized. The first, arising in the mid-nineteenth century and lasting into the early twentieth, was sparked by women’s efforts to be involved in the public sphere and to win the right to vote. In the 1960s and 1970s, the second wave focused on civil rights and equality for women. With the third wave, from the 1980s forward, came global feminism and the emphasis on the contextual nature of interpretation. Now a fourth wave may be emerging, with a stronger emphasis on the intersectionality of women’s concerns with those of other marginalized groups and the increased use of the internet as

a platform for discussion and activism.<sup>1</sup> As feminism has matured, it has recognized that inequities based on gender are interwoven with power imbalances based on race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual identity, physical ability, and a host of other social markers.

## **Feminist Women and Men**

Men as well as nonbinary people who choose to identify with and partner with feminist women in the work of deconstructing systems of domination and building structures of equality are rightly regarded as feminists. Some men readily identify with experiences of women who are discriminated against on the basis of sex/gender, having themselves had comparable experiences; others who may not have faced direct discrimination or stereotyping recognize that inequity and problematic characterization still occur, and they seek correction. This series is pleased to include feminist men both as lead authors and as contributing voices.

## **Feminist Biblical Interpretation**

Women interpreting the Bible from the lenses of their own experience is nothing new. Throughout the ages women have recounted the biblical stories, teaching them to their children and others, all the while interpreting them afresh for their time and circumstances.<sup>2</sup> Following is a very brief sketch of select foremothers who laid the groundwork for contemporary feminist biblical interpretation.

One of the earliest known Christian women who challenged patriarchal interpretations of Scripture was a consecrated virgin named Helie, who lived in the second century CE. When she refused to marry, her

1. See Martha Rampton, "Four Waves of Feminism" (October 25, 2015), at <http://www.pacificu.edu/about-us/news-events/four-waves-feminism>; and Ealasaid Munro, "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?," <https://www.psa.ac.uk/insight-plus/feminism-fourth-wave>.

2. For fuller treatments of this history, see chap. 7, "One Thousand Years of Feminist Bible Criticism," in Gerda Lerner, *Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 138–66; Susanne Scholz, "From the 'Woman's Bible' to the 'Women's Bible,' The History of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible," in *Introducing the Women's Hebrew Bible*, IFT 13 (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 12–32; Marion Ann Taylor and Agnes Choi, eds., *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters: A Historical and Biographical Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

parents brought her before a judge, who quoted to her Paul's admonition, "It is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Cor 7:9). In response, Helie first acknowledges that this is what Scripture says, but then she retorts, "but not for everyone, that is, not for holy virgins."<sup>3</sup> She is one of the first to question the notion that a text has one meaning that is applicable in all situations.

A Jewish woman who also lived in the second century CE, Beruriah, is said to have had "profound knowledge of biblical exegesis and outstanding intelligence."<sup>4</sup> One story preserved in the Talmud (b. Ber. 10a) tells of how she challenged her husband, Rabbi Meir, when he prayed for the destruction of a sinner. Proffering an alternate interpretation, she argued that Psalm 104:35 advocated praying for the destruction of sin, not the sinner.

In medieval times the first written commentaries on Scripture from a critical feminist point of view emerge. While others may have been produced and passed on orally, they are for the most part lost to us now. Among the earliest preserved feminist writings are those of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), German writer, mystic, and abbess of a Benedictine monastery. She reinterpreted the Genesis narratives in a way that presented women and men as complementary and interdependent. She frequently wrote about the Divine as feminine.<sup>5</sup> Along with other women mystics of the time, such as Julian of Norwich (1342–ca. 1416), she spoke authoritatively from her personal experiences of God's revelation in prayer.

In this era, women were also among the scribes who copied biblical manuscripts. Notable among them is Paula Dei Mansi of Verona, from a distinguished family of Jewish scribes. In 1288, she translated from Hebrew into Italian a collection of Bible commentaries written by her father and added her own explanations.<sup>6</sup>

Another pioneer, Christine de Pizan (1365–ca. 1430), was a French court writer and prolific poet. She used allegory and common sense

3. Madrid, Escorial MS, a II 9, f. 90 v., as cited in Lerner, *Feminist Consciousness*, 140.

4. See Judith R. Baskin, "Women and Post-Biblical Commentary," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: URJ Press and Women of Reform Judaism, The Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, 2008), xlix–lv, at lii.

5. Hildegard of Bingen, *De Operatione Dei*, 1.4.100; PL 197:885bc, as cited in Lerner, *Feminist Consciousness*, 142–43. See also Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

6. Emily Taitz, Sondra Henry, Cheryl Tallan, eds., *JPS Guide to Jewish Women 600 B.C.E.–1900 C.E.* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2003), 110–11.

to subvert misogynist readings of Scripture and celebrated the accomplishments of female biblical figures to argue for women's active roles in building society.<sup>7</sup>

By the seventeenth century, there were women who asserted that the biblical text needs to be understood and interpreted in its historical context. For example, Rachel Speght (1597–ca. 1630), a Calvinist English poet, elaborates on the historical situation in first-century Corinth that prompted Paul to say, "It is well for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Cor 7:1). Her aim was to show that the biblical texts should not be applied in a literal fashion to all times and circumstances. Similarly, Margaret Fell (1614–1702), one of the founders of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, addressed the Pauline prohibitions against women speaking in church by insisting that they do not have universal validity. Rather, they need to be understood in their historical context, as addressed to a local church in particular time-bound circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

Along with analyzing the historical context of the biblical writings, women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries began to attend to misogynistic interpretations based on faulty translations. One of the first to do so was British feminist Mary Astell (1666–1731).<sup>9</sup> In the United States, the Grimké sisters, Sarah (1792–1873) and Angelina (1805–1879), Quaker women from a slaveholding family in South Carolina, learned biblical Greek and Hebrew so that they could interpret the Bible for themselves. They were prompted to do so after men sought to silence them from speaking out against slavery and for women's rights by claiming that the Bible (e.g., 1 Cor 14:34) prevented women from speaking in public.<sup>10</sup> Another prominent abolitionist, Isabella Baumfree, was a former slave who adopted the name Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797–1883) and quoted the Bible liberally in her speeches<sup>11</sup> and in so doing challenged cultural assumptions and biblical interpretations that undergird gender inequities.

7. See further Taylor and Choi, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, 127–32.

8. Her major work, *Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed by the Scriptures*, published in London in 1667, gave a systematic feminist reading of all biblical texts pertaining to women.

9. Mary Astell, *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (New York: Source Book Press, 1970, reprint of the 1730 edition; earliest edition of this work is 1700), 103–4.

10. See further Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838).

11. See, for example, her most famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman?," delivered in 1851 at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in Akron, OH; <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp>.

Another monumental work that emerged in nineteenth-century England was that of Jewish theologian Grace Aguilar (1816–1847), *The Women of Israel*,<sup>12</sup> published in 1845. Aguilar's approach was to make connections between the biblical women and contemporary Jewish women's concerns. She aimed to counter the widespread notion that women were degraded in Jewish law and that only in Christianity were women's dignity and value upheld. Her intent was to help Jewish women find strength and encouragement by seeing the evidence of God's compassionate love in the history of every woman in the Bible. While not a full commentary on the Bible, Aguilar's work stands out for its comprehensive treatment of every female biblical character, including even the most obscure references.<sup>13</sup>

The first person to produce a full-blown feminist commentary on the Bible was Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902). A leading proponent in the United States for women's right to vote, she found that whenever women tried to make inroads into politics, education, or the work world, the Bible was quoted against them. Along with a team of like-minded women, she produced her own commentary on every text of the Bible that concerned women. Her pioneering two-volume project, *The Woman's Bible*, published in 1895 and 1898, urges women to recognize that texts that degrade women come from the men who wrote the texts, not from God, and to use their common sense to rethink what has been presented to them as sacred.

Nearly a century later, *The Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), appeared. This one-volume commentary features North American feminist scholarship on each book of the Protestant canon. Like Cady Stanton's commentary, it does not contain comments on every section of the biblical text but only on those passages deemed relevant to women. It was revised and expanded in 1998 to include the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical books, and the contributors to this new volume reflect the global face of contemporary feminist scholarship. The revisions made in the third edition, which appeared in 2012, represent the profound advances in feminist biblical scholarship and include newer voices. In both the second and third editions, *The* has been dropped from the title.

12. The full title is *The Women of Israel or Characters and Sketches from the Holy Scriptures and Jewish History Illustrative of the Past History, Present Duty, and Future Destiny of the Hebrew Females, as Based on the Word of God*.

13. See further Eskenazi and Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, xxxviii; Taylor and Choi, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, 31–37.

Also appearing at the centennial of Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* were two volumes edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza with the assistance of Shelly Matthews. The first, *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), charts a comprehensive approach to feminist interpretation from ecumenical, interreligious, and multicultural perspectives. The second volume, published in 1994, provides critical feminist commentary on each book of the New Testament as well as on three books of Jewish Pseudepigrapha and eleven other early Christian writings.

In Europe, similar endeavors have been undertaken, such as the one-volume *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung*, edited by Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), featuring German feminist biblical interpretation of each book of the Bible, along with apocryphal books, and several extrabiblical writings. This work, now in its third edition, has recently been translated into English.<sup>14</sup> A multivolume project, *The Bible and Women: An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History*, edited by Irmtraud Fischer, Adriana Valerio, Mercedes Navarro Puerto, Christiana de Groot, and Mary Ann Beavis, is currently in production. This project presents a history of the reception of the Bible as embedded in Western cultural history and focuses particularly on gender-relevant biblical themes, biblical female characters, and women recipients of the Bible. The volumes are published in English, Spanish, Italian, and German.<sup>15</sup>

Another groundbreaking work is the collection *The Feminist Companion to the Bible Series*, edited by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993–2015), which comprises twenty volumes of commen-

14. *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, trans. Lisa E. Dahill, Everett R. Kalin, Nancy Lukens, Linda M. Maloney, Barbara Rumscheidt, Martin Rumscheidt, and Tina Steiner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012). Another notable collection is the three volumes edited by Susanne Scholz, *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect*, *Recent Research in Biblical Studies* 7, 8, 9 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013, 2014, 2016).

15. The first volume, on the Torah, appeared in Spanish in 2009, in German and Italian in 2010, and in English in 2011 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature). Five more volumes are now available: *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (2014); *The Writings and Later Wisdom Books*, ed. Christl M. Maier and Nuria Caldich-Benages (2014); *Gospels: Narrative and History*, ed. Mercedes Navarro Puerto and Marinella Perroni; Amy-Jill Levine (English ed.), *The Bible and Women: An Encyclopedia of Exegesis and Cultural History, New Testament 2.1* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015); *The High Middle Ages*, ed. Kari Elisabeth Børresen and Adriana Valerio (2015); and *Early Jewish Writings*, ed. Eileen Schuller and Marie-Theres Wacker (2017). For further information, see <http://www.bibleandwomen.org>.

taries on the Old Testament. The parallel series, *Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff and Maria Mayo Robbins (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001–2009), contains thirteen volumes with one more planned. These two series are not full commentaries on the biblical books but comprise collected essays on discrete biblical texts.

Works by individual feminist biblical scholars in all parts of the world abound, and they are now too numerous to list in this introduction. Feminist biblical interpretation has reached a level of maturity that now makes possible a commentary series on every book of the Bible. In recent decades, women have had greater access to formal theological education, have been able to learn critical analytical tools, have put their own interpretations into writing, and have developed new methods of biblical interpretation. Until recent decades the work of feminist biblical interpreters was largely unknown, both to other women and to their brothers in the synagogue, church, and academy. Feminists now have taken their place in the professional world of biblical scholars, where they build on the work of their foremothers and connect with one another across the globe in ways not previously possible. In a few short decades, feminist biblical criticism has become an integral part of the academy.

## **Methodologies**

Feminist biblical scholars use a variety of methods and often employ a number of them together.<sup>16</sup> In the *Wisdom Commentary* series, the authors will explain their understanding of feminism and the feminist reading strategies used in their commentary. Each volume treats the biblical text in blocks of material, not an analysis verse by verse. The entire text is considered, not only those passages that feature female characters or that speak specifically about women. When women are not apparent in the narrative, feminist lenses are used to analyze the dynamics in the text between male characters, the models of power, binary ways of thinking, and the dynamics of imperialism. Attention is given to how the whole text functions and how it was and is heard, both in its original context and today. Issues of particular concern to women—e.g., poverty, food, health, the environment, water—come to the fore.

16. See the seventeen essays in Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, eds., *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), which show the complementarity of various approaches.

One of the approaches used by early feminists and still popular today is to lift up the overlooked and forgotten stories of women in the Bible. Studies of women in each of the Testaments have been done, and there are also studies on women in particular biblical books.<sup>17</sup> Feminists recognize that the examples of biblical characters can be both empowering and problematic. The point of the feminist enterprise is not to serve as an apologetic for women; it is rather, in part, to recover women's history and literary roles in all their complexity and to learn from that recovery.

Retrieving the submerged history of biblical women is a crucial step for constructing the story of the past so as to lead to liberative possibilities for the present and future. There are, however, some pitfalls to this approach. Sometimes depictions of biblical women have been naïve and romantic. Some commentators exalt the virtues of both biblical and contemporary women and paint women as superior to men. Such reverse discrimination inhibits movement toward equality for all. In addition, some feminists challenge the idea that one can "pluck positive images out of an admittedly androcentric text, separating literary characterizations from the androcentric interests they were created to serve."<sup>18</sup> Still other feminists find these images to have enormous value.

One other danger with seeking the submerged history of women is the tendency for Christian feminists to paint Jesus and even Paul as liberators of women in a way that demonizes Judaism.<sup>19</sup> *Wisdom Commentary*

17. See, e.g., Alice Bach, ed., *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002); Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross Shepard Kraemer, eds., *Women in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); Irene Nowell, *Women in the Old Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997); Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003); Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001); Bonnie Thurston, *Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary*, *Companions to the New Testament* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

18. J. Cheryl Exum, "Second Thoughts about Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1.8–2.10," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, FCB 6, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 75–97, at 76.

19. See Judith Plaskow, "Anti-Judaism in Feminist Christian Interpretation," in *Searching the Scriptures, vol. 1: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza with Shelly Matthews (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 1:117–29; Amy-Jill Levine, "The New Testament and Anti-Judaism," in *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 87–117.



aims to enhance understanding of Jesus as well as Paul as Jews of their day and to forge solidarity among Jewish and Christian feminists.<sup>20</sup>

Feminist scholars who use historical-critical methods analyze the world behind the text; they seek to understand the historical context from which the text emerged and the circumstances of the communities to whom it was addressed. In bringing feminist lenses to this approach, the aim is not to impose modern expectations on ancient cultures but to unmask the ways that ideologically problematic mind-sets that produced the ancient texts are still promulgated through the text. Feminist biblical scholars aim not only to deconstruct but also to reclaim and reconstruct biblical history as women's history, in which women were central and active agents in creating religious heritage.<sup>21</sup> A further step is to construct meaning for contemporary women and men in a liberative movement toward transformation of social, political, economic, and religious structures.<sup>22</sup> In recent years, some feminists have embraced new historicism, which accents the creative role of the interpreter in any construction of history and exposes the power struggles to which the text witnesses.<sup>23</sup>

Literary critics analyze the world of the text: its form, language patterns, and rhetorical function.<sup>24</sup> They do not attempt to separate layers

20. For an overview of the work of Jewish feminists see Mara H. Benjamin, "Tracing the Contours of a Half Century of Jewish Feminist Theology," *JFSR* 36 (2020): 11–31.

21. See, for example, Phyllis A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo, eds., *Women and Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

22. See, e.g., Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), whose aim is to engage in biblical interpretation not only for intellectual enlightenment but, even more important, for personal and communal transformation. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (*Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001]) envisions the work of feminist biblical interpretation as a dance of Wisdom that consists of seven steps that interweave in spiral movements toward liberation, the final one being transformative action for change.

23. See Gina Hens-Piazza, *The New Historicism*, GBS, Old Testament Series (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

24. Phyllis Trible was among the first to employ this method with texts from Genesis and Ruth in her groundbreaking book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). Another pioneer in feminist literary criticism is Mieke Bal (*Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987]). For surveys of recent developments in literary methods, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: University

of tradition and redaction but focus on the text holistically, as it is in its present form. They examine how meaning is created in the interaction between the text and its reader in multiple contexts. Within the arena of literary approaches are reader-oriented approaches, narrative, rhetorical, structuralist, post-structuralist, deconstructive, ideological, autobiographical, and performance criticism.<sup>25</sup> Narrative critics study the interrelation among author, text, and audience through investigation of settings, both spatial and temporal; characters; plot; and narrative techniques (e.g., irony, parody, intertextual allusions). Reader-response critics attend to the impact that the text has on the reader or hearer. They recognize that when a text is detrimental toward women there is the choice either to affirm the text or to read against the grain toward a liberative end. Rhetorical criticism analyzes the style of argumentation and attends to how the author is attempting to shape the thinking or actions of the hearer. Structuralist critics analyze the complex patterns of binary oppositions in the text to derive its meaning.<sup>26</sup> Post-structuralist approaches challenge the notion that there are fixed meanings to any biblical text or that there is one universal truth. They engage in close readings of the text and often engage in intertextual analysis.<sup>27</sup> Within this approach is deconstructionist criticism, which views the text as a site of conflict, with competing narratives. The interpreter aims to expose the fault lines and overturn and reconfigure binaries by elevating the underling of a pair and foregrounding it.<sup>28</sup> Feminists also use other post-

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of Minnesota Press, 2008); Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, eds., *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008); Michal Beth Dinkler, *Literary Theory and the New Testament*, AYBRL (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

25. See, e.g., J. Cheryl Exum and David J. A. Clines, eds., *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993); Edgar V. McKnight and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, eds., *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994).

26. See, e.g., David Jobling, *The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Three Structural Analyses in the Old Testament*, JSOTSup 7 (Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1978).

27. See, e.g., Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); *The Bible in Theory: Critical and Postcritical Essays* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010); Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

28. David Penchansky, "Deconstruction," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Steven McKenzie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 196–205. See, for example, Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise:*

modern approaches, such as ideological and autobiographical criticism. The former analyzes the system of ideas that underlies the power and values concealed in the text as well as that of the interpreter.<sup>29</sup> The latter involves deliberate self-disclosure while reading the text as a critical exegete.<sup>30</sup> Performance criticism attends to how the text was passed on orally, usually in communal settings, and to the verbal and nonverbal interactions between the performer and the audience.<sup>31</sup>

From the beginning, feminists have understood that interpreting the Bible is an act of power. In recent decades, feminist biblical scholars have developed hermeneutical theories of the ethics and politics of biblical interpretation to challenge the claims to value neutrality of most academic biblical scholarship. Feminist biblical scholars have also turned their attention to how some biblical writings were shaped by the power of empire and how this still shapes readers' self-understandings today. They have developed hermeneutical approaches that reveal, critique, and evaluate the interactions depicted in the text against the context of empire, and they consider implications for contemporary contexts.<sup>32</sup> Feminists also analyze the dynamics of colonization and the mentalities of colonized peoples in the exercise of biblical interpretation. As Kwok Pui-lan explains, "A postcolonial feminist interpretation of the Bible needs to investigate the deployment of gender in the narration of identity, the negotiation of power differentials between the colonizers and the colonized, and the reinforcement of patriarchal control over spheres

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*The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993); David Rutledge, *Reading Marginally: Feminism, Deconstruction and the Bible*, *BibInt* 21 (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

29. See David Jobling and Tina Pippin, eds., *Semeia 59: Ideological Criticism of Biblical Texts* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992); Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 2007).

30. See, e.g., Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger, ed., *Autobiographical Biblical Interpretation: Between Text and Self* (Leiden: Deo, 2002); P. J. W. Schutte, "When *They*, *We*, and the Passive Become *I*—Introducing Autobiographical Biblical Criticism," *HTS Theologese Studies / Theological Studies* 61 (2005): 401–16.

31. See, e.g., Holly E. Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones, eds., *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009).

32. E.g., Gale Yee, ed., *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Warren Carter, *The Gospel of Matthew in Its Roman Imperial Context* (London: T&T Clark, 2005); *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007); Judith E. McKinlay, *Reframing Her: Biblical Women in Postcolonial Focus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2004).

where these elites could exercise control."<sup>33</sup> Methods and models from sociology and cultural anthropology are used by feminists to investigate women's everyday lives, their experiences of marriage, childrearing, labor, money, illness, etc.<sup>34</sup>

As feminists have examined the construction of gender from varying cultural perspectives, they have become ever more cognizant that the way gender roles are defined within differing cultures varies radically. As Mary Ann Tolbert observes, "Attempts to isolate some universal role that cross-culturally defines 'woman' have run into contradictory evidence at every turn."<sup>35</sup> Some women have coined new terms to highlight the particularities of their socio-cultural context. Many African American feminists, for example, call themselves *womanists* to draw attention to the double oppression of racism and sexism they experience.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, many US Hispanic feminists speak of themselves as *mujeristas* (*mujer* is Spanish for "woman").<sup>37</sup> Others prefer to be called "Latina feminists."<sup>38</sup> As a gender-neutral or nonbinary alternative, many today use Latinx. *Mujeristas*, Latina and Latinx feminists emphasize that the context for their theologizing is *mestizaje* and *mulatez* (racial and cultural mixture), done *en*

33. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 9. See also Musa W. Dube, ed., *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000); Cristl M. Maier and Carolyn J. Sharp, *Prophecy and Power: Jeremiah in Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); L. Juliana Claassens and Carolyn J. Sharp, eds., *Feminist Frameworks and the Bible: Power, Ambiguity, and Intersectionality*, LHBOTS 630 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017).

34. See, for example, Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Luise Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995); Susan Niditch, "My Brother Esau Is a Hairy Man": *Hair and Identity in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

35. Mary Ann Tolbert, "Social, Sociological, and Anthropological Methods," in *Searching the Scriptures*, 1:255–71, at 265.

36. Alice Walker coined the term (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967, 1983]). See also Katie G. Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 30–40; Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: Lura Media, 1988); Nyasha Junior, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015).

37. Ada María Isasi-Díaz (*Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996]) is credited with coining the term.

38. E.g., María Pilar Aquino, Daisy L. Machado, and Jeanette Rodríguez, eds., *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

*conjunto* (in community), with *lo cotidiano* (everyday lived experience) of Latina women as starting points for theological reflection and the encounter with the divine. Intercultural analysis has become an indispensable tool for working toward justice for women at the global level.<sup>39</sup>

Some feminists are among those who have developed lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) interpretation. This approach focuses on issues of sexual identity and uses various reading strategies. Some point out the ways in which categories that emerged in recent centuries are applied anachronistically to biblical texts to make modern-day judgments. Others show how the Bible is silent on contemporary issues about sexual identity. Still others examine same-sex relationships in the Bible by figures such as Ruth and Naomi or David and Jonathan. In recent years, queer theory has emerged; it emphasizes the blurriness of boundaries not just of sexual identity but also of gender roles. Queer critics often focus on texts in which figures transgress what is traditionally considered proper gender behavior.<sup>40</sup>

Feminists have also been engaged in studying the reception history of the text<sup>41</sup> and have engaged in studies in the emerging fields of disability theory and of children in the Bible.<sup>42</sup>

39. See, e.g., María Pilar Aquino and María José Rosado-Nunes, eds., *Feminist Intercultural Theology: Latina Explorations for a Just World*, Studies in Latino/a Catholicism (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007). See also Michelle A. Gonzalez, "Latina Feminist Theology: Past, Present, and Future," *JFSR* 25 (2009): 150–55. See also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed., *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement*, The Bible and Women 9.1 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), who charts feminist studies around the globe as well as emerging feminist methodologies.

40. See, e.g., Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Women Partners in the New Testament," *JFSR* 6 (1990): 65–86; Deirdre J. Good, "Reading Strategies for Biblical Passages on Same-Sex Relations," *Theology and Sexuality* 7 (1997): 70–82; Deryn Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Feminist Hermeneutics* (London: SCM, 2011); Teresa Hornsby and Ken Stone, eds., *Bible Trouble: Queer Readings at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011); Joseph A. Marchal, "Queer Studies and Critical Masculinity Studies in Feminist Biblical Studies," in *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, The Bible and Women 9.1 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 261–80.

41. See Sharon H. Ringe, "A History of Interpretation," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, 5; Marion Ann Taylor and Agnes Choi, eds., *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters: A Historical and Biographical Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012); Yvonne Sherwood, "Introduction," in *The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

42. See for example Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, and Amos Yong, eds., *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*, Studies in Religion, Theology and Disability

Feminists also recognize that the struggle for women’s equality and dignity is intimately connected with the struggle for respect for Earth and for the whole of the cosmos. Ecofeminists interpret Scripture in ways that highlight the link between human domination of nature and male subjugation of women. They show how anthropocentric ways of interpreting the Bible have overlooked or dismissed Earth and Earth community. They invite readers to identify not only with human characters in the biblical narrative but also with other Earth creatures and domains of nature, especially those that are the object of injustice. Some use creative imagination to retrieve the interests of Earth implicit in the narrative and enable Earth to speak.<sup>43</sup>

### **Biblical Authority**

By the late nineteenth century, some feminists, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, began to question openly whether the Bible could continue to be regarded as authoritative for women. They viewed the Bible itself as the source of women’s oppression, and some rejected its sacred origin and saving claims. Some decided that the Bible and the religious traditions that enshrine it are too thoroughly saturated with androcentrism and patriarchy to be redeemable.<sup>44</sup>

In the Wisdom Commentary series, questions such as these may be raised, but the aim of this series is not to lead readers to reject the authority of the biblical text. Rather, the aim is to promote better understanding of the contexts from which the text arose and of the rhetorical effects it has on people in contemporary contexts. Such understanding can lead to a deepening of faith, with the Bible serving as an aid to bring flourishing of life.

### **Language for God**

Because of the ways in which the term “God” has been used to symbolize the divine in predominantly male, patriarchal, and monarchical

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(Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), and Sharon Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

43. E.g., Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger, *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, SymS 46 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008); Mary Judith Ress, *Ecofeminism in Latin America, Women from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

44. E.g., Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: A Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973).

modes, feminists have designed new ways of speaking of the divine. Some have called attention to the inadequacy of the term *God* by trying to visually destabilize our ways of thinking and speaking of the divine. Rosemary Radford Ruether proposed *God/ess*, as an unpronounceable term pointing to the unnameable understanding of the divine that transcends patriarchal limitations.<sup>45</sup> Some have followed traditional Jewish practice, writing *G-d*. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has adopted *G\*d*.<sup>46</sup> Others draw on the biblical tradition to mine female and non-gender-specific metaphors and symbols.<sup>47</sup> In *Wisdom Commentary*, there is not one standard way of expressing the divine; each author will use her or his preferred ways. The one exception is that when the tetragrammaton, YHWH, the name revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14, is used, it will be without vowels, respecting the Jewish custom of avoiding pronouncing the divine name out of reverence.

## Nomenclature for the Two Testaments

In recent decades, some biblical scholars have begun to call the two Testaments of the Bible by names other than the traditional nomenclature: Old and New Testament. Some regard "Old" as derogatory, implying that it is no longer relevant or that it has been superseded. Consequently, terms like Hebrew Bible, First Testament, and Jewish Scriptures and, correspondingly, Christian Scriptures or Second Testament have come into use. There are a number of difficulties with these designations. The term "Hebrew Bible" does not take into account that parts of the Old Testament are written not in Hebrew but in Aramaic.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, for Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believers, the Old Testament includes books written in Greek—the Deuterocanonical books,

45. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1993).

46. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet; Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 191 n. 3.

47. E.g., Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992). See further Elizabeth A. Johnson, "God," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 128–30.

48. Gen 31:47; Jer 10:11; Ezra 4:7–6:18; 7:12–26; Dan 2:4–7:28.

considered Apocrypha by Protestants.<sup>49</sup> The term “Jewish Scriptures” is inadequate because these books are also sacred to Christians. Conversely, “Christian Scriptures” is not an accurate designation for the New Testament, since the Old Testament is also part of the Christian Scriptures. Using “First and Second Testament” also has difficulties, in that it can imply a hierarchy and a value judgment.<sup>50</sup> Jews generally use the term Tanakh, an acronym for Torah (Pentateuch), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings).

In Wisdom Commentary, if authors choose to use a designation other than Tanakh, Old Testament, and New Testament, they will explain how they mean the term.

## Translation

Modern feminist scholars recognize the complexities connected with biblical translation, as they have delved into questions about philosophy of language, how meanings are produced, and how they are culturally situated. Today it is evident that simply translating into gender-neutral formulations cannot address all the challenges presented by androcentric texts. Efforts at feminist translation must also deal with issues around authority and canonicity.<sup>51</sup>

Because of these complexities, the editors of the Wisdom Commentary series have chosen to use an existing translation, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), which is provided for easy reference at the top of each page of commentary. The NRSV was produced by a team of ecumenical and interreligious scholars, is a fairly literal translation, and uses inclusive language for human beings. Brief discussions about problematic translations appear in the inserts labeled “Translation Matters.” When more detailed discussions are available, these will be indicated in footnotes. In the commentary, wherever Hebrew or Greek words are used, English translation is provided. In cases where a wordplay is involved, transliteration is provided to enable understanding.

49. Representing the *via media* between Catholic and reformed, Anglicans generally consider the Apocrypha to be profitable, if not canonical, and utilize select Wisdom texts liturgically.

50. See Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, 193–99.

51. Elizabeth Castelli, “*Les Belles Infidèles*/Fidelity or Feminism? The Meanings of Feminist Biblical Translation,” in *Searching the Scriptures*, 1:189–204, here 190.



## Art and Poetry

Artistic expression in poetry, music, sculpture, painting, and various other modes is very important to feminist interpretation. Where possible, art and poetry are included in the print volumes of the series. In a number of instances, these are original works created for this project. Regrettably, copyright and production costs prohibit the inclusion of color photographs and other artistic work.

## Glossary

Because there are a number of excellent readily available resources that provide definitions and concise explanations of terms used in feminist theological and biblical studies, this series will not include a glossary. We refer you to works such as *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, edited by Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), and volume 1 of *Searching the Scriptures*, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza with the assistance of Shelly Matthews (New York: Crossroad, 1993). Individual authors in the Wisdom Commentary series will define the way they are using terms that may be unfamiliar.

## A Concluding Word

In just a few short decades, feminist biblical studies has grown exponentially, both in the methods that have been developed and in the number of scholars who have embraced it. We realize that this series is limited and will soon need to be revised and updated. It is our hope that Wisdom Commentary, by making the best of current feminist biblical scholarship available in an accessible format to ministers, preachers, teachers, scholars, and students, will aid all readers in their advancement toward God's vision of dignity, equality, and justice for all.



## **Acknowledgments**

There are a great many people who have made this series possible: first, Peter Dwyer, director of Liturgical Press, and Hans Christoffersen, publisher of the academic market at Liturgical Press, who have believed in this project and have shepherded it since it was conceived in 2008. Editorial consultants Athalya Brenner-Idan and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza have not only been an inspiration with their pioneering work but have encouraged us all along the way with their personal involvement. Volume editors Mary Ann Beavis, Carol J. Dempsey, Gina Hens-Piazza, Amy-Jill Levine, Linda M. Maloney, Song-Mi Suzie Park, Ahida Pilarski, Sarah Tanzer, and Laress Wilkins Lawrence have lent their extraordinary wisdom to the shaping of the series, have used their extensive networks of relationships to secure authors and contributors, and have worked tirelessly to guide their work to completion. Four others who have contributed greatly to the shaping of the project are Linda M. Day, Mignon Jacobs, Seung Ai Yang, and Barbara E. Bove of blessed memory (d. 2010). Editorial and research assistant Susan M. Hickman provided invaluable support with administrative details and arrangements. I am grateful to Brian Eisenschenk and Christine Henderson who assisted Susan Hickman with the Wiki. I am especially thankful to Lauren L. Murphy and Justin Howell for their work in copyediting; and to the staff at Liturgical Press, especially Colleen Stiller, production manager; Stephanie Lancour, production editor; Julie Surma, desktop publisher; Angie Steffens, production coordinator; and Tara Durham, marketing director.

## *Author's Preface*

The Gospel of John is a narrative; it tells a story, with a narrator, a plot, and characters, who serve to express the particular point of view of the author. Because this is an ancient story, told to an audience from a different time, culture, and religious perception to most modern readers, there will be aspects of the story that are puzzling. The author makes use of the Scriptures of Israel available in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic, sometimes making this explicit but more frequently through an allusion that the original audience would have been expected to know. As well as the written Scriptures, the author works within the theological thinking of late Second Temple Judaism, again, with the expectation that the original audience would be familiar with that thought-world. An audience reading this story today needs a guide to make explicit what that first audience could be presumed to know and understand. It is my task in this commentary to be that guide.

My goal is to provide a coherent and intelligible reading of the entire Gospel narrative, while providing some discussion of particularly complex sections by engaging with the views of a range of scholars, even though it will not provide a detailed analysis of all verses or detailed arguments in favor of a particular reading. Footnotes and references to previous studies will provide the reader with further treatment of these matters; in particular I will often reference my own work where readers will find more substantial arguments for a particular interpretation.

My prior studies of this Gospel have led me to see some major themes that recur across the entire narrative and drive the narrative to give expression to a single, theological interpretation of Jesus, in his life, ministry, death, and resurrection. Jesus's identity as the "bridegroom" and

“temple” are themes introduced in the opening chapters and continue to impact the narrative through to the final chapter. Jesus’s ministry, as ushering in a new creation and drawing believers into a new relationship with God, is likewise introduced in the prologue (John 1:1-18) and then realized in a very different telling of the passion. The interplay of these themes and symbols give this Gospel its artistic richness and enduring appreciation as “a spiritual Gospel.”

Every book emerges from within a community, and this book is no exception. Sandra Schneiders, Frank Moloney, Brendan Byrne, and Dorothy Lee had a significant impact on my undergraduate studies of the Fourth Gospel, and it is a joy to me that they continue to be my friends and occasional table companions. Many other scholars have shaped my views, and within this volume I am pleased to include a number of contributing voices. Ruth Sheridan was my first doctoral student from whom I learned greater sensitivity to the issue of “the Jews” in John. Rekha Chennattu from India joined me in editing a volume of essays to honor our common doctoral supervisor, Frank Moloney. Kath Rushton from New Zealand and Margaret Daly-Denton from Ireland have made excellent contributions to Johannine scholarship from the perspective of Earth. Elizabeth Schrader has frequently presented at the SBL, and her research on “Mary,” the sister of Lazarus, challenges most, if not all, commentators. I am humbled and delighted that all these women agreed to contribute their voices to mine to make this commentary richer. Finally, Barbara Reid and Mary Ann Beavis, as well as being contributing voices, have also offered much encouragement, wisdom, and suggestions as this commentary made its way into print. Their wide knowledge of feminist interpretation enriched my perspective enormously. Without this community of scholars, this volume could never have been birthed. Thank you.

At Liturgical Press I have received painstaking editorial suggestions and corrections from Lauren L. Murphy and Stephanie Lancour, and the layout is the work of Julie Surma. Their work polishes the “rough diamond” of my text to make it a fitting addition to this Wisdom Commentary series. Thank you for your detailed attention.

I offer this commentary to you, the readers, as one way, my way, of reading and valuing this ancient text.

## *Author's Introduction*

When Europeans arrived in Australia, they looked on the continent as *terra nullius*—ridding the land of one hundred thousand years of habitation, culture, agriculture, song, art, technology, and ecofriendly living. The aborigines were considered nonpeople and until 1967 were not even counted in the census of Australian people. Their existence was numbered with the stock, if they worked on cattle or sheep stations; otherwise they went unrecorded. The dark-skinned first people of this ancient land were made invisible and nonexistent by European eyes.

Women can resonate with this. The experience of many women requires the suffix “less”—powerless, voiceless, moneyless, stateless, homeless. On the world stage women seem to be constantly in the shadows of written history, watching on as if nonexistent. Their lives and experience are not worth recording. Within the limits of an ancient text that emerged from within a patriarchal social context, I wish to invite women to take their place within the Johannine narrative. Some women appear as full characters and have primary roles, such as the mother of Jesus, the woman of Samaria, Martha and Mary of Bethany, and Mary Magdalene. Others seem to be lost in the crowd or submerged within the group of disciples. But this Gospel, more than any other New Testament book, requires that all characters—women, men, Jews, Gentiles—all participate equally in the divinization of creation when the “Word became flesh” (1:14). The fundamental theology of the text is that all creation is open to be the tabernacling presence of God. The commentary is written from this presumption.

Methodologically, the analysis will involve two deliberate strategies. The first recognizes that the Gospel draws on the OT<sup>1</sup> figure of Wisdom (Gk: *Sophia*) in its portrayal of Jesus. Although Wisdom is not named, her place with God at the dawn of creation (Prov 8:22), her journey to tabernacle with humankind (Sir 24:8-12), her seeking disciples and making them “friends of God and prophets” (Wis 7:27) resonate with the Johannine text. Jesus gives flesh and bones to Wisdom’s pilgrimage and task (John 1:14). Each chapter will begin with a brief text from the Wisdom literature so that her presence does not go unrecognized.

The word “wisdom” is feminine in both Hebrew (*Hokmah*) and Greek (*Sophia*). This means that in the commentary it is appropriate to speak of Sophia and then to use feminine pronouns such as “she” or “her.” While any language to speak of God is metaphorical, how we use language does shape our thinking and ideas. When so much of the Christian discourse has used only male imagery and then consistently spoken of God and prayed using the pronoun “he,” to bring the grammatically feminine language into theology both challenges the absolute imaging of a male God and offers a corrective.

More important than the grammar is the genre of the wisdom literature. When Sophia announces her presence, she does not make a declaration couched in metaphysical propositions; she sings herself into creation.

<sup>23</sup>Ages ago I was set up,

at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

<sup>24</sup>When there were no depths I was brought forth,

when there were no springs abounding with water.

<sup>25</sup>Before the mountains had been shaped,

before the hills, I was brought forth. (Prov 8:23-25)

Sophia inhabits the places of women, and she acts as women do in setting her table and offering an invitation to her neighbors (Prov 9:1-3). Where the voice of God “thunders” (Ps 29:2), Sophia’s voice invites, “Come, eat of my bread” (Prov 9:5). While noting this I am not suggesting that Sophia is a timid shadow of God confined to the house. In Sirach 24 and Proverbs 8 her domain is the entire cosmos, and in the book of Wisdom

1. I refer to the two major sections within the Bible as the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT). Within the Old Testament there will be times when I refer to its Hebrew text and other times when I refer to the Greek translation of this known as the Septuagint (LXX). The designation “old” or “new” is simply a temporal statement referring to when these books were written. See further comments in the general editor’s introduction, xxxix–xl.

she is credited with Israel's escape from Egypt (Wis 10:15-21) and their deliverance in the Sinai wilderness (Wis 11:1-14). Her protective care of Israel is a power to be reckoned with as "she drowned their enemies, and cast them up from the depth of the sea" (Wis 10:19). The poetic genre of Wisdom's speech allows for free ranging imagery and hyperbole. She is not tied to formulaic exactitude. In the words of Diego Irarrázaval: "Christian theology is not a mental and doctrinal labor. Rather, it is a loving relationship with God that leads to celebration, transformation, knowledge. It is, as Jon Sobrino puts it, an *intellectus amoris*."<sup>2</sup>

For feminist theologians the "maleness" of Jesus is a difficulty. It brings a male specificity to God imagery and language. But when the divine Sophia is brought into any thinking about Jesus, then the male specificity does not restrict divine imagery and language to "male only." Sophia breaks open the possibility for all women and men to find a place in divine friendship. That God became a particular human, Jesus, is called "the scandal of particularity." Adding to this is a further scandalous realization "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>3</sup> The study of early Christian texts leads Sally Douglas to conclude:

Re-engaging with Jesus–Woman Wisdom honours the heart of Christian identity, as the incarnation is central and it is Christ who saves. Yet in re-recognizing Jesus–Woman Wisdom ancient claims about Christ are able to be liberated from cultural habits of seeing that diminish their audacity. Wisdom christology and Wisdom soteriology are widely, and wildly, accessible. Images and symbols of Jesus–Woman Wisdom have the potential to communicate with intensity and gripping power, as they dissolve within themselves humanly constructed dualism, between the divine and the earth, between male and female and between the church and the world.<sup>4</sup>

2. Diego Irarrázaval, "La otra globalización— anotación teológica," *Pasos* 77 (1998): 2. The phrase *intellectus amoris* means "love's understanding" through faith. See Sharon H. Ringe (*Wisdom's Friends: Community and Christology in the Fourth Gospel* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999], 1–5), who discusses the power and necessity of poetry to express religious experience in relation to the Gospel.

3. Sally Douglas, *Early Church Understandings of Jesus as the Female Divine: The Scandal of the Scandal of Particularity*, LNTS 557 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 2; italics in the original.

4. Douglas, *Early Church Understandings*, 202.

Wisdom Christology in the Fourth Gospel is well presented by Sharon Ringe, Martin Scott, and Ben Witherington III,<sup>5</sup> but it is also strongly critiqued by Judith Lieu, who writes, “John has no interest in ‘wisdom.’ . . . The Gospel itself shows no interest in them [the wisdom motifs].”<sup>6</sup> She acknowledges that the prologue draws on Wisdom traditions but then states correctly that Wisdom is not named in the narrative and that where there are links with the Wisdom tradition, “they are in no sense part of her gendered character and cannot be said to be an expression of the feminine (aspect of the divine or whatever).”<sup>7</sup> On this point I disagree with Judith Lieu.

Early in the narrative there is an encounter with Nicodemus, and in the dialogue and discourse that follows the Gospel uses a concept and terms that are unique to the wisdom literature. Briefly,<sup>8</sup> Jesus speaks of the reign of God (John 3:3, 5; βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ), an expression found only in the book of Wisdom (10:10). Similarly, the term “eternity life” (John 3:15, 16; ζῶην αἰώνιον)<sup>9</sup> is unique to the book of Wisdom (5:15; εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα ζῶσιν), as is the theology of participation *now* in the life of God.<sup>10</sup> Pharisees, such as Nicodemus, considered this to be a feature of the “end time.” It is in this context that Jesus speaks to Nicodemus of the need to be reborn (John 3:3, 5). The birth image is named specifically and is clearly a gendered image, much to Nicodemus’s confusion (3:4). Following this dialogue, the discourse then introduces the concept of “eternity life” (John 3:15, 16), which is the quality of life that Sophia offers the righteous in the book of Wisdom (Wis 6:18; 8:17, 21). This concept clarifies what being “born again” means. It is to be born into a new quality of eternity life. Jesus

5. Ringe, *Wisdom’s Friends*; Martin Scott, *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus*, JSNTSup 71 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992); Ben Witherington III, *John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

6. Judith Lieu, “Scripture and the Feminine in John,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Hebrew Bible in the New Testament*, ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 238.

7. Lieu, “Scripture and the Feminine in John,” 238.

8. More will be said on these points within the commentary.

9. This Greek expression is usually translated “eternal life.” I prefer to put the emphasis on the quality of life that is being described and not simply the length of life. I will argue that in this Gospel Jesus offers a new quality of life, that life God lives in eternity. The catchphrase “eternity life” expresses this richness and in the Fourth Gospel is the equivalent of the phrase “the reign of God,” as used frequently in the Synoptic Gospels.

10. “The hour is coming and is now here” (John 4:23; 5:25).



speaks of himself as the only-born (*μονογενῆ*) of God (John 3:16)<sup>11</sup> and as Jesus/Sophia<sup>12</sup> offers eternity life to those who believe. From then on, the Gospel uses the term “eternity life” as a major motif of the narrative,<sup>13</sup> and this quality of life is grounded in the language of being born (John 3:3, 5). It is difficult *not* to see Sophia in this passage and, following this, whenever “eternity life” is mentioned.<sup>14</sup> At the cross, the image of being born is graphically shown in the birthing image when blood and water flow from the side of Sophia-Jesus.<sup>15</sup> As I will argue in the commentary, this is a moment when disciples are born to be children of God, as confirmed by Jesus to Mary Magdalene (John 20:17). As I elaborate on the Wisdom Christology throughout this commentary, I will be mindful to try to avoid the pitfalls Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza identifies. Similar to me, she thinks “the Fourth Gospel understands Jesus as making Sophia present in and through his/her work.”<sup>16</sup> But she warns that Wisdom Christology can romanticize and divinize patriarchal notions of femininity, thereby unwittingly reinscribing gender dualism. In addition, she notes that wisdom literature came out of elite male circles. “Its function was to give instruction to the *pater familias*, legitimate male authority, and advance kyriarchal agenda.”<sup>17</sup> In retrieving the submerged Sophia traditions, I will try to rearticulate them in such a way that questions the dominant male language for God and Christ in ways that open new possibilities for egalitarian practice.

In addition to drawing on wisdom traditions, a second interpretive strategy that I will use in this commentary is akin to the Jewish tradition of midrash. Many Gospel scenes are monochromatic, with only

11. *Μονογενῆ* has as its first meaning “to be born.” It is a word found only in John (1:14, 18; and 3:16, 18). William F. Arndt, “*γίνομαι*,” BDAG (2000): 197.

12. Sophia is also described as “the only born,” although this word is usually translated as “unique” (Wis 7:22, *μονογενής*).

13. The expression *ζωὴν αἰώνιον* (eternity life) occurs in 3:15, 16, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:24, 39; 6:27, 40, 47, 54, 68; 10:28; 12:25, 50; 17:2; and *αἰώνιος ζωὴ* in 17:3.

14. Lieu does discuss the Nicodemus passage but does not relate it to the book of Wisdom and the concept of eternity life that follows the dialogue about being born again. Lieu, “Scripture and the Feminine in John,” 237–38.

15. Barbara E. Reid, “Birthed from the Side of Jesus (John 19:34),” in *Finding a Woman's Place: Essays in Honor of Carolyn Osiek, R.S.C.J.*, ed. David L. Bach and Jason T. Lamoreaux (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011). See excursus in this commentary at 19:34.

16. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet; Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 167.

17. Barbara Reid and Shelly Matthews, *Luke 1–9*, WCS 43A (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021), 235.

men visible. The presence of women is taken for granted, forgotten, or unrecognized. Here, midrash is needed. As Jewish feminist theologian Judith Plaskow states: “Midrash expands and burrows, invents the forgotten and prods the memory, takes from history and asks for more. It gives us the inner life history cannot follow.”<sup>18</sup> She also speaks of the “contradiction between the holes in the text and many women’s felt experience.”<sup>19</sup> Rather than continue the sins of my white European ancestors and see *terra nullius*, my reading insists on a text inhabited by women as well as men; I will draw Sophia to the foreground and bring women’s discipleship from the shadows.

When reading any document, it is helpful to know basic information about it so that an interpretation is coherent with the document’s original context, and its relevance to later times can then be extrapolated. Who was the author? When and where was it written? Why was it written? Who was the expected reader/audience? When asking these questions of the Fourth Gospel, there are immediate difficulties, as the earliest manuscripts available to scholars have no autograph to identify the author, nor is there certainty about the date and location of its writing. What follows is my position with a very brief discussion.<sup>20</sup>

## Location and Dating

Early twentieth-century commentaries looked to a background in Greek thought because of the dualistic language of the Gospel; e.g., light, dark; above, below; heaven, earth. Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 and their gradual dissemination to the wider scholarly community, scholars have been more convinced that the initial shaping of the Gospel was within a Judean context, as the type of dualism, the realized eschatology, the community-as-temple theology found in John is also found in the Scrolls. John’s Gospel has its roots in the varieties of Jewish beliefs and groups found in first-century Judea and Galilee,

18. Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 59.

19. Judith Plaskow, “Standing Again at Sinai: Jewish Memory from a Feminist Perspective,” *Tikkun* 2 (1986): 28.

20. Further details can be found in Gail R. O’Day, “John,” in *The Gospel of Luke; the Gospel of John*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Gail R. O’Day, NIB 9 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995); Ruth B. Edwards, *Discovering John: Content, Interpretation, Reception, DisBT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

## John 1:1-18

### *Sophia Finds Her Home*

*At the beginning of God's work I [Wisdom] was created,  
the first of God's acts of long ago;  
Before the mountains had been shaped,  
before the hills, I was born. (Prov 8:22, 25)<sup>1</sup>*

*There is in her a spirit that is intelligent, holy,  
unique, manifold, subtle,  
mobile, clear, unpolluted, . . .  
overseeing all,  
and penetrating through all spirits  
that are intelligent, pure, and altogether subtle.  
For wisdom is more mobile than any motion;  
because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. (Wis 7:22-24)*

“In the beginning.” With these words John plunges the reader back in time to that moment when energy and light exploded and the cosmos began. This author likewise begins the Jesus story as an explosion of light into darkness. The evangelist not only introduces the readers to John’s cosmic compass but also alerts them to the way this narrative will develop. It will be a tapestry of memories of Jesus interwoven with the community’s Spirit-guided experience, set against the writings,

1. Author’s translation. In both the Hebrew (הווללת) and the Greek (γεννῶ) the term means to give birth, to labor. See William L. Holladay and Ludwig Köhler, “היל,” in *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 102.

rituals, and wisdom of ancient Israel. In this kaleidoscopic manner, the evangelist sets out to tell the meaning of the Jesus event, to Israel, to all people, to the cosmos. In telling the Jesus story, the evangelist makes use of Israel's own narrative about a divine figure, present with God in the work of creation, who then comes to dwell in their midst. This was Wisdom (Gk.: σοφία; Heb.: חכמה).

## Sophia/Wisdom

The wisdom traditions developed in the period after the exile in Babylon. The wisdom mentality was essentially a contemplative attitude, able to see God at the heart of the world. According to Sharon Ringe, "Wisdom is connected to the divine logic undergirding the creation—God's will or plan for the created order and for the structures and relationships that give the world meaning, shape, and coherence."<sup>2</sup> This wisdom, although immanent in creation, was differentiated from creation itself in the great poems of Job 28, Proverbs 8, Sirach 24, and Wisdom 7.<sup>3</sup> In the voice of Wisdom/Sophia a new bearer of divine revelation is introduced. The prophets spoke of the Word going forth from the mouth of God to accomplish God's purpose (Isa 55:10-11); of the Spirit being set within Israel (Ezek 22:26; 37:14). The sages in the postexilic community chose the term *Sophia*/Wisdom to describe God's self-communication in the world.

Wisdom's relationship to creation and to God is revealed clearly in Proverbs 8. Here, *Sophia* speaks publicly and directly, describing her origins at/as the beginning of God's creative activity and her role as that of a child or artisan.

The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,  
 the first of his acts of long ago.  
 Ages ago I was set up,  
 at the first, before the beginning of the earth . . .  
 then I was beside him, like a master worker [darling child];<sup>4</sup>  
 and I was daily his delight,  
 rejoicing before him always,

2. Sharon H. Ringe, *Wisdom's Friends: Community and Christology in the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 29.

3. The books of Wisdom and Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), were written late in Second Temple Judaism and were not written in Hebrew, but Greek. They were therefore not included in the Hebrew Bible but are in the Greek Septuagint. They are included in the Catholic canon and so are in Catholic Bibles. Within some Protestant traditions they are considered deuterocanonical and are not included in their Bibles.

4. The exact meaning of the Hebrew here is mysterious.

rejoicing in his inhabited world  
and delighting in the human race. (Prov 8:22-23, 30-31)

Sirach 24 follows Proverbs in describing Wisdom's origins in God, and in this poem a new element is added, in that Wisdom is given a precise location.

Then the Creator of all things gave me a command,  
and my Creator chose the place for my tent [LXX: τὴν σκηνὴν μου].  
He said, "Make your dwelling in Jacob,  
and in Israel receive your inheritance."  
Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me,  
and for all the ages I shall not cease to be.  
In the holy tent [LXX: ἐν σκηνῇ ἁγίᾳ] I ministered before him,  
and so I was established in Zion.  
Thus in the beloved city he gave me a resting place,  
and in Jerusalem was my domain. (Sir 24:8-11)

Wisdom, who had dwelt in the heights of heaven (Sir 24:4), is now located within Israel's tabernacle (σκηνή). A later verse identifies Wisdom with Torah,

All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God,  
the law that Moses commanded us  
as an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob. (Sir 24:23)

The book of Baruch makes a similar identification, "She is the book of the commandments of God, the law that endures forever" (Bar 4:1). In the postexilic period, it is in the living out of Torah that Israel is assured of the divine presence.<sup>5</sup> Wisdom is the mode of expressing the immanence of God, and in the final book of the Old Testament Wisdom is described in ways that depict her intimate relationship with God and with humanity.<sup>6</sup> Wisdom is the breath, the power, the pure emanation, the image of God (Wis 7:25-26), and Wisdom passes into holy souls making them "friends of God, and prophets" (Wis 7:27). Wisdom is God's gift (Wis 8:21) to the righteous ones to draw them into an intimate communion of life. In the

5. The Aramaic targums speak of this divine presence of God in the world as the *Shekinah*; see the excursus below.

6. In the book of Wisdom, *Sophia's* self-description of her works and qualities has been likened to the literary genre known as "aretalogy," in particular the hymns praising the Egyptian goddess Isis. For further discussion of this, see John S. Kloppenborg, "Isis and Sophia in the Book of Wisdom," *HTR* 75 (1982): 57-84; and Andrew T. Glicksman, *Wisdom of Solomon 10: A Jewish Hellenistic Reinterpretation of Early Israelite History through Sapiential Lenses*, DCLS 9 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011).

tradition of the sages, such a communion of life is found in the Torah, rather than in the rituals of the temple.<sup>7</sup> Through *Sophia*/Wisdom, a feminine voice is a new tone in the divine dialogue with humanity. For women, divine revelation is no longer spoken with an exclusively male timbre, and so women can now hear themselves echoed back to them.

The Gospel of John never uses the term “wisdom,” and yet in its depiction of the Word, both preexistent and enfleshed, the attributes of Wisdom are also attributes of the Word.<sup>8</sup>

- Word and Wisdom have their origins in God (Prov 8:22; Sir 24:3; Wis 7:25-26; John 1:1-2)
- Wisdom preexisted and had a role in the task of creation (Prov 3:19; 8:22-29; Sir 1:4, 9-10; 16:24–17:7; Wis 8:4-6; John 1:2-3)
- Wisdom is infused in creation, giving it order and endurance (Wis 1:7; 7:24, 27; 8:1; 11:25; John 1:2, 10)
- Wisdom comes to the world with a mission (Prov 8:4, 31-36; Sir 24:7, 12, 19-22; John 1:14) to speak personally to the world (Sir 24:19-22; John 3:16-17), and to her followers she offers life and blessings (Sir 1:14-20; 6:18-31; 15:1-8; 24:19-33; John 3:10, 14)
- Wisdom draws people into friendship with God (Wis 7:27; John 15:13, 14, 15)

Making use of these OT images, the Fourth Gospel affirms that Wisdom, who was with God in the beginning, creating order in the world, has now found a resting place, has pitched her tent in human history. Where Israel sought Wisdom’s resting place in Torah, for the Johannine community, *Jesus* is the incarnation of divine Wisdom, and this community bears witness to its experience. Within the earliest Church experience, still closely in touch with its Jewish roots and Scriptures, there was no difficulty proclaiming the divine presence of *Sophia* in the male *Jesus*; for those familiar with Israel’s Scriptures she was not hidden. The works of Sally Douglas and Eva Günther demonstrate the way in which canonical Gospels and

7. Von Rad cautions against interpreting the various criticisms of the cult as outright rejection of cultic practices; he writes, “The wise men had, intellectually, outgrown the world of cultic action.” See Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM, 1972), 186–89.

8. Sharon Ringe identifies numerous ways in which the motifs of *Logos* and *Sophia* continue across the Gospel narrative even though these terms do not appear as a christological title. Ringe, *Wisdom’s Friends*, 53–61.

## John 1:1-18

<sup>1:1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

<sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup>The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

<sup>10</sup>He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the

letters found in Sophia the language and imagery needed to speak of Jesus and his mission.<sup>9</sup> A shift seems to occur in the middle of the second century, demonstrated particularly through Tertullian (ca. 155–240 CE).<sup>10</sup> By this time the good news of liberation and salvation has reached into the Greco-Roman world, and by doing this the Gospel has hit up against attitudes to women that go beyond patriarchy into the misogyny of Aristotelian anthropology and philosophy. Within this mind-set the woman is not made in the image of God (Gen 1:27) and her life is not celebrated as “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23); instead, women are malformed, imperfect men.<sup>11</sup> From this time on the maleness of Jesus casts a veil over Sophia that had been diaphanous in the New Testament texts.

Like the figure of Sophia, the Gospel presses Jesus’s origins back to the beginning of time; the introductory prologue echoes the opening words of Genesis 1 and is guided by the seven-day structure of this creation account.

I structure the prologue with two parallel sections: one reporting or telling the story of Jesus (vv. 3-13), and one section then offering first person testimony to this story (vv. 14-17). These two sections are enclosed within an introduction (vv. 1-2) and conclusion (v. 18).

9. Sally Douglas, *Early Church Understandings of Jesus as the Female Divine: The Scandal of the Scandal of Particularity*, LNTS 557 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016) and Eva Günther, *Wisdom as a Model for Jesus’ Ministry: A Study on the “Lament over Jerusalem” in Matt 23:37-39 Par. Luke 13:34-35*, WUNT 2/513, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020).

10. Douglas, *Jesus as the Female Divine*, 116–17.

11. Aristotle (384–322 BCE): “And a woman is as it were an infertile male; the female, in fact, is female on account of an inability of a sort. . . . The male provides the ‘form’ and the ‘principle of movement,’ the female provides the body, in other words, the material” (*On the Genesis of the Creatures* 1.20).

*John 1:1-18 (cont.)*

world did not know him. <sup>11</sup>He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup>But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, <sup>13</sup>who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

<sup>14</sup>And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son,

full of grace and truth. <sup>15</sup>(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") <sup>16</sup>From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. <sup>17</sup>The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup>No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

**Introduction:** <sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God.

## [Part A: The Story Told]

<sup>3</sup>All things came into being through him,  
and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life,  
and the life was the light of all people.  
<sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness did not overcome it.

<sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

<sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

[Part B: Personal Testimony]<sup>12</sup>

<sup>14</sup>And the Word became flesh and lived [tabernacled: ἐσκήνωσεν] among us,  
and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

<sup>15</sup>(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'")

12. Verses 1-13 are in reported speech; verses 14-17 use first-person pronouns, "I," "we," "us," giving these verses the character of eyewitness testimony.



<sup>9</sup>The true light, which enlightens everyone,  
 was coming into the world.  
<sup>10</sup>He was in the world, and the world came into being through him;  
 yet the world did not know him.  
<sup>11</sup>He came to what was his own,  
 and his own people did not accept him.

<sup>12</sup>But to all who received him,  
 who believed in his name,  
 he gave power to become children of God,  
<sup>13</sup>who were born, not of blood  
 or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man,  
 but of God.

<sup>16</sup>From his fullness we have all received,  
 grace upon grace [χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος].  
<sup>17</sup>The law indeed was given through Moses;  
 grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

**Conclusion:** <sup>18</sup>No one has ever seen God.  
 It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart [κόλπον],<sup>13</sup>  
 who has made him known.

The Gospel opens with a hymn-like prologue (vv. 1-18) that has been likened to an overture of a grand opera.<sup>14</sup> In these verses the audience hears of the major characters, namely, God and the Word (v. 1),<sup>15</sup> who in the narrative will be named as Father and Son.<sup>16</sup> Themes that will recur across the narrative are announced: life (v. 4), cosmos (v. 10), and

13. Κόλπος means "breast" rather than heart, which would be καρδιά in Greek.

14. Brendan Byrne, *Life Abounding: A Reading of John's Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 21.

15. A very rich study of the "character" of God in the Fourth Gospel is Marianne Meye Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

16. While the names reflect the patriarchal culture of the time, the presentation of the "Father" in John subverts the image of patriarchy and depicts a nonauthoritarian father figure who displays vulnerability in loving and gifting the world with the beloved (3:16). See the insert by Dorothy Lee on the portrayal of the Father in John's Gospel, "The Iconic Father," p. 156; also Dorothy A. Lee, "Beyond Suspicion? The Fatherhood of God in the Fourth Gospel," *Pacifica* 8 (1995): 140–54.

tabernacle (v. 14).<sup>17</sup> The plot is poignantly described: “he came to what was his own [εἰς τὰ ἴδια], and his own people did not accept him” (v. 11). But there are some of “his own” who do receive him and these are given the promise that expresses the goal of this entire adventure,<sup>18</sup> that believers will be transformed into children (v. 12) who will participate in the intimate relationship of the only born Son, dynamically resting on the Father’s breast (v. 18). Although *Sophia*/Wisdom is not named, her subtle presence suffuses the prologue.

Unfortunately, Christianity has moved away from its Jewish roots, and many Christians are not familiar with the wisdom literature or even do not have all of this literature within their Bibles. This means that Wisdom’s presence is not obviously recognized, which can be problematic for feminists. That Wisdom is present but unnamed in the New Testament resonates with the experience of women in church communities today who are present and active, but their contribution and leadership is unrecognized and unnamed. Like *Sophia* of old, women today are crying out in the streets and raising their voices (Prov 1:20), demanding justice and equality for all human beings.

Distanced as we are by time, culture, and religious traditions, a Western, Christian, twenty-first-century audience may hear these verses but not be attuned to their deeper resonances. We are also listening to an evangelist who is both artist and theologian, employing the literary styles his original audience would have been accustomed to through the repeated hearing of their ancient Scriptures, the Old Testament.<sup>19</sup> There are times when the author will cite these Scriptures explicitly (e.g., 1:23), but more frequently the narrative will proceed through allusions and subtle echoes, relying on the audience’s familiarity with these ancient texts and their appreciation of the author’s artistic skill. While this is challenging for the modern reader, it is important to remember that the author’s aim is to communicate in order to reveal and lead to belief in Jesus, and through believing, have life in his name (see 20:31).

17. Within the narrative, the cultic symbol of the tabernacle will be represented by the temple.

18. On this point I agree with Käsemann that v. 12 “could be the culmination . . . [of] what was achieved by the manifestation of the Revealer.” See Ernst Käsemann, “The Structure and Purpose of the Prologue to John’s Gospel,” in *New Testament Questions of Today* (London: SCM, 1969), 152.

19. When referring to the Scriptures known and used in the first century, I will use the general expression the Old Testament (OT). At times I will refer specifically to the Greek text of these writings, the Septuagint (LXX), or the Hebrew text (MT) and sometimes the Aramaic text known as the targums.

Following the lead of Adele Reinhartz, we can read the Gospel as telling three different “tales.” At one level the Gospel narrates the story of the historical person Jesus, situated in the regions of Galilee, Judea, and Samaria, in the early part of the first century CE. At another level, the story reveals something of the later experience of the Johannine community in their faith and struggle with early Judaism after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. But beyond these two “tales” lies a larger “meta-tale” that has “the cosmos as its setting and eternity as its time frame.”<sup>20</sup> The prologue takes the reader from the cosmological tale (v. 1) into the historical tale (v. 18) through the experience and witness of the ecclesiological tale (vv. 14-17).

### Introduction (1:1-2)

The prologue begins by echoing the first words of Genesis, inviting listeners into a cosmic tale of God and the Word existing beyond space and time “in the beginning,” whenever that may have been. The description of the Word “with [πρός] God” expresses a dynamic intimacy that will be recapitulated in the conclusion (v. 18), which describes the Son drawn “into” (εἰς) the Father’s bosom (κόλπος),<sup>21</sup> a “vivid portrayal of maternal imagery of mother and child.”<sup>22</sup>

The particular Greek construction of the third phrase, “the Word was God,” makes it clear that the Word participates in the divinity without being totally identical with “the God” (ὁ θεός) of 1:1b. “The construction the evangelist chose to express this idea was the most concise way he could have stated that the Word was God and yet was distinct from the Father.”<sup>23</sup>

### Stanza 1 (1:3-5)

The structure presented above shows the prologue developing in two parallel arrays of three stanzas set within an introduction and a

20. Adele Reinhartz, *The Word in the World: The Cosmological Tale in the Fourth Gospel*, SBLMS 45 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 4.

21. The Greek prepositions πρὸς and εἰς express movement toward; Bo Reicke, “πρὸς,” *TNDT* 6 (1964): 721. The choice of the term “bosom” reflects the relational closeness between the “father” and “son” even as it blurs the gendered language, suggesting a maternal closeness of a child at the breast.

22. Adesola Joan Akala, *The Son-Father Relationship and Christological Symbolism in the Gospel of John*, LNTS 505 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 221.

23. See the lengthy discussion of this verse in Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 266–69.

conclusion.<sup>24</sup> The first stanza tells a story of the Word's relation to the cosmos as an agent of creation, recalling the breath and voice of God speaking over the waters to create light and to separate light from darkness (Gen 1:3-5). In stating that "the darkness did not overcome it," the prologue intimates a conflict between the light and the darkness, a conflict that will be played out in the ensuing narrative.<sup>25</sup>

### **Stanza 2 (1:6-9)**

The second stanza introduces John as one "sent by God." John comes highly credentialed and yet John's role is not to be the light but to bear witness. The narrative will continue to make this distinction between John and Jesus.

### **Stanza 3 (1:10-13)**

The third stanza briefly narrates the experience when the creative Word, already present in the cosmos, is revealed to "his own." Here a distinction is made between some of his own who reject him and some who receive him in faith. These believers in "his name" (v. 12) will become "children of God" and will be "born" of God (ἐγεννήθησαν, v. 13). In both the Pauline and Johannine literature, being a child of God is a metaphorical way of stating a close and personal relationship with God, made possible through Jesus. The metaphor draws on the OT sense of Israel as God's own people, expressed in Hosea as God's children (Hos 11:1-4). For Paul, "The status of son implies full freedom and adulthood as compared with legal servitude and restriction. It means freedom from all cosmic powers, Gal. 3:25 ff.; 4:1 ff., 9; Rom. 8:31 ff."<sup>26</sup> It is also important for readers today to understand that in the ancient world adults could become closely affiliated with another adult through a process of adoption, a process not restricted to children. Wisdom speaks of initiating a close relationship between the righteous and God, but rather than

24. For a summary of other ways of structuring the prologue, see Mary L. Coloe, "The Structure of the Johannine Prologue and Genesis 1," *ABR* 45 (1997): 40–43.

25. Light and darkness will be two key symbols expressing the cosmological drama. For an examination of the dramaturgical and revelatory function of the "light" metaphor, see Jörg Frey, *The Glory of the Crucified One: Christology and Theology in the Gospel of John*, trans. Wayne Coppins and Christoph Heilig, *BMSEC* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), 126–37.

26. Albrecht Oepke, "Divine Sonship," *TDNT* 5 (1967): 652.

the metaphor of “adoption,” she uses the model of friendship (Wis 7:27). This model is also used by Jesus in his final discourse when he calls his disciples “friends” (15:15). While the language of becoming “children of God” may suggest childishness for a reader today, culturally the metaphor included chosen adult relationships, and in the narrative this model shifts to one of adult friendship.

Becoming children of God is the ultimate goal of the narrative. Not only does the Word reveal God, but also through him believers will be drawn into the very life of God and be transformed into brothers and sisters of Jesus and daughters and sons of God (20:17).<sup>27</sup> This transformation will be depicted at the cross. A very frequent way of designating all Israel was to say, “the children of Israel.” The evangelist situates the origin of believers not in a human patriarch (Jacob/Israel) but in God, and this God is depicted as giving “birth” (γεννάω) to her children.<sup>28</sup>

The image of God as a birthing mother would be familiar to a Jewish audience whose Scriptures describe God as “the Rock that bore you” and Israel is chastised for forgetting “the God who gave you birth” (Deut 32:18). Similarly, God “will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant” (Isa 42:14). The image of God as a birthing and nurturing mother is a promise of hope for the returning exiles: “Shall I open the womb and not deliver? says the LORD. . . . As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you” (Isa 66:9a, 13). God challenges Job to recognize that creation itself is born from her womb: “From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?” (Job 38:29). Thus, the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings bear witness that God images and language must be inclusive of women’s experience. The birthing language introduced in the prologue cuts across the primary narrative language of God as “Father” and prepares the reader to encounter further “birthing” imagery.

27. Mary Magdalene is given the Easter proclamation: “Go to my sisters and brothers [ἀδελφούς] and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Although the word ἀδελφοί is grammatically masculine, according to H. G. Liddell, it is in fact a generic plural meaning both brothers and sisters. Henry G. Liddell, “ἀδελφός,” in *A Lexicon: Abridged from Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1996), 12.

28. Although γεννάω may be used for both “the ‘begetting’ of the father and the ‘bearing’ of the mother,” it is only rarely used to speak of God. Psalms 2 and 109 speak of the king being begotten/born of God, and Sophia/Wisdom in Proverbs 8. See Karl Heinrich Rengstorff and Friedrich Büchsel, “γεννάω,” *TDNT* 1 (1964): 665–75.

**Stanza 4 (1:14)**

In verse 14 a major shift occurs. The story told across verses 2-13 is repeated, but now it has the character of first-person testimony. The incarnate Word dwelt among “us”; we hear directly the voice of believers witnessing to what “*we* have seen” (v. 14); John’s witness in his own words, “This was he of whom *I* said, ‘He who comes after *me* ranks ahead of *me* because he was before *me*’” (v. 15); and what they know through experience, “from his fullness *we* have all received” (vv. 16-17). The change from narration to testimony at verse 14 led to my structure shown above.

<sup>14</sup>The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, and we have seen his glory,  
the glory as of a father’s only son [μονογενοῦς], the fullness of a gift that is true.<sup>29</sup>

In the first stanza, verses 3-5 speak of life and light shining in the darkness. When story becomes testimony, verse 14 proclaims, “*we saw* his glory.” The Word, present as the life-force within creation, has become visible; light has brought perception. When we hear the statement, “The Word became flesh [σάρξ],” we may understand this as simply a statement of the Word becoming human. A common creed affirms, “by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became *man*.”<sup>30</sup> This is not accurate according to the biblical sense of “flesh.” The Hebrew word בשר, “flesh,” in the OT means more than a physical attribute of biological life experienced by humans and animals. In both Hellenistic Greek and early Judaism “flesh” “can also be used to emphasize the corruptibility of man [*sic*] and the lowliness of the creature over against the Creator.”<sup>31</sup> Thus “flesh” is a quality of all created things—*ta panta*. Under the influence of Platonic and Epicurean philosophy, “flesh” became associated with materiality and sin in later Jewish and Christian writings, but this is not its primary sense in the OT or in the Fourth Gospel. In the OT “flesh” is the perception of the human person “in relation to God. As

29. Author’s translation. “The LXX uses μονογενής for יחיד, e.g., Ju. 11:34, where it means the only child; cf. also Tob 3:15; 6:11.” Friedrich Büchsel, “Μονογενής,” *TDNT* 4 (1967): 738. In Tob 6:11 it is used to speak of Sarah, the only daughter of Raguel. In v. 14 the adjective has a masculine ending giving “only son.”

30. This statement is from the Profession of Faith based on the Nicean-Constantinopolitan Creed, as expressed in the latest English translation of the Roman Catholic Eucharist (2010).

31. Eduard Schweizer and Friedrich Baumgärtel, “Σάρξ, Σαρκικός, Σάρκινος,” *TDNT* 7 (1971): 111.

a creature of God he [sic] is flesh, always exposed to death."<sup>32</sup> Flesh emphasizes the corruptibility of human life, its temporality as distinct from the incorruptibility of the eternal God. Within the Fourth Gospel *σάρξ* is the human, earthly sphere without knowledge of God. This does not mean it is sinful, simply ignorant. It is the choice for unbelief, not *σάρξ*, that gives the world its sinful state. In 1:13 *σάρξ* refers to ordinary human birth as distinct from birth of God. In becoming flesh the Word enters fully into a world bound by space and time, and like all creation the enfleshed Word will experience death. Flesh means anything that has been created and is therefore bound by time and the ordinary material processes of death and decay.

All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people is grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever. (Isa 40:6-9; RSV)

*Σάρξ*, "flesh," in verse 14 therefore balances *πάντα*, "all things," in verse 3 to describe the entry of the Word into the "stuff" of creation. It is all inclusive, male and female, human and nonhuman, living and nonliving. As Dorothy Lee states, "It is not the maleness of Jesus that has symbolic significance in this world view but rather his embodiment in material/human form."<sup>33</sup>

And herein lies a great paradox, not only that flesh reveals divine glory, but also that the incarnation destroys dualistic views of spirit/matter, male/female. Under the later influence of Greek philosophy Christianity moved away from an incarnational theology. "It has set in place a hierarchy with God and spirit presiding and various manifestation of the flesh in descending order. Women, and nature itself, are at the bottom since man has claimed for himself rationality and spirituality which are nearer to divinity than are matter and flesh."<sup>34</sup> The Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus (205–270 CE) was the first philosopher to emphasize the connection of matter with evil. He wrote, "When something is absolutely deficient—and this is matter—this is essential evil without any share of

32. Eduard Schweizer and Friedrich Baumgärtel, "*Σάρξ, Σαρκικός, Σάρκιος*," *TDNT* 7 (1971): 123.

33. Dorothy A. Lee, *Flesh and Glory: Symbolism, Gender and Theology in the Gospel of John* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 29.

34. Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, IFT 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 16. See also Marie J. Gibling, "Dualism," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

good.”<sup>35</sup> Since women were associated with materiality, under the influence of Neoplatonism, women became identified with evil.<sup>36</sup> Against such centuries-old dualism, feminists and eco-theologians today are reclaiming incarnational theology. “‘Flesh’ is a far broader reality than ‘humanity’ and, as we are learning from the geneticists and biologists, we are not a solo species; we are related to all other ‘flesh’ with whom we share the same remote origin in the dust of exploding stars.”<sup>37</sup>

In the first stanza the Word was described as “life” and “light.” In verse 14, a community bears witness to what the light has revealed—“we have seen his glory.” This glory is described as πλήρης χάριτος και ἀληθείας, “the fullness of a gift that is true.” This verse is frequently translated using the Pauline word “grace,” but χάρις usually means “gift.”<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, in Greek when the two nouns “gift” and “truth” are connected by “and” the second noun can be understood not as an addition to but as a quality of the first noun. The phrase χάριτος και ἀληθείας is thus better translated as the fullness of a “true gift,” or the fullness of a “gift that is true.”<sup>39</sup>

In describing the flesh-taking of the Word, John uses the verb ἐσκήνωσεν from the word σκηνή, which means “tent” or “tabernacle,” so the expression could read, “The Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us.” The word σκηνή was used in the OT to speak of the tent/tabernacle that symbolized God’s presence with Israel when they left Sinai (Exod 40). This same word was then used to describe Sophia finding her place “in the holy tent” (LXX: σκηνή, Sir 24:10). By using this cultic term, John evokes the long memory of the Divine Presence dwelling within Israel and associated with the ark of the covenant, the temple, and the tabernacle.<sup>40</sup>

35. Plotinus, *Enneads in Plotinus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 3:256.

36. See Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution, 750 B.C.–A.D. 1250* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985). The Plotinus citation is on p. 203.

37. Margaret Daly-Denton, *John: An Earth Bible Commentary; Supposing Him to be the Gardener*, Earth Bible Commentary (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 35. See also Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, 61.

38. In English we use the words “charism” to speak of a gift and “charismatic” to describe a gifted individual.

39. This grammatical form will also be significant in translating v. 16. For further explanation, see Francis J. Moloney, *John*, SP 4 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 45; Ruth B. Edwards, “XAPIN ANTI XAPITOS (John 1:16): Grace and the Law in the Johannine Prologue,” *JSNT* 32 (1988): 3-15.

40. For a more detailed discussion of this cultic presence, see Mary L. Coloe, *God Dwells with Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), chap. 3.



Following the exile, God's presence was seen beyond the cult, within the very order of the universe with its rhythms of times and seasons. This presence of God was named divine Wisdom, Σοφία (*Sophia*). The sages found *Sophia* not only in the order of the cosmos but also in the orderly life of the community living according to God's law—the Torah—and so they spoke of *Sophia* making her home within Israel, coming to dwell in the tent/tabernacle and later enscripted in Israel's Torah (Sir 24).

### Stanza 5 (1:15)

Following the personal testimony of the community, who have seen the Word tabernacling "among us," the next stanza returns to the witness of John, where he speaks in his own voice, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me." In the context of the Fourth Gospel's theology of the preexistent Word, the verse as it now stands is a reference to Jesus, who ranks higher than John and whose existence has already been situated "in the beginning."<sup>41</sup>

### Stanza 6 (1:16-17)

<sup>16</sup>From his fullness *we* have all received, a gift instead of a gift [χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος].

<sup>17</sup>For the law was given through Moses; the true gift [ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια] came through Jesus Christ.<sup>42</sup>

Testimony continues in the final stanza, which speaks of a gift that "*we* have received." Where stanza 3 made a distinction between those of his own who did not receive the Word and those who did, stanza 6 makes a distinction between two "gifts"—χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος. Once again most translations follow the Pauline sense of χάρις as "grace" rather than the usual translation as "gift." The following verse elaborates further on these two gifts. The first gift was the law, "given through Moses"; now in Jesus another gift is being offered, described as the fullness of a true

41. John Meier considers that since a similar phrase is attested in the Synoptic Gospels, "we have good reason to accept that this is substantially the Baptist's own teaching." Most likely the historical John was referring to an expectation of Elijah returning before the eschatological Day of the Lord (Mal 4:6). See John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 2: *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 27–40.

42. Author's translation.

gift (v. 17). The tragedy is that some of “his own” who received the first gift of the Mosaic law are unable to see in Jesus the second gift, which this community believes to be in continuity with and fulfilling the hope expressed in Israel’s law.

The parallel stanza, verses 11-13, clarifies what this further gift is. Those who believe in his name “are given the power to become the children of God” (v. 12). Within the Gospel narrative, some of “his own” will claim to be followers of Moses (9:28) and children of Abraham (8:33). The Johannine community claims that a greater lineage is now possible, that through Jesus they have become children of God.

These two verses can be read falsely as supersessionism, particularly when the preposition *ἀντί* is read as a *contrast* between two gifts. *Ἀντί* is a preposition that can mean replacement or “equivalent in estimation” or “similarity.”<sup>43</sup> The Gospel narrative does not show Jesus replacing the gift of the law or denying its validity. In fact, when there is a conflict about Jesus’s act of healing on the Sabbath (chap. 5), Jesus draws on the law to support his actions (7:19-24). Therefore, it is best to read *χάρις ἀντί χάριτος* as a gift just as once Moses received a gift, where the emphasis is on the bounty of God’s free giving, once to Moses and now to “us” (1:14). In the estimation of the Johannine community, this gift, becoming children of God (1:12), is the full expression of the first gift. Daniel Boyarin proposes the following understanding of these verses (1:16, 17): “Although the Word is the creator of all, as we learned in v. 3, all were not capable alone of receiving him. Indeed, his own people did not receive him when he came in the form of the Torah . . . but God performed the extraordinary act of incarnating his Logos in flesh and blood. . . . Jesus comes to fulfill the mission of Moses, not to displace it. The Torah simply needed a better exegete, the *Logos Ensarkos*, a fitting teacher for flesh and blood.”<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion (1:18)

<sup>18</sup>No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart [κόλπον] who has made him known.

43. Friedrich Büchsel, “Ἀντί,” *TDNT* 1 (1964): 372–73.

44. Daniel Boyarin, “The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John,” *HTR* 94 (2001): 280.

The introduction began with the mythic language of *Logos* and *Theos* “in the beginning.” When the *Logos* enters human history in verse 14, the language shifts to metaphor, and the prologue now expresses the dynamic unity of verse 1 in the familial image of an only child nestled in the bosom (κόλπος)<sup>45</sup> of a parent. Against claims that some of Israel’s great holy ones went up to heaven and saw God, the Gospel asserts that this has never happened (see also 3:13). The only one who can reveal God is the one who has always been in God’s presence and now has come into history. There are difficulties with the text in that some manuscripts read “the only God” (μονογενῆς θεός) and others read “the only son” (μονογενῆς υἱός). For consistency with the image of “father” I prefer the only “son” even though it has the weaker attestations; also as noted in the introduction, the first meaning ascribed to γίνομαι is “to come into being through process of birth or natural production, *be born, be produced.*”<sup>46</sup> While masculine language is used, the imagery is of an only born child resting at the mother’s breast.

In the introduction I noted the “blurring of gender boundaries” that occurs in the Gospel, and 1:18 is another clear example of this. The prologue begins with mythic cosmic language of God and the Word, but now that the Word has entered corporeal existence as “flesh” the language changes to that of person—and in this case the image of father and son is used. This will be the primary overt image throughout the narrative, but it is interrupted by other times of gender blurring, as will be shown, when Jesus speaks and acts as Sophia and when birthing is attributed to himself (19:34) and God (cf. 1:13). The feminine gender is regularly lost in translation. In 1:18 Jesus is spoken of as the μονογενῆς, from two adjectives μόνος and γένος related to the verb γίνομαι, a term that can mean both “begotten” as from a man or “birthed” as from a woman. But as Gail O’Day notes, “Most translations favor the ‘begotten’ side, of that translation choice.”<sup>47</sup> This results in the feminine imagery of God as a birthing and nursing mother (e.g., Isa 49:15; 66:13) being lost, as well as the feminine face of Sophia-Jesus.

45. As noted above, κόλπος means bosom, not heart, as NRSV renders it. The Greek word for heart is καρδιά.

46. BDAG, 197. Italics in the original.

47. Gail R. O’Day, “John,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 520.

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