4

Wisdom is Justified by her Deeds: Claiming the Jesus-Myth

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> Our myths can imprison as well as inspire us.
> When they no longer reflect our deepest sense
> of who we are
> and who we can be,
> It is up to us to transform them
> by living our new vision,
> and sharing it with others.
> In doing this,
> we cleanse the obstruction of the flow of life-force
> within us
> tapping deep roots which nourish the whole
> in ways we may never even know (Koff-Chapin 1984).

This reflection of Deborah Koff-Chapin could well be placed on the lips of a growing number of contemporary Christian women (and a smaller number of men) who are experiencing the Jesus-myth with its predominance of male images and language for the divinity and for Jesus as imprisoning. At an international theological symposium in New Zealand in 1991, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel presented a paper entitled:

"Can a Male Saviour Save Women?" A provocative title for many, but one containing a significant question which suggests that the articulation and celebration of the Jesus-myth in general and its symbolic presentation of Jesus in particular no longer speak to the deepest sense of who women are or who we can be – at least not to the extent which it might.

The critique inherent in Moltmann-Wendel's question is not new to feminist theologians. It was begun as early as 1973 by Mary Daly who claimed:

> It will, I think, become increasingly evident that exclusively masculine symbols for the ideal of "incarnation" or for the ideal of the human search for fulfillment will not do (Daly 1973:71).

Daly's critique was, at that time, radical and deconstructive of the patriarchal structures and androcentric symbol system that characterised Christianity. It was also a self-fulfilling prediction. Ten years later Rosemary Radford Ruether undertook a more systematic critique of the "Christology" "enshrined as orthodoxy" (Ruether 1983:116) under the banner of the question taken up by Moltmann-Wendel. Tracing the historical development of this Christology, she showed how the metaphors of messianic king and *Logos* displaced that of divine wisdom in the symbolic representation of the Christ of faith of the early Christian communities. The former connoted maleness in the symbolic world of Judaism and Hellenism, while the latter was personified as female. This process, which she calls the "patriarchalization of Christology", resulted in a belief in the ontological necessity of the maleness of the incarnate one and a subsequent necessity to argue for the "maleness" of divinity. Consequent to this was the claim that women, because of their femaleness, could not represent Christ, a claim which has not only excluded women from ordained ministry within many Christian churches but has exalted maleness in Christian anthropologies.

Ruether's study, however, was not limited to critique. She searched the tradition for alternatives to the "masculinist" Christology which held the centre. Androgynous and spirit Christologies certainly provided an alternative, but a careful analysis of their limitations led her to explore the possibility of a feminist Christology whose starting point, "must be a reencounter with the Jesus of the synoptic gospels, not the accumulated doctrine about him but his message and praxis" (1983:135). For Ruether, the Jesus as Liberator who emerges from such a reading and Jesus as the Christ whom she calls "the representative of liberated humanity and the liberating Word of God" (1983:137) point toward a "dynamic, rather than static, relationship between redeemer and redeemed", in a way that extends the meaning of "the Christ" beyond association

with the "historical" Jesus and into the redeemed community with women at the centre and not on the margins (1983:138).

In the subsequent decade, the critique and reconstruction undertaken by Ruether was carried further by others from a variety of perspectives.[1] Women, drawing on their own experience within the Christian tradition which has carried for them both oppression as well as the seeds of liberation, turned to that tradition, their past, and undertook a profound critique. They also sought both within that past as well as within their present for silenced, forgotten and new images and constructs which have begun to transform the myth of Christianity and the Jesus story within it. This act of transformation is only beginning and many more voices must join the chorus. Daphne Hampson has recently done this with her *Theology and Feminism* (1990). In her work she provides a critique not only of the tradition, as many before her have done, but also of a number of the emerging feminist Christologies. While this is a necessary voice in the dialogue inviting us further into the possibilities that women's knowledge offers beyond patriarchy, Hampson's own presuppositions do not allow for a reclaiming of the tradition in a way which, in fact, is a transformation of the myth.[2]

The most recent voice contributing to this transformation from a feminist perspective is that of Elizabeth Johnson. She turns to the Sophia image which Ruether recognised as suppressed in the patriarchalisation of Christology. Subsequent to an articulation of a new anthropology which models one human nature "instantiated in a multiplicity of differences" (1992:156) she carries out her project from a three-fold perspective:

> ... by telling the gospel story of Jesus as the story of Wisdom's child, Sophia incarnate; by interpreting the symbol of the Christ to allow its ancient inclusivity to shine through; by explicating Christological doctrine to unlock what is of benefit (1992:154).

Johnson's "telling of the gospel story of Jesus as the story of Wisdom's child, Sophia incarnate", takes its inspiration from the four gospel narratives as does Ruether's reencounter discussed above. Neither, however, offers a re-reading of a specific gospel which may enable that particular gospel to be heard, to be read with new ears and with new eyes within the context of not only a transformation of our myth but also of our rites. It is in the context of this lacuna that I wish to locate this present undertaking. It is but the beginning of what I hope may be a more substantial contribution to the present dialogue, namely a feminist reading of the Matthean gospel story with particular attention to the symbolic presentation of the character Jesus.[3] It will take account of

new images and constructs which have emerged from the twenty years of feminist reclaiming of the Jesus tradition both biblically and theologically as well as focus specifically on images and constructs within the story itself which have been forgotten or hidden in the intervening centuries of androcentric reading.

In this paper, I will, therefore, outline a possible approach to such a reading, dialogue briefly with current scholarship and then offer an initial reading which can be developed in later undertakings. My title may therefore be a misnomer in that I am rather preparing the way for a feminist reading of the Matthean gospel in order to rediscover Jesus who is at the heart of this myth. Only faint whispers of a possible new voice, that perhaps of Jesus-Sophia and of her justifying deeds will be able to be heard at this point.

The Art of Transforming the Myth

The quotation with which this paper began spoke of a transformation of the myth which no longer inspires us, no longer reflects our deepest sense of who we are or can be. When I ask how such a transformation can take place, I find myself as a biblical scholar returning over and over again to the words of Adrienne Rich written as early as 1972:

> Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival (Rich 1972:18).

As I read further, this time I found her reiterating:

> We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us (1972:19).

Her words express succinctly the task that I am undertaking, namely a re-reading of the Matthean Jesus story. The new critical direction is that of contemporary Christian feminism informed as it is by two decades of critique and reconstruction in relation to the Jesus/Christos myth. The particular tradition whose hold I would wish to break is that of the "Son of God/Son of Man" symbolism considered central to the Matthean story of Jesus.

Such an undertaking has plunged me into hermeneutical and methodological considerations. Initially, my concern is with a re-reading of the text. In this I come to the text not as an uninformed reader but one who belongs clearly to a particular reading community, namely that of Christian biblical scholars whose encounter with the text is shaped by gender questions and whose purpose is to read the text in a way that

opens up its inclusive *basileia* or "kingdom" message for today's believing communities of women and men. This initial reading is, therefore, theological.[4] It will entail a certain *suspicion* or reading against the grain of the text, given the androcentric bias and patriarchal constructs within the text, but it will also open up the possibility of a new reading of the Jesus character. Hans-Georg Gadamer addresses the otherness of the text and its possibility for newness when he says:

> A person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him [*sic*] something. That is why a hermeneutically trained mind must be, from the start, sensitive to the text's quality of newness. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither "neutrality" in the matter of the object nor the extinction of one's self, but the conscious assimilation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings (Gadamer 1979:238).

Gadamer's "hermeneutics of tradition", while drawing our attention to the *bias* we bring to the interpretive act because of our place within a particular reading community, gives little attention, however, to the similar bias or *prejudice* within language and the tradition (elements which lie at the heart of the biblical text and its proclamation within ritual). It is, therefore, gender-blind as well as closed to other interests or ideologies encoded within the text.

Paul Ricoeur, in an article "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology", seeks to address this lacuna. He locates the critical instance at the heart of interpretation, an approach which has characterised feminist biblical hermeneutics, combining as it does a *hermeneutics of suspicion* with a *hermeneutics of reclamation*.[5] He points out:

> The peculiarity of the literary work, and indeed of the work as such, is nevertheless to transcend its own psycho-sociological conditions of production and thereby to open itself to an unlimited series of readings, themselves situated in socio-cultural contexts which are always different. In short, the work *decontextualises* itself, from the sociological as well as the psychological point of view, and is able to *recontextualise* itself differently in the act of reading. – The work itself creates an audience, which potentially includes anyone who can read. The emancipation of the text constitutes the most fundamental condition for the recognition of a critical instance at the heart of interpretation (Ricoeur 1981:91).

I have already located my own reading site within contemporary feminist biblical hermeneutics. This can be supplemented here by the understanding that the Matthean text does not stand alone, even while it is the text being read, but in fact is located within the Christian bible. It

shares both explicitly and implicitly in the intertextuality that functions within the biblical canon. As a result, therefore, it is possible to explore the symbolic and metaphorical characterisation of Jesus within this text in the light of the Wisdom myth in particular since it offers unique possibilities for a feminist reading. This is not, however, an arbitrary choice but one which the text itself opens up for us by its identification of Jesus with Wisdom in Matthew 11:19: Wisdom is justified by her deeds.

The recontextualising that Ricoeur envisages, the reclamation that feminist biblical hermeneutics undertakes, opens up the "world in front of the text", a world which we do not know until we enter into the interpretive process and a world which Ricoeur suggests is constitutive of the critical instance within this process. The "proposed worlds which interpretation unfolds" can open up new possibilities of understanding for the reader, the specific reading community to which that reader belongs as well as to the work's general reading community (in this instance the community of readers of the biblical canon). In this way, those traditions of "Christology" which have been restrictive of the human community from a gender perspective may not in fact be passed on, but may lose their hold over us as Rich proposed.

The choice of method within the art of transformation of the myth is not arbitrary. Ricoeur suggests that "the matter of the text is not what a naive reading of the text reveals, but what the formal arrangement of the text mediates" (1981:93). Since the focus is on the character of Jesus as presented in the Matthean story, a narrative critical approach with its attention to characterisation in the context of the structural elements of a narrative would seem to offer the most appropriate methodological option. Particular attention will need to be given, however, to the role of symbol and metaphor in the interpretation of the character Jesus in the Matthean text since these provide the "implicit commentary and directional signals" between implied author and implied reader (Culpepper 1983:181). I could, at this point, continue this theoretical discussion in relation to theory of metaphor, religious language and genderisation. I propose, however, to turn to the actual transformation of the myth.

The Act of Transforming the Myth: A Beginning

A. The Scholarship

This transformation from a biblical perspective has a context not only within Christian feminist reconstruction but also within Matthean biblical scholarship, and it is here that our two-fold hermeneutic must begin. Initial attention will be directed to this task which will be followed by a re-reading of the Matthean text.

In opening his 1984 article, "The Figure of Jesus in Matthew's Story: A Literary-Critical Probe", Jack Dean Kingsbury states:

> The question of the christology of Matthew's Gospel continues to spark debate. There is as yet no agreement in scholarly circles as to where the center of this christology lies (1984:3).

In referencing this claim, he cites seven texts from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, most of which support a 'Son' Christology, whether that be under the title 'Son of God' or 'Son of Man'.[6] Kingsbury himself then goes on to state in this article, as he has done elsewhere, that "Matthew's christology is preeminently a Son of God christology" (1984:3). Further investigation reveals, however, that he includes none of the recent studies which suggest that not only the metaphor of "son" but also that of "wisdom" provide "directional signals" for the reader of the Matthean text.[7] A number of subsequent studies, on the other hand, have sought to explore more fully one or other aspect of the interpretive framework provided for Jesus in the Matthean gospel or to bring the two into dialogue.[8] Interestingly, the focus in these studies has tended to be more towards the "wisdom" metaphor as an appropriate interpretive lens for at least certain sections of the gospel, but these studies have not wanted to claim any one particular metaphor as dominant. Rather they seem to be more concerned to offer an actualisation of one of the particular aspects of the characterisation of Jesus. Such an approach is affirmed by Burnett when he suggests:

> One does not have to try to assign a dominant Christological title like son of God in order to read for a transcendental signified for the identity of Jesus ... one might seize on the meaning of Jesus as savior and as God's presence by defining that in terms of Jesus' apparent narrative role as the Revealer. That role, in turn could be presented in terms of another frame, e.g., Jesus functions as Revealer in his role as the Wisdom of God, and that frame can then be exalted to encompass the Christological titles themselves, as I have done (Burnett 1989:599).

It is within such a movement that I wish to situate this study, choosing, as I noted earlier, to focus on the intertextuality of the wisdom myth in the interpretation of the Jesus story. I will attempt to demonstrate how not only selected sections but the entire story may be read in light of this myth. In contrast to the major studies which have employed a redaction critical approach to the text, I will draw on the insights of narrative and reader-response criticism within the hermeneutical framework already outlined.[9]

Another specific contribution of this study will be its feminist or gender perspective. Within recent feminist reclamations of the biblical tradition, the figure of Wisdom symbolised as female has provided a significant alternative to the predominant male imaging of divinity.[10] The absence of this perspective in recent studies of the appropriation of the wisdom myth in the Matthean story of Jesus is noted by Celia Deutsch in the conclusion to her recent article, "Wisdom in Matthew: Transformation of a Symbol":

> And so Matthew identifies Jesus with personified Wisdom. He [*sic*] has transformed a traditional symbol, "Lady Wisdom", so that the two terms conjoined by the metaphor are no longer "Woman" and "Wisdom" but "Jesus" and "Wisdom". The content of the symbol is located no longer in an imaginary woman, but in an historical, albeit exalted, male. The shift is startling, and its significance requires further exploration in terms of the process of symbolization, and gender and feminist studies (Deutsch 1990:46).

Her conclusion encourages a gender reading of the Matthean transformation of a significant symbol. Pregeant, on the other hand, provides a challenge to further dialogue:

> My judgment that the first gospel does not in fact contain a genuine Wisdom Christology will appear in some respects disappointing from a feminist perspective (Pregeant 1990:492).

There seems to be in Pregeant's conclusion an underlying assumption that he has undertaken the reading of the Matthean gospel endorsed by the narrator:

> It would appear, then, that it is possible for a reader to interpret Matthew in such a way as to hear the text calling for an identification of Jesus with personified Wisdom. To put the matter differently, we can conclude that the narrator has not foreclosed such an interpretation. To fail to foreclose such a reading, however, is not to endorse it (489).

My own recent feminist reading of the Matthean gospel with particular attention to female characters, on the other hand, has shown that within this gospel there is a dominant narrative which encodes the androcentric perspective and patriarchal structures of its original social milieu but that there is also a significant underside to this narrative in which there is a consistently developed theme of female discipleship and participation in the *basileia* ministry of Jesus. In the conclusion to this study I conjectured that a study of the use of the wisdom metaphor to characterise Jesus throughout the narrative may reveal an underside to this aspect of the unfolding story just as my previous study revealed

this in relation to other characters (Wainwright 1991:354). Returning to Pregeant, therefore, one may at least suggest the possibility at this stage of the research that he may have read the dominant symbolic frameworks used in the Matthean characterisation of Jesus. The underside is yet to be uncovered. It is toward this possibility that I now turn, exploring first the wisdom myth which shapes the Matthean characterisation and then briefly surveying this characterisation of Jesus in the gospel text.

B. Intertextuality: The Wisdom Myth

During Israel's post-exilic period and particularly its Hellenistic phase, a body of literature emerged which has traditionally been called the Wisdom literature. Within this literature, the reader encounters the divine presence and activity personified as female. The Hebrew *hokmah* and the Greek *sophia*, grammatically feminine words meaning wisdom, were personified and predicated of Israel's God. Of this process, influenced as it was by the new emergence of the religion of Isis across the Greek world, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza says, "Divine Sophia is Israel's God in the language and *Gestalt* of the goddess" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:133).

Within this Wisdom myth, Sophia exists from eternity (Sirach 1:4; Prov 8:22ff) and is the female creative spirit present and active in the shaping of the universe (Prov 8:22ff). In this same poem of Proverbs 8, she is called a unique craftsperson (8:30) who not only delights in the divine presence but rejoices and delights in the human family. Indeed so great is this delight that the poet Ben Sirach characterises her as taking her place among them, pitching her tent within the created universe (Sirach 24:8, 12). She is not distant but rather "pervades and penetrates all things" as the song of Sophia indicates (Wis 7:24). She offers a vision of interconnectedness linking humanity, divinity and the whole of the universe.

She is preacher and teacher (Prov 1:20; 8:1ff). She invites the followers whom she calls to her (Sir 4:11-19; 51:26) to learn from her and also to learn her. She is teacher and she is what is taught:

> Wisdom is radiant and unfading,
> and she is easily discerned by those who love her,
> and is found by those who seek her.
> She hastens to make herself
> known to those who desire her (Wis 6:12-13).

Her wisdom, however, is not esoteric learning, but rather it is what is learnt in the very thick of life for she cries aloud in the street and the market place, on the walls of the city and the entrance to the city gates

(Prov 1:20-21). Another context for her teaching is the banquet to which she calls those who would learn of her (Prov 9:1-6).

The high point of the development of the Wisdom myth is found in the *Wisdom of Solomon*. Here Sophia is, as Elizabeth Johnson suggests, "intrinsically linked to the mystery of God" (Johnson 1992:89). She is

> a breath of the power of God
> and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;
> therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her
> For she is a reflection of eternal light
> a spotless mirror of the working of God
> and an image of God's goodness (Wis 7:25-26).

In conclusion, it should be noted that, like Isis, Sophia is saviour (Wis 9:18). Just as the righteous ones of old were protected and saved by wisdom (Wis 10), so the righteous one who is a child of Wisdom in each new age can rely on that same protection (Wis 2:12-3:9).

The Text

In approaching the Matthean text to begin our transformation of the Jesus myth, there are certain presuppositions regarding the literary approach being taken which need to be clarified.

First, I will be concerned with the implied author and implied reader discerned from the encounter with the text itself and available by way of analysis of the codes within the text. Second, the implied author and reader cannot be considered purely as abstractions isolated from any socio-historical considerations. Any political reading of the text, including a feminist reading, recognises that every text has a significant rhetorical function. This means that the way it was to function for the one who produced it and for those who would receive it has been encoded in the text. In a reading of Matthew's gospel, therefore, it is clear that the Matthean author assumes that the intended audience is familiar with the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures including the most recent corpus – the Wisdom writings examined briefly above. These function rhetorically within the text in the shaping of the implied reader's understanding of Jesus. Significant attention will be given, therefore, to the rhetorical function of the characterisation of Jesus within the unfolding story – by way of example, the socio-rhetorical function of the designation "son" in relation to Jesus at the beginning (1:1) and end (28:19) of the gospel will need consideration. In the light of these presuppositions, let me now simply outline the contours of the reading being proposed.

Since the opening of any story is significant in terms of the relationship established between implied author and implied reader, the way the reader is introduced to the character Jesus in the opening chapters of the gospel story will require detailed attention. The reader encounters Jesus in the opening verse of the gospel story through the narrative comment: the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham (1:1).

Immediately the designation *"Christos"* is given a delimitation by its association with "son of David", "son of Abraham", which locates Jesus as a character within Israel's sacred story. These two *"huios"* or "son" titles together with the patrilineage which follows establish Jesus as the one in whom Israel's patriarchal history culminates. The implied author thus begins the creation of the symbolic universe of the narrative. It is ordered according to a sacred unfolding pattern and it is male.

In my earlier study I grappled with the extraordinary presence within the patrilineage of Jesus at the opening of the gospel story of the names of four women from Israel's story – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba, who is called "the wife of Uriah". Their names, together with that of Mary who would give birth to Jesus, break the ordered patterning of the genealogy. They symbolise female power as well as its domestication (Wainwright 1991:68; Anderson 1987:188). Their naming, therefore, along with that of the males within the patrilineage, has a rhetorical function not only in relation to the community's self-understanding but also in relation to their understanding of Jesus. Female presence and power can function to decentre the male metaphor of son and the lineage of sons, at least momentarily, at the opening of the gospel. Just as the ordered naming of fathers and sons evokes the divine order in Israel's story, so too the disruptive naming of women may be representative of Sophia who decentres the male metaphors, male imagery of the divine in Israel's story. At this point, these are but hints in the narrative which open up the possibility of a new reading. It is clear, however, that the story of Jesus is linked inextricably with women's stories in Israel as well as men's, with hints of female imagery in a context of dominant male metaphors.

The birth narrative (Matt 1:18-25) identifies Jesus as the one who is "to save his people from their sins". In light of the wisdom myth, he is to be saviour as Sophia was designated saviour, a brief hint which can begin the deconstructive process within the Matthean symbol system. Within the same narrative, the fulfilment quotation in 1:23 links Jesus to the one who is to be named "Emmanuel" which the implied author explicates for the reader – a name which means God with us.

Traditionally this birth narrative has been understood in light of the fulfilment of prophetic expectations, expectations of liberation according to Brueggemann, who would place a text such as is 7:14 within the "liberation trajectory" of Israel's sacred story (Brueggemann 1979:161-185). This text, however, together with others in the infancy narrative, has functioned for some readers to embed Jesus more firmly into a patriarchal sacred story with its exclusive male metaphors, as can be seen from this contemporary characterisation of Jesus drawn from the Matthean infancy narrative:

> [T]he royal, Davidic theology integrates all the forenamed roles (Lord, Christ, King, Son of God, Son of Man, Son of David, Shepherd, Servant and Prophet), without necessarily exhausting their meaning. The Christ of Matthew is Lord of the heart. Only through immersion in the Gospel's royalist faith-vision can the various colours of the Christological spectrum, as caught by the titles, coalesce into the glory that captivated the evangelist (Nolan 1979:13).

Read in this way, the symbolisation process evident in the text and its subsequent interpretation from an androcentric perspective functions to immerse the female reader into such a "royalist faith-vision". This faith vision is gender-inflected to render them invisible and has consequently led to their alienation from the myth itself. There is, however, an alternative potential which deconstructs such an embedding, opening the way for alternative symbolisation.

The implied author's designation of this Jesus who is to be born of Mary as "God with us" draws the reader not only into the prophetic tradition but also the wisdom tradition. Emmanuel may well be symbolically linked to Sophia who delights in the inhabited world, being among the human family (Prov 8:31) and who is commanded to place a tent in Jacob, who indeed took root in an honoured people (Sirach 24:8-12). She too was designated Saviour (Wis 9:18; 10:4; 14:4; 16:7), as is Jesus, who is called Emmanuel in Matt 1:21-23.

We have here perhaps the first hint of what Deutsch has pointed to, namely, the wisdom myth functioning as symbolic vehicle for the rich characterisation of Jesus within the gospel narrative. Within this myth, wisdom is metaphorically female, whereas, within the gospel narrative, Jesus is introduced to readers as male within a symbolic universe that is gender-inflected at the beginning of the narrative in predominantly male terms. The tensive nature of the wisdom myth and metaphor is exploited to shape the symbolic universe being constructed for the reader. The male symbolisation with which the gospel opened is brought into tensive relationship with female symbolisation at this very early point. This same tensive relationship continues into the subsequent chapter where, in two

successive scenes, prophetic fulfilment texts conclude the respective segments of the story.

The imagery of the first is that of the divine parent of Hosea calling the son (*huios*) out of Egypt (2:15). The imagery evoked may well be female, even more so than male, given the Hosean text (see Hos 11:1-4), but because the male imaging of God has been so dominant in our reading of the Matthean text (and indeed any Christian text) then we are more likely to be shaped to read this image in male terms. In the second scene, however, the imagery is more explicitly female. The slaying of the innocent children is symbolically linked to Rachel weeping for her children. Jesus' presence and projected mission may draw forth the same lack of response that Sophia's invitation did (Prov 1:20-33). This is imaged here in terms of female pain and mourning just as Jesus' actual mourning in the face of Jerusalem's rejection later in the story will likewise be depicted in female imagery – the hen who would gather her chicks under her wings and they would not be so gathered (Matt 23:37). As women's stories emerged among those of men in the prelude to Jesus' story, so too does female imagery emerge from the underside to characterise Jesus who is born of the woman Mary.

The opening section of the gospel into which the reader is immediately drawn to encounter Jesus, the central character of the unfolding story, offers hints that an alternate reading of the text from a feminist or gender perspective may yield rich insights into the narrative's characterisation of Jesus. These hints will need to inform the reader as the narrative unfolds. In the context of this paper, I can simply indicate some of the potential that the text contains for such reading.

The Jesus who sits on the mountaintop teaching disciples the way of righteousness is traditionally characterised by many in terms of Moses, the giver of the law (Davies and Allison 1988:423-424). Recent interest in the intertextuality between the Wisdom literature and the Christian scriptures has, however, drawn attention to the strong affinities between Jesus' sermon in Matthew 5-7 and the wisdom corpus (Tuttle 1977; Perdue 1986). Tuttle would go so far as to say that "its form, language, imagery, content and function are typically sapiential" (1977:230). This, in its turn, raises questions regarding the symbolic presentation of Jesus in this narrative context. On the one hand, the Jesus of the sermon can be appropriated symbolically as sage, providing gender continuity between the actual first-century Galilean teacher and the textual symbolisation. This same proclaimed Jesus of the Matthean text can, on the other hand, evoke for the reader Sophia or Woman Wisdom of the sapiential tradition, she who, in the words of Perdue, "is the dancing goddess (of Prov 8:22-31) who metaphorically expresses the dynamic form of aesthesis" (1986:5-6).

This aesthesis which the "dancing goddess" expresses metaphorically is that which "wisdom's practitioners ... discover, sustain, and even create ... through language which takes up residence in the heart and forms and shapes both human character and the structure and norms of society" (1986:5). The reader is once more drawn into the tensive quality of the Sophia metaphor with its female connotations being linked to the male sage and wisdom practitioner, Jesus.

Such symbolisation continues into chapters 8 and 9 of the Matthean gospel where the sage who teaches with authority (4:23; 7:28-29; 9:35) also heals with that same authority (4:23; 9:6, 8; 9:35). In the symbolic account of the stilling of the storm, described as it is in the language of the *seismos* or earthquake, the fearful disciples call out to be saved from their life-endangering peril (8:25). The woman with the haemorrhage whose life has been virtually destroyed by the social and religious taboos surrounding her illness claims the same life-restoring power when she says to herself that but a touch of his garment will restore her life (9:21). Jesus, the righteous one, who restores life for human supplicants again evokes Woman Wisdom. Here it is not the "dancing goddess" but she whose power to protect, to strengthen, to rescue, to keep safe is praised in Wisdom 10 (Wis 10:1, 2, 4, 5, 6). As saving one she is reminiscent of Isis whom Matthews describes as "the possessor of the *ankh*, which was the symbol of both divine authority and also the key to the house of life itself" (Matthews 1991:65-66). Jesus the sage and the holy righteous one is also Jesus-Sophia.

It is Jesus-Sophia who sends out disciples into the market-place (Matt 10:5-15) just as Sophia sent her household companions out as her emissaries (Prov 9:3). It is not surprising for the reader, therefore, when the works of the *Christos* (Matt 11:2) are paralleled with those of Sophia (Matt 11:19): Wisdom is justified or made righteous by her deeds. Jesus as the one who preaches the right ordering of the universe, its resources and relationships, a key element of Sophia's message of wisdom, also does or lives this righteousness or right ordering. As such, he is acclaimed not only as *Christos* but also with the female gestalt, *Sophia*. That such imagery characterises the central section of the gospel – 11:1-14:13a – has been admirably demonstrated by Rod Doyle (1984) and Celia Deutsch (1987). Their work may, however, need to be brought into dialogue with a more synchronic and reader-centred analysis as well as a feminist critique.

As the Matthean story of Jesus continues, so too does the pattern of symbolisation which identifies the male character, Jesus, with characteristics of the female gestalt of God, Sophia. Details of the continuation of the pattern cannot be given in this essay, but the contours have been

established. In conclusion, let it suffice to point to the explicitly female imagery associated with Jesus in Matt 23:37 (the female hen who gathers her chicks under her wing) which raises questions regarding a possible narrative link between this imagery and that of Rachel weeping for her children in 2:18. The final hint that invites further development that can be mentioned here is the rejection of Wisdom and the rejection of the righteous one within the wisdom myth which provides an interpretive lens for the reader of the passion narrative.

Conclusion

Is Wisdom/Sophia Jesus so justified by her deeds, as the Matthean gospel claims, that those who seek her may find her at work informing in her subtle, hidden and yet revelatory way the entire story of Jesus, the Jesus-myth as we encounter it in the Matthean text? This tentative beginning of an answer to this very question, which has engaged my mind and heart for some time, has indeed raised many more questions. It has also suggested that a positive answer may be found, an answer which results from a feminist critical and rhetorical reading of the text. Such a reading, in its turn, validates Burnett's claim that "one does not have to try to assign a dominant Christological title like son of God in order to read for a transcendental signified for the identity of Jesus" (Burnett 1989:599, n. 23). The wisdom myth has provided another mode of reading for such transcendence. It would also be my hope that this initial exploration and its continuation participates in the transformation of the Christian myth while at the same time enabling us to live a new vision and to share it with others. In this way, we will be enabled to claim our rites as women, rites in which we celebrate the Christian myth using those symbols, myths and images which celebrate the female – the female gestalt of God, the female metaphor predicated of Jesus.

Notes

1 Rita Nakashima Brock (1988) explored the notion of "erotic power" as the heart of human life and creativity as well as the impetus for divine love and incarnation. Through a reading of the Markan story of Jesus as a story of erotic power at work, she, like Ruether, reconstructed a Christology which located Jesus the Christ within the Christa/Community as the locus of erotic power seeking fulness of being. Jacquelyn Grant (1989) analysed the feminist Christology of white feminist theologians and biblical scholars and then critiqued it from the perspective of the experience of black American women. To name just a third example from the wide selection available to us: Chung Hyun Kyung (1990) demonstrated how

Asian women's Christology, until recently had been dominated by the images brought by the missionaries. She pointed out, however, that Asian women doing theology are giving new meaning to these images as well as developing new images and constructs to give expression to their understanding of Jesus shaped by their experience.

2 Erin White, in a paper, "Is Feminist Epistemology Only a Critique of Ideology?", to be included in a forthcoming collection of essays in Australian feminist theology, provides an excellent analysis of this aspect of Hampson's work in the light of Gadamer's "hermeneutics of tradition". Also, recent hermeneutical theory which focusses on the reader as the one who gives meaning to a text provides a further theoretical basis for the notion of "living tradition" or transformation of myth as undertaken in this essay.

3 In relation to my own undertaking, I try to avoid using the term "Christology" since it may communicate an assumption that the author of the gospel was intentionally developing a systematic theology of Jesus and that a study of the text can uncover that theology. My aim is to read the story of Jesus to determine how the character Jesus is delineated and symbolically presented in the narrative. The approach taken in this paper will, therefore, be primarily a narrative/rhetorical approach, while the hermeneutical perspective will be theological.

4 My general approach is theological/reconstructionist as informed by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1983). See also her 1988 article, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship". She has developed her hermeneutical approach further in a later publication (1992).

5 Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell in their Introduction to *Feminism as Critique* (1987:1) point to these two aspects as constitutive of the history of feminism and it is clear that they function in the wealth of feminist biblical scholarship which is currently being produced.

6 See Kingsbury (1975), Waetjen (1976), Pregeant (1978), Meier (1979), Nolan (1979), Hill (1980), and Fuller and Perkins (1983).

7 Christ (1970), Suggs (1970), and Burnett (1981) were all available when Kingsbury wrote his article.

8 See Doyle (1984), Deutsch (1987) and (1990), Burnett (1989), and Pregeant (1990).

9 Kingsbury proposed such a study in his 1984 article, "The Figure". David Hill, "The Figure of Jesus in Matthew's Story: A Response to Professor Kingsbury's Literary-critical Probe", *Journal for Studies of the New Testament* (1984) 21:37-52, pointed to some of the limitations of this study. Burnett, "Characterization and Christology" (1989), undertook what he called a beginning reflection on the function of the proper name "Jesus" in the light of poststructuralist theories of language and reading. Pregeant's study "Wisdom Passages" uses a reader-response approach to test the

findings of the redaction critics, while Deutsch (1990) proposes a reading of the Matthean story of Jesus in light of the Wisdom myth of which it is an interpretation, but her study is predominantly from a redactional perspective. Each of these will provide points of dialogue in my own reading.

10 See especially Camp (1985; 1987) and Johnson (1985).

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