PART II. DISCOURSE ABOUT GOD

What is the right way to speak about God? This question of unsurpassed importance has been raised in an important text by theologian Elizabeth Johnson. Johnson argues that speech about God is speech about our lives and ultimately the key to the meaning of everything. The way in which a faith community shapes its language about God implicitly represents what it takes to be the highest good — the profoundest truth — the most appealing beauty. And in turn such speech directs how a community acts and identifies itself. Speech about God molds a community.

For example, speech about God that extols God’s presence and action in nature would promote a community which respects and cares for nature. On the other hand, speech about a beneficial and loving God who forgives offenses would in turn promote a faith community that cares for its neighbors and forgives enemies. Speech about God shapes the life orientation of the community and individuals in the community.¹

This is the second in a series of two articles dealing with the contribution of feminist theology to discourse about God.² As

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1. The first two paragraphs come from Elizabeth Johnson, SHE WHO IS: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 3-4. This is the main work that I use throughout the article, often using her material verbatim.
was stated in the first article, our goal is to let feminist theologians speak for themselves. Consequently, most of what follows is taken directly from their work. In particular, we have relied heavily on the work of Elizabeth Johnson. In the first article, Part I. Introduction to Feminist Theology, we found that traditional theology is patriarchal and androcentric — that is, that it addresses God and images God as a ruling male, and consequently puts man at the center of human life. The ruling man is considered the norm and measure of what it means to be human. Part I spoke about the harm this has done to women. This article will speak of the harm this does to our understanding of God.

In outlining how feminist theologians address this situation, we indicated that they agree on three tasks — (1) first of all, the task of critique or deconstruction, that is, the task of exposing hidden patriarchal assumptions of traditional theology; (2) secondly, the task of discovery, that is, the task of finding in the tradition hidden wisdom that transcends patriarchal assumptions; (3) and thirdly, the task of constructing new, more inclusive and holistic ways to express the mystery of God. We use these categories: deconstruction, discovery and reconstruction to ponder how feminist theology helps us to speak more rightly of God.

CRITIQUE OF THE TRADITION

While officially the Church rightly and consistently teaches that God is spirit and so is beyond identification with either male or female, yet the daily language of preaching, worship, catechesis, and instruction gives a different message: God is male, or at least more like a man than a woman, or at least more fittingly addressed as male than as female.

We need look no further than the celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy. It begins with the sign of the cross, “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” and moves to “Lord have mercy,” to the creed’s “for us men and our salvation,” through “Father, you are holy indeed,” and so on. Now feminist theologians point out that the problem is not with the metaphors used — Father, Lord, King, etc. These are perfectly appropriate metaphors for God. The problem is, that in fact these
male terms are used *exclusively, literally, and patriarchally.* Let us look at each of these briefly.

**Exclusively:** The Bible uses a multitude of metaphors in speaking about God. Yet these are never used or developed in speech about God. In most languages God is always referred to as “He” with a capital ‘H’ — the capital serving subtly and implicitly to identify maleness as normative. In liturgy, in all languages, prayers are offered to the Father, through the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit. In many languages, the Holy Spirit is masculinized as well through the use of grammatically male pronouns.

**Literally:** In spite of the biblical tradition’s constant teaching that the mystery of God is beyond all comprehension, the exclusively male symbol of God is used in an uncritically literal way. If not explicitly, the constant use of the male designation for God *implicitly* and effectively powers the imagination to think of God as male. Elizabeth Johnson has a wonderful lapidary phrase that speaks volumes. She writes: “The symbol of God functions.” In other words, it does what it signifies. The words and speech we use about God function to embody in the faith community precisely what the symbols point toward. In this case, making God male. The symbol of God functions.

This can happen even in highly abstract discussions as exemplified in the phrase “God is not male. He is Spirit!” Or let us listen to the great Julian of Norwich, the 13th century English Anchoress who is noted for calling Jesus a mother because Jesus gives birth to a new people. Julian writes:

> The mother can give her child to suck of her milk, but our precious Mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and does, most courteously and most tenderly, with the blessed sacrament, which is the precious food of true life.

Such language provides an opportunity for the divine mystery to be glimpsed when the noun “mother” and the pronoun

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3. This and the following material are taken from Johnson, 33-35.
“himself” grate against one another. The ambiguity here is startling. Julian, even while seemingly breaking away from patriarchal literalism, appears bound by androcentric vocabulary. On the other hand, her juxtaposition of male and female terms causes a kind of cognitive dissonance that leads us deeper into the mystery of God. What is also revealing is that the very use of female imagery causes the dissonance. By contrast when words like father, king, lord, bridegroom, husband are used, there is usually no sense of inappropriateness. The incidental implication of maleness seems to have slipped in as essential. The problem of the literal use of male metaphors is concretely demonstrated when female terms for God are introduced. People immediately feel uncomfortable or they object.

Patriarchally: The normal speech about God is not just masculine — but, as we have seen, refers to a particular type of man — the ruling male. The divine mystery is cast in the role of a monarch, absolute ruler, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, to whom all owe unquestioning obedience. This powerful monarch is sometimes just and harsh, threatening hell to sinners, but also kindly, merciful and forgiving. But the problem still remains — a benevolent patriarch is still a patriarch.

The exclusive and literal symbol of God as male is embodied in Western art as God the old man with a long white beard: recall, for example, Michelangelo’s depiction of God the Father creating Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

In abstract thought, the dualistic categories of traditional theology identify God as male. The Greek philosophical tradition adopted by theology identifies the male principle with spirit, with the mind and reason, and more importantly, with the philosophical notion of “act” or “perfection” itself. This is in contrast to “potency” which along with matter, passion and body are identified with the female. In this dualistic world view, often critiqued by feminists, male is to female as autonomy is to dependance, as strength is to weakness, as fullness is to emptiness, as dynamism is to stasis, — as good is to evil. Since the divine principle is pure act and goodness, it necessarily must exclude all dependency, potency and prime matter. The logic is

6. See Johnson, 35.
inexorable, even if not followed to its final conclusion: God is masculine and can be spoken of only on the model of the spiritually masculine, to the exclusion of the passive, material feminine.

Let us give an example from Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas notes that Scripture attributes to God the Father what in our material world belongs to both father and mother, that is, the begetting of the Son — but he nevertheless argues that God cannot be spoken of on the analogy of mother — because God is pure act, whereas in the process of begetting, the mother represents the principle that receives passively. Here we see how deeply androcentric presuppositions permeate the classical philosophical doctrine of God as well as the specifically Christian doctrine of God’s Trinity.

Even more dramatically is how these same subtle assumptions have crept into Christology. According to the way the Council of Chalcedon formulated it — one and the same Christ is made known in two natures, human and divine. We are all familiar with this hallowed formula. The problem is this: the close union between the two natures — the hypostatic union — linked to the confession that Jesus’ personal identity as “God from God” has tended to allow the sex of Jesus to be transferred to God’s own being. What is interesting here and informative about how deeply androcentrism goes — is that this transference does not happen with other historical characteristics of Jesus — Jesus was a Jew, but his Jewishness is not transferred — neither is his age, his class, etc. But in spite of Chalcedon’s strictures against mixing or confusing the two natures of Christ, the practical effect of the definition has been to promote the use of male metaphors and the unsuitability of female ones in speech about God. As a visible image of the invisible God, the human man Jesus is used to tie the knot between maleness and divinity.

Feminist theological analysis makes it clear that exclusive, literal and patriarchal speech about God has serious effects — both for human beings and for God. In stereotyping and then banning female imagery as unsuitable as a metaphor for God, the dominance of men over women receives justification, while

7. SCG 4.11, 19. From Johnson, 35.
women are denigrated. Even worse, such a position and such speech so reduce the divine reality to the sole metaphor of the ruling male that the symbol itself loses its religious significance and ability to point to the ultimate truth. In other words, it becomes an idol — the falsification of the idea of God. Again the symbol functions.

There is no need to go into the effects of how patriarchal God symbolism functions to legitimate and reinforce patriarchal social structures in family, society and in the church, as well as marginalize women religiously. When God is consistently envisioned in the image of one sex rather than both sexes, and in the image of the ruling class of this sex, then this group is seen to possess the image of God in a primary way. In other words, the sacred character of maleness itself is revealed! Maleness itself is close to God. Mary Daly summed this up with her pithy phrase: "If God is male, male is God."8 The idolatry becomes complete! There is a small step from here to the sanction of male domination and denigration of women.

And this brings us to the theological effects of exclusive, literal, and patriarchal speech about God. The feminist critique of the language of traditional theology is that it breaks the first commandment — that is, it sets up and worships an idol. Any representation of God that loses its humility as only a symbol is, because of this, idolatrous. Rather than help to disclose some of the incomprehensible mystery of God, the comprehensible symbol is taken for the reality. Here we reach not the truth, but lies about God, and so self-deceiving lies about ourselves.

Feminist theological critique attempts to shatter the idols of religious language of God-He. Normative theological language and conceptualization of God on the model of the ruling male alone is theologically equivalent to the graven image condemned in the Bible — a finite representation set up and worshiped as if it were the whole of the divine mystery.

To sum up, literal, exclusive, patriarchal speech about God is both oppressive and idolatrous. It functions to justify social structures of dominance and it simultaneously restricts the

mystery of God. This is not to speak rightly about God.

So much for our sketch of the first task, the critique. Now let us move to the second task: Discovery.

DISCOVERY: FROM CLASSICAL THEOLOGY

In the process of discovering more inclusive ways to rightly speak of God that are embedded and hidden in the faith tradition, feminists point to three resources: the doctrine of God’s incomprehensibility, the play of analogy in speech about God, and the consequent need for many names for God. These come from classical theology and can guide the movement toward right speech about God. Let us examine each one.

Divine Incomprehensibility: It is axiomatic in traditional theology that all speech about God is symbolic. God is absolute mystery — which means of course not that God is unintelligible and beyond all understanding. It means rather, God is mystery in that there is too much there to wrap our minds around — too much for us to comprehend. In other words, God is mystery in the sense of being inexhaustible intelligibility. So all we say about God is only partial. God is essentially incomprehensible, and any claim otherwise leads only to idolatry — to a false God. In the words of St. Augustine: si comprehensis, non est Deus — if you have understood, what you have understood is not God.

This recalls the long apophatic theological tradition. Pseudo-Dionysius is perhaps the best example. For Pseudo-Dionysius, the perfection of all our knowledge of God is a knowing of the unknown — that we can say more rightly what God is not, than what God is. Even in Aquinas there is a powerful apophasic element — a theological agnosticism that is more pervasive than usually has been acknowledged. Aquinas writes for example:

Now we cannot know what God is, but only what God is not; we must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist, rather than the ways in which God does.

This is the preface to Thomas’ mature discussion of the ways

9. This and the following are condensed from Johnson, 105-20.
God is known and named. We have all heard the story of Thomas’ assessment of his whole theological enterprise, made on his deathbed as he was about to encounter the divine mystery itself — that all his work, all that he said and wrote, it all seemed like straw.

The author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* developed apophatic theology into high spirituality when he said: “God can be loved, but not known.” By loving we embrace God, or rather we allow God to embrace us.

What of Jesus though? Does not Christ reveal to us who God is? Well, yes and no. The revelation in Scripture and the revelation who is Jesus Christ does not water down the idea of divine incomprehensibility. There is a sense in which the mysteriousness of God is brought to a more intense pitch in the expression of God’s saving love poured out in Jesus Christ. Is not God all the more inscrutable as “Three in One?” For all our theology, what do we know when we know this? Is not the statement that God is “triune,” discourse about the incomprehensible mystery of God? As Walter Kasper writes:

The trinitarian profession of faith is therefore not only the summation of the revelation of the mystery of God; it is also the concrete exposition of the hiddenness of God, which is the origin, goal and essential content of all revelation.11

Jesus reveals to us how God acts toward us, how God relates to us, how we are to act and relate to each other. But God remains, even in Jesus, divine mystery.

It is abundantly clear that traditional theology sees all its words, images, and concepts as not capable of fully comprehending God. Feminist theology reclaims this long and powerful tradition in its effort to emancipate speech about God. It recalls that all symbols only point to God. Mary Daly is correct when she calls theology “naming toward God.”12 God has been imaged exclusively, literally and patriarchally as a man. God can and

should be imaged in other non-sexist symbols. And doing so, immediately relativizes the old terms and makes them less idolatrous. It reminds us that all terms for God are only metaphors.

But then, if this is true, how is it possible to say anything at all about God? When do we dare speak? Is not the feminist project to find ways to speak more rightly about God just as doomed as the old patriarchal one? The problem is that the only means we have are images, stories, symbols, and experiences from our created world. All we can do is use the most esteemed of them to point towards God. And yet what do we have in the end? More idolatry?

**Analogy:** Again, classical theology has something to offer. Early Christian theology knew the problem of absolutizing speech about God, and it articulated the idea that speaking about God involves a threefold process of affirmation, negation, and eminence. A word that is prized from our human experience is first affirmed of God. Then the same word is critically negated to remove any association with creaturely modes of being. Finally, the word is re-predicated of God in a super-eminent way that transcends all our cognitive capabilities. This has been usually called analogical predication. For example, we say God is good because we prize goodness. But we must also say God is not good the way creatures are good, but God is good in an excellent way as the source of all that is good. The word ‘good’ still points from our experience to God, but it also points beyond anything that we understand as good, in a way we can no longer conceive, in the direction of holy mystery. Every concept and symbol must go through this purifying. At the end, while we intuit an unspeakable richness and vivifying reality, God remains incomprehensible.

For Thomas Aquinas this threefold movement of analogy is clarified by two other possibilities. On the one hand, words about God are not *univocal*, having the same meaning as when we say them of creatures. On the other hand, neither are they *equivocal*, having no association to creaturely meaning, for that would lead to meaninglessness. Instead, they are *analogical* — opening through affirmation, negation and excellence a perspective onto God, directing the mind to God.
The knowing in this analogical process is a dynamic relational knowing. It ends not so much in a concept as in a judgment of the human spirit that affirms God to be inconceivable while at the same time gives us a trustworthy image in symbol. Analogy shapes every category of words used to speak about God. Metaphoric terms come from some form of concrete bodiliness: God is a rock; a lion, a consuming fire, a whispering wind. Relational terms name God's relation to the world; God is creator, redeemer, gift, love. Negative terms state that God lacks imperfection: God is infinite, immutable. At the end of the process the mystery of the living God is evoked and the human thinker remains in religious awe and adoration of the divine super-abundance.

This understanding of the analogical nature of speech about God assumes a strongly critical function for feminist theologians looking at the androcentric character of traditional theology. The masculine terms, the designation "he," are subject to the limitation found in all naming of God. As Elizabeth Johnson writes:

Analogy functions as a wheel on which [women] can spin out emancipatory language in fidelity to the mystery of God and their own good mystery which participates in that fire.  

Many Names for God: This leads to the next step. No one naming or speaking of God is adequate. This causes Aquinas to conclude: "From this we see the necessity of giving God many names." This using of many names for God is a rich tradition in Judaism. There are over ninety different names for God in the Talmud. The Islamic tradition uses a litany of 99 names for Allah. The hundredth name, believed to be the true one is honored in silence. It is not pronounced because such a name does not exist: God is ineffable. In contrast, Western language in the Christian tradition has been meager. Too often it has focused on a few male symbols to the virtual exclusion of female and cosmic ones.

Feminist theologians search the tradition of the many names

13. See Johnson, 117.
of God for images and symbols taken from the concrete experience of women in order to find ways to more rightly speak about God. In the Bible itself and in the Christian tradition, a plethora of images comes into play. In addition to terms taken from personal relationships such as mother, father, husband, female beloved, companion, and friend, and images taken from political life such as advocate, liberator, king, warrior, and judge, the Bible pictures God as a dairymaid, shepherd, farmer, laundress, construction worker, potter, fisherman, midwife, merchant, physician, bakerwoman, teacher, writer, artist, nurse, metal worker, homemaker. Despite the multiplicity of imagery taken from the experience of men, feminist exegesis brings to light another evocative vision of God taken from women’s experience.

In sum, the classical themes of the incomprehensibility of God, the analogical nature of religious language, and the necessity of many names for God have been used by feminist theologians in the task of discovery of the hidden wisdom within the tradition. These resources shift the debate from the narrow focus on patriarchal terms to a ground more ancient and more living. This process forms part of the task of discovery of ways to emancipate speech about God. Moreover, feminist theologians want to make it clear that speech about God in female metaphors does not mean that God has a “feminine” dimension. Nor does the use of male metaphors bespeak of God’s masculine dimension. Images and names of God do not aim to identify only part of the divine mystery. Rather they intend to evoke the whole. Female imagery by itself points to God as such. If women are created in the image of God, then God can be spoken of in female metaphors in as full and as limited way as male metaphors do, without talk of feminine dimensions.¹⁵

Let us leave off here our search of classical theology, and move to an even more important part of the tradition — this is, Holy Scripture.

DISCOVERY: FROM SCRIPTURE

The search for emancipatory speech about God leads neces-

¹⁵. See Johnson, 54.
sarily to the Bible.\textsuperscript{16} Although egalitarian impulses are clearly discernable in Scripture, feminist interpretation sees the texts themselves as written by and for men in a patriarchal culture. Thus, for the most part the story of salvation in the Bible is told from a male point of view. The world of patriarchy provides the chief metaphors for discourse about God in Scripture.

The Bible is a text, and all texts must be interpreted. But the Bible is a revealed text and the word of God. So interpretation of the Bible involves an understanding of and a theory of revelation. An older model of revelation saw God’s word in rational statements communicated by God without error that gives information about the divine mystery. This led to a very literal interpretation of the Bible. However, in the course of history, theology found other models of revelation that stress revelation as God’s self-communication in historical events mediated through culture and history.

Here the Second Vatican Council provides the lens through which to interpret the word of God. The Scriptures, writes the Council, teach “firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.”\textsuperscript{17} Scripture is affirmed to be inerrant in what matters ‘\textit{nostra salutis causa}’, ‘for the sake of our salvation’. In other words, things in the Bible that do not pertain to salvation do not belong to inspiration. This understanding of revelation has been used fruitfully by feminist theology to separate its saving message for men and women from its patriarchal expression.

\textit{Jesus and ‘abba’}: Let us give one example from the New Testament — Jesus’ calling of God “Father” and teaching his followers to call God “Father.” There is no question among most biblical scholars that the historical Jesus most likely used the paternal metaphor for God. For a literal-minded reader of the Bible, the question would be closed. We \textit{must} call God “Father.” This is the command of Jesus. This argument insists that Jesus’ example and teaching make the paternal metaphor normative for the church in such a way that other names for God are excluded.

\textsuperscript{16} The following is condensed from Johnson, 76-103.
There are many difficulties with this line of reasoning. Not the least of these is that it singles out for emulation one thing we know about the historical Jesus while it ignores others. For example, Jesus preached the immanent coming of the reign of God — a theme profoundly central to his ministry; yet the church no longer feels bound to urgently speak about God this way. Jesus asked his disciples to keep alive the memory of the woman who anointed his head, but even her name has been forgotten, nor has any news of what subsequently happened to her survived. Why then, ask feminist theologians, must the term ‘father’ become absolute and exclusive? There are many things that the historical Jesus said and did that the church no longer follows, and there are many things that the church says and does that Jesus did not say or do. This is theologically right, since it is the full reality of Jesus the Christ that guides the church in its course through history.

Furthermore, a deeper reading of Scripture tells us that Jesus himself used a diverse and colorful array of metaphors for God — a woman searching for a lost coin, a shepherd looking for a lost sheep, a bakerwoman kneading dough, and so on. Later Christian talk about God is poor indeed in comparison with the Gospels’ depiction of Jesus’ speech. In other words, Jesus’ use of the paternal metaphor was not exclusive.

But what about its frequency? Surely this was the most frequent way Jesus spoke of God? Biblical scholarship would answer ‘no.’ The paternal metaphor is not necessarily as frequent nor as central as a literal reading of the text would suggest. A word count is most revealing: in Mark, the earliest gospel, Jesus calls God father two times; in Luke, 15 times; in Matthew 49 times; and in John, 109 times. The Q source, which is the early sayings document preceding the written Gospels that contains source material common to Matthew and Luke, has Jesus call God father only once. When we compare the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew with the Sermon on the Plain in Luke, we find that Matthew has expanded the father language in ways not represented in Luke’s version (Mt 5-7; Lk 6:12-20). The earliest strata of New Testament evidence, shows that Jesus did indeed use the paternal metaphor to name God; but the later the text, the more likely the Jesus of the Gospel calls God father. It is
hard not to conclude that as time went on, the theological development in the early church ascribed to Jesus its own favorite way of referring to God. As far as we can tell, it was not the historical Jesus who most often referred to God as father, but rather the early church.

When feminist theologians further examine the actual father symbol used by Jesus, something else emerges. Jesus called God ‘abba’ — which connotes an intimacy of relation between Jesus and God, along with a sense of God’s compassion over suffering. Jesus’ ‘abba’, in other words, is not a patriarchal father who can be used to legitimate systems of oppression, but a God of the oppressed, a God of community, a God of compassion and intimacy. Everyone related to the one Abba stands in a relation of mutuality with one another. In fact, Jesus in Matthew’s gospel forbids his disciples to call any man father. Matthew’s text reads:

You are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers and sisters. Call no man father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ. Whoever is greatest among you shall be your servant; whoever exalts oneself will be humbled, and whoever humbles oneself will be exalted.  

Thus, Jesus upended power relationships, transforming all teachers, fathers, masters, great ones into servants of the little ones. Jesus’ use of the metaphor ‘abba’, then, is not exclusive, not frequent, not patriarchal, and cannot be used to justify the exclusive, literal and patriarchal use of the title ‘father’ to name God.

Let us now turn briefly to two biblical symbols that are frequently explored by feminist theologians as ways to speak more rightly about God — namely Spirit and Wisdom.

**Spirit:** When the Bible wants to speak about the transcendent God’s creative presence and activity in the world, it turns to the term **Spirit** — literally meaning a blowing wind, a stream of air, breath in motion — something dynamically in movement and

18. Mt 23:8-12.
19. The following is condensed from Johnson, 82-100.
impossible to pin down. The Hebrew word for spirit, *ruah* is grammatically feminine, while the Greek term, *pneuma* is neuter and the Latin term, *spiritus* is masculine. But the grammatical gender of words does not necessarily indicate the maleness or femaleness of its object. However, analysis makes clear the imagery that accrues around Spirit as well as the Spirit’s functions speak in analogy with women’s historical reality. *Ruah* creates new life, hovers like a nesting mother bird, shelters under the protective shadow of her wings, works like a midwife or a washerwoman — all images that allude to femaleness. Furthermore, Scripture at times uses a range of imagery to speak about these deeds, such as water that cleanses and refreshes, fire that warms and brightens — images that are taken from what has traditionally been women’s work in the East — drawing and carrying water, lighting and keeping the fire.

In the Christian Scriptures, the Spirit is spoken of in connection with the ministry and resurrection of Jesus and the birth and growth of the community of disciples. One example will suffice: Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus in the gospel according to John carries a clear maternal metaphor for Spirit. A person must be born anew in order to enter the reign of God, Jesus insists. Nicodemus asks, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” (Jn 3:4). Jesus’ reply keeps the metaphor of birth and amplifies it to speak of being born of God: “no one,” Jesus says, “can enter the reign of God without being born of water and Spirit” (Jn 3:5-6). God’s spirit is likened here to a woman bringing forth new life through childbirth, so that those who believe, are truly “born of God.” Clearly, God the Spirit is presented as mother. Unfortunately, as Sandra Schneiders comments, “the theological tradition which has controlled the reading of Scripture has insisted on its own male understanding of God to the extent that it has virtually obliterated from the religious imagination this clearly feminine presentation of God the Spirit as mother.”

Wisdom: Another, even more explicit way of speaking about the mystery of God in female symbol is the biblical figure of Sophia or Wisdom. This is the most developed personification of God’s presence and activity in the Hebrew Scriptures. The term itself is feminine in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin (hokma, sophia, sapientia respectively). While this does not itself tell us much, the biblical depiction of Wisdom is itself consistently female, casting her as sister, mother, female beloved, hostess, and other female roles — symbolizing transcendent power ordering and delighting the World. She pervades the World, both nature and human beings. Feminist theologians have shown that Sophia is a female personification of God’s own being in creative and saving involvement with the world. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza observes: “Divine Sophia is Israel’s God in language and gestalt of the goddess.”

Jesus-Sophia: First century Christians took hold of this Wisdom tradition in an effort to find words for their experience of the saving significance of Jesus. What Judaism said of Sophia, Christian hymn makers and epistle writers now came to say of Jesus: he is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15); the radiant light of God’s glory (Heb 1:3); the firstborn of all creation (Col 1:5); the one through whom all things were made (1 Cor 8:6). There seems to be an early Wisdom Christology where Jesus is so closely associated with Sophia that by the end of the first century, he is presented not only as a wisdom teacher, not only as a child and envoy of Sophia, but ultimately as an embodiment of Sophia herself. In the words of Schüssler Fiorenza:

While the Jesus movement, like John [the Baptist], understood Jesus as the messenger and prophet of divine Sophia, the Wisdom Christology of the Christian missionary movement sees him as divine Sophia herself.

According to biblical scholar Raymond Brown’s analysis: “In

22. Schüssler Fiorenza, 189. From Johnson, 95.
John, Jesus is personified Wisdom."\textsuperscript{23}

This tradition of Jesus as personified Wisdom plays a foundational role in the development of Christology, and some of the most profound christological assertions in the New Testament are made in these categories. Witness Paul in the First Letter to the Corinthians: "... we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and a folly to the Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and Wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:22-24) — Christ crucified, the Sophia of God.

The feminist analysis of Jesus-Sophia is quite lengthy and extensive. Let us point to only one final and important aspect of it — how it was the Sophia tradition that first enabled the early Christians to affirm the revelatory intimacy existing between Jesus and God. The first step in the development of early christology was to assert of Jesus the Christ everything that the Hebrew Scriptures' Wisdom tradition asserted of God. In other words, female not male imagery was first used to make the most profound christological affirmation about the relation of Jesus to God — to say that what is true of God is true of Jesus. Only afterwards did the Church develop a masculinized logos-Christology. Elizabeth Johnson shows that ultimately the gender of Sophia was a factor in her replacement by the Logos, and this signaled a shift in the Christian community toward more patriarchal structures.\textsuperscript{24}

What does it mean that one of the key origins of the doctrines of incarnation and Trinity lies in the identification of the crucified and risen Jesus with a female image of God? Since Jesus the Christ is depicted as divine Sophia, then it is not unthinkable — not unbiblical even — to confess Jesus the Christ as the incarnation of God imaged in female symbols — a Christa as well as a Christ.

The androcentric stranglehold on the maleness of Jesus breaks down and points to an inclusive christology in female symbols. Even Augustine is not afraid to appeal to this ancient story of

\textsuperscript{24} Johnson, 97-98.
Wisdom: “But she is sent in one way that she may be with human beings; she has been sent in another way that she herself might be a human being.” God-Sophia — she is sent as Jesus-Sophia. In other words, Jesus Christ is the human being Sophia herself became.

The Bible is rich in imagery and terms for God that transcend patriarchal and androcentric thinking. Let these two, Spirit and Wisdom, suffice for this sketch.

RECONSTRUCTION

We are not far now from where Elizabeth Johnson arrives when she calls God “SHE WHO IS.” Discourse about the holy mystery in the symbols of Spirit and Wisdom provides glimpses into an alternative to the dominant patriarchal theological language about God. These alternate symbols are embedded in tradition and Scripture though they have been skewed and neglected by sexism.

The third task of feminist theology is Reconstruction — a project that remains to be completed. Hopefully these reflections have provided a few building blocks toward that reconstruction. Resources from the tradition and from Scripture are there. We need only tap them.

So then, we have tried to reflect on the how to rightly speak about God — to examine the contribution of feminist theology to discourse about God. To speak rightly about God. To act rightly in God. Feminist Theology, we think, helps us toward the first of these goals. May it also help us, in light of that speaking, move toward acting rightly.