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Wisdom Christology in Origen and Elizabeth Johnson: A Supplementary Discourse

Adam Paul Koester

Wisdom's influence on the creation of the New Testament and early Christology is unmistakable. Origen, in the third century, sees this connection to the Wisdom personified in the Old Testament and understands Christ's ontology in a way that includes Wisdom fundamentally. As a modern scholar, Elizabeth Johnson reconstructs the process through which Wisdom came to be personified and traces her shadow through the New Testament. If we see Origen's theology through what we know from current Wisdom scholarship would it be possible to open many more avenues of examination within various areas of theology? The conjoining of Origen's Sophia-centered Christology and current Wisdom scholarship found in Elizabeth Johnson enables a cosmological and feminine-oriented ontology for the second person of the Trinity.

Elizabeth Johnson's work, *Jesus, The Wisdom of God*, traces the historical and scriptural basis for the personification of Wisdom in the Old Testament into its transformation into a Sophia-centered Christology found throughout the Christian writings. While there is no consensus among scholars about the complete personification of the person Sophia in ancient times, Johnson argues that it was based on the Old Testament texts. She states, "This much is obvious: the figure of Wisdom is the most developed personification in the Jewish tradition, much more acutely limned than the figures of the Word, Spirit, Torah, or Shekinah."¹ By stating that this tradition is linked to the Egyptian cult of Isis and showing that Judaism did not incorporate Wisdom as a separate deity alongside Yahweh as the cult of Isis would have preferred, Johnson provides the framework for understanding how Wisdom was immensely influential to early Christology and not a step away from monotheism.

With Wisdom already personified as a being not separate from God but with distinct attributes not directly claimed by God, she was perfectly placed to exemplify how Christ related to God as both deity and person. This distinction also represents a shift in Wisdom theology made by Paul. Johnson says,

By so implicating divine Sophia with Jesus Christ he also implied that God's wisdom is now to be read off not from nature or the Torah, but from the history of Jesus culminating in the cross. Here is the transvaluation of values so connected with the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus: divine Sophia is manifest not in glorious deeds or esoteric doctrine, but in the cross and the preaching of the cross.²

This conception is clearly illustrated in the christological hymns Paul often intertwines with his own letters. One in particular, which will be discussed in greater detail later, is found in the letter to the Colossians (Col 1:15-20). Johnson says of these verses that until one reads the verses concerning the crucifixion and resurrection "there is nothing that could not be said of Sophia; change 'he' to 'she' and the hymn's reliance on wisdom texts becomes obvious."³

Johnson's conversation around Matthew, Q, and John shows the influence of Wisdom literature on these texts. Johnson finds that Matthew "puts Sophia's words in Jesus' mouth so that Jesus is presented as Sophia speaking"⁴ and in Q, "Jesus issues Sophia's call and promise, assumes her role of sending prophets, performs her deeds, enjoys her intimate knowledge of God, utters her lament. . . . He is not simply Sophia's child or envoy, but her embodiment."⁵

John conversely gives attributes of Wisdom to Jesus' ministry, but the prologue, which, based on imagery and function, one would assume to be a prime example of Wisdom Christology, uses the image of Logos instead of Sophia. Many scholars, says Johnson, find that these images have "striking parallels" and that they are "almost interchangeable."⁶ Yet the question still remains of why one would use the image of Logos instead of Wisdom. Johnson suggests Philo's theology as a strong candidate for influencing the switch to the use of Logos in the prologue. Johnson then states the conclusions of many scholars that it is possible the reason for this switch is that the image of a male Logos was more comfort-

¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Jesus, the Wisdom of God." *ETL* 61 (1985): 264.

² *Ibid.*, 277-78.

³ *Ibid.*, 279.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 283.

⁶ See *ibid.*, 285, for full list of conclusions.

ably applied to Christ than a female Sophia. Thus, Johnson concludes the discussion of the prologue with a question:

The point is, however, that Christian reflection before John had not found it difficult to apply insights associated with the figure of Sophia to Jesus, not only to the risen and exalted Christ but even to the historical Jesus as he was being portrayed in his ministry. Could the shift to the Logos concept be associated with the broader shift in the Christian community toward more patriarchal ecclesial structures and the blocking of women from ministries in which they had earlier participated?⁷

While no conclusions on this are made by Johnson at this point, she brings the paper to a close with the fact that while Logos is used to talk about Jesus in the prologue of John it is still heavily intertwined with Sophia's roles from the Old Testament.

Finding these possibilities in Scripture, Johnson arrives at four conclusions, two of which I will focus on before moving into Origen's theology. First, one basic ontology of Jesus can be understood in terms of Wisdom personified. This connection allows the many attributes of Wisdom to be directly applied to Christ and give the most solid foundation for talking about the incarnation.⁸ Second, Johnson argues that any Logos-centered Christology should automatically make the connection to a Wisdom-centered understanding of Christ. She states, "When we read that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1,14), we can rightly think of Sophia, the creative and saving presence of God in the world, coming definitively toward us in Christ."⁹ Knowing that Sophia has had such an enormous impact on the conception of Christ, it is impossible to view Christ as fully human simply in maleness. Johnson writes, "To say then that Jesus is the image of God (Col 1,15) means not that he is the image of God as male, but that he embodies God's compassionate love, inclusive justice, and renewing power in the world. In the second place, use of wisdom categories calls into question the distorted theological use of the male-

⁷ Ibid., 288. This question absolutely needs to be asked of contemporary culture when reflecting on women's role in the church today compared with men's. While it is not necessarily going to be the case, our communities need to engage carefully in theological reflection regarding the issues raised by Wisdom Christology and questions regarding women's role in ecclesial structure.

⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 292.

⁹ Ibid., 293.

ness of Jesus."¹⁰ In this way Wisdom Christology offers a pathway to understanding Christ as a figure who can relate to both sexes equally and inclusively.

The theological premises of Origen similarly offer a pathway into realizing who Christ is as a being who holds within its personal ontology both the figures of Logos and Sophia. Origen's understanding of Christ finds Christ's main identity confirmed in multiple *epinoiai*, or aspects. These aspects are named as a mechanism that Origen uses to explain how "God, therefore, is altogether one and simple. Our Savior, however, because of the many things, since God 'set' him 'forth as a propitiation' and firstfruits of all creation, becomes many things, or perhaps even all these things, as the whole creation which can be made free needs him."¹¹ The foundation of these *epinoiai* "rests on Origen's understanding of the function of Christ as the mediator between God and creation."¹² The order and complete interworking of this idea is found most clearly in the second chapter of Origen's *De Principiis*. Origen says here, "Our first task therefore is to see what the only-begotten Son of God is, seeing he is called by many different names according to the circumstances and beliefs of the different writers."¹³ Recognizing that many different images are used, Origen sets out to understand Christ through them, the primary one being Wisdom.

By stating that Wisdom is the primary understanding of the Son, Origen must then go on to say exactly what this means when understanding God. Wisdom is the first born of creation, as Paul says in Colossians 1:15,¹⁴ not with a physical body but rather as a being who "makes men wise by revealing and imparting itself to the minds of such as are able to receive its influence and intelligence."¹⁵ The

¹⁰ Ibid., 294.

¹¹ Origen, *Commentary on John: Book I*, par. 119 as found in *Origen: Commentary on the Gospel According to John, Books 1-10*, trans. Robert E. Heine (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1989). Following, the location as found in Origen's work will be cited.

¹² John Anthony McGuckin, ed., *The Westminster Handbook to Origen* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 93.

¹³ Origen, *First Principles: Book I*, chap. II, par. 1 as found in G. W. Butterworth and Paul Koetschau, *Origen on First Principles, Being Koetschau's Text of the De Principiis Translated into English, Together with an Introduction and Notes* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1936). Following, the location as found in Origen's work will be cited.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., par. 2. See also: footnote 4, Butterworth and Koetschau, 15. It is important here to take into account Origen's theology

incorporeal nature of God in all three forms is necessary for Origen's understanding of cosmology. While this implies that it is impossible to think of Wisdom as actually female, Origen retains the use "She" when talking about her—the same as he does when speaking about the Son and using "he"—thus, he retains her femininity despite God's incorporeal nature. Also, accepting Wisdom as the primary way of understanding the Son makes impossible the thought that the Son had a beginning. Origen states this belief in the Son as eternally begotten and thus states of Wisdom, "Wisdom, therefore, must be believed to have been begotten beyond the limits of any beginning that we can speak of or understand. . . . Solomon . . . says that she was created as a 'beginning of the ways' of God, which means that she contains within herself both beginnings and causes and species of the whole creation."¹⁶ Understanding Wisdom as the beginning of all creation, Origen equates these attributes to the Son of God as the Son is Wisdom.

of the incarnation and of preexistence. Stephen Thomas, in an article in John Anthony McGuckin, ed., *The Westminster Handbook to Origen*, describes Origen's speculation of the preexistence of souls to account for their physical nature. Thomas finds that Origen implies that in order to understand the fall and the "placing in bodies" of Gen. 2, it is possible to see the souls as pre-existent—not just momentarily but with an entire life of decisions—where they would have made mistakes and fallen away from God at different levels. When a soul is placed in a body then, it is not as punishment for these sins, but rather for the possibility that the soul would be rehabilitated and returned to God (56). One can compare this to what it is like to put on extra, warm clothing in order to go outside in cold weather. The clothing itself is not harmful, though it may be encumbering to the person, but rather represents the state of the person being away from a comfortable environment. This fall created a tiered spiritual universe of demons, humans, and angels. These souls, all with their original purpose identical, find their place now in the separate dimensions of corporality and noncorporality. There was one soul, however, that did not stray from its original created intent of contemplation of God; that soul is the soul of Christ. In another article in the same anthology on Origen, Charles Kannengiesser states, "It was this soul, Jesus, preexistently chosen by the divine Logos for his own descent to earth at the decisive moment of the universal need for salvation. According to Philippians 2:7-8, the Son of God volunteered to deny himself in such a rescue mission. . . . Using the soul like a space suit (in the present case one should rather call it an 'earth suit'), the uncreated Logos of God encapsulated himself inside a created spiritual nature, a unique case of intimacy in which the creature instantly gave itself away to its creator" (76-77). This allows Origen to overcome the dualism between the spiritual and physical world. It is also important to note that Origen does not speak of the human soul being eliminated by the Logos, but rather integrating with it (77).

¹⁶ Origen, *First Principles: Book I*, par. 2.

Once Origen has established Wisdom as the Son, his next task is to incorporate Logos into the Christology. Origen's heavy incorporation allows a clear link between Logos and Sophia as he writes about the introduction to the Gospel of John. The reasoning for this link is shown in Origen's commentary on John when he states,

But it is as the beginning that Christ is creator, according to which he is wisdom. Therefore as wisdom he is called the beginning. . . . It is wisdom which is understood, on the one hand, taken in relation to the structure of the contemplation and the thoughts of all things, but it is the Word which is received, taken in relation to the communication of the things which have been contemplated to spiritual beings.¹⁷

And later, "But consider if it is possible also for us to take the statement, 'In the beginning was the Word,' in accordance with this meaning, so that all things came to be in accordance with the wisdom and plans of the system of thoughts in the Word."¹⁸ While it can be assumed that Origen makes this connection based on scriptural analysis of John—Sophia being the beginning¹⁹ and Logos being in the beginning²⁰—it is also highly likely that it is by their respective economies and their interrelated, complementary relationship to creation that Origen makes the connection. This relationship between Sophia and Logos seems to be one of "creator"/"order-er" as seen in *First Principles*: "For wisdom opens to all other beings, that is, to the whole creation, the meaning of the mysteries and secrets which are contained within the wisdom of God, and so she is called the Word, because she is as it were an interpreter of the mind's secrets."²¹

Here, Origen stops to examine his conclusions about Christ and Wisdom based on Scripture. In doing this, he makes the scriptural connection between Wisdom 7:26²² and the hymn in Colossians 1:15-20.²³ Moving from talking about Wisdom directly to this hymn, Origen, with his own preconceptions, finds that the Father and the Son are distinguishable yet one being. He states, "the Father's image is repro-

¹⁷ Origen, *Commentary on John: Book I*, par. 111.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, par. 113.

¹⁹ Cf. Prov 8:22-23.

²⁰ Cf. John 1:1.

²¹ Origen, *First Principles: Book I*, chap. II, par. 3.

²² "For she is a reflection of the eternal light, / untarnished mirror of God's active power, / and image of his goodness."

²³ Specifically Col 1:15, "He is the image of the unseen God, / the first born of all creation."

duced in the Son [just as Adam begat Seth], whose birth from the Father is as it were an act of his will proceeding from the mind,”²⁴ and later states on the unity of God, “Rather must we suppose that as an act of will proceeds from the mind without either cutting off any part of the mind or being separated or divided from it, in some similar fashion has the Father begotten the Son, who is indeed his image.”²⁵ Origen continues this line of thought in understanding the relationship between the Father and the Son as he examines more closely the attributes of Wisdom in chapter 7. He makes the distinction between why the text says Wisdom, and thus the Son, is a breath of the “power” of God²⁶ and not the “glory,” “eternal light,” “working,” and “goodness” that Solomon also mentions of Wisdom. Origen’s conclusion here is that in being the “power” of God it is proven that “there always has existed that breath of the power of God, having no beginning but God himself. Nor indeed could it have fitly had any other beginning except from whom it takes its existence and birth, that is, God.”²⁷ For Origen, it is clear that the Son cannot have been thought to have never existed and the attributes exhibited thus far prove that the Son is one with God and without beginning.

Just as Origen concludes through Wisdom that the Son is equal to the Father in power, so does Wisdom allow him to conclude that the Son necessarily represents the Father clearly. For if Wisdom is the “untarnished mirror of God’s active power” (Wis 7:26), then she works as a result of the Father working, “whether in his acts of creation, or of providence, or of judgment, or in the ordering and superintendence of every detail of the universe at his own appointed time.”²⁸ Origen’s thoughts here lead him to conclude that it is only the Father who is good. He defends this by stating that, “as if these words were to be taken as a denial that either Christ or the Holy Spirit is good; but, as we said before, the original goodness must be believed to reside in God the Father, and from him both the Son and Holy Spirit undoubtedly draw into themselves the nature of that goodness existing in the fount from which the one is born and the other proceeds.”²⁹

²⁴ Origen, *First Principles: Book I*, chap. II, par. 6.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Cf. Wis 7:25.

²⁷ Origen, *First Principles: Book I*, chap. II, par. 9.

²⁸ Ibid., par. 12.

²⁹ Ibid., par. 13.

Through his incorporation of Wisdom into Christology, Origen is able to make these conclusions about Christ. What must be understood at the same time as this ontological significance of Wisdom and the Son is the soteriological significance Wisdom allows Christ to have in the world. Consequentially, this possibility stems also from the connections made in Colossians 1:15-20. In reference to John 1:29,³⁰ Origen states the following:

He [John the Baptist] does not say he who will take it away but is not already also taking it away; and he does not say he who took it away but is not also still taking it away. / For the “taking away” affects each one in the world until sin be removed from all the world and the Savior deliver to the Father a prepared kingdom which permits the Father’s rule and again admits all things of God in its whole and total self.³¹

This process is done so that God may be “all in all.” Thus Christ’ saving significance can reach to the end of creation. This is made possible because in Wisdom all creation was made and “It is because of this creation [the creation of Wisdom] that the whole creation has also been to subsist, since it has a share in the divine wisdom according to which it has been created, for according to the Prophet David, God made ‘all things in Wisdom.’”³² Thus connections, which will be explored shortly, are easily drawn between creation and salvation.

When examining the thoughts of Elizabeth Johnson on the evidence of Wisdom imagery in forming Scripture, one can quite easily see correlations between these possibilities and Origen’s theological construction of Christology. Origen’s most basic attributes of Christ—equality with the Father, begotten of the Father, creator and sustainer of creation—all come as a result of reflection on the correlation between Wisdom’s attributes and similarly built passages in the New Testament. The construction found in Origen and the reconstruction of Sophia in Johnson lead to three deeply intertwined possibilities for imagining Christology.

First, Johnson’s two conclusions mentioned earlier are reinforced by Origen’s foundation that Sophia and Logos are two necessary pieces of the

³⁰ “The next day, he saw Jesus coming towards him and said, ‘Look, there is the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.’”

³¹ Origen, *Commentary on John: Book I*, par. 234–35.

³² Ibid., par. 244.

ontology of Christ the Son. The combination of Logos as “order-er” and Sophia as “creator” allows in Christ what Rosemary Radford Ruether imagines for earth healing in her book, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*. Ruether states in imagining the possibilities in healing that the “two voices of divinity from nature”³³ need to come together and remain in communion. The first imaged as “God” is the being who we find communicating in “thunderous masculine tones of ‘though shalt’ and ‘though shalt not.’ It is the voice of power and law, but speaking (at its most authentic) on behalf of the weak, as a mandate to protect the powerless and to restrain the power of the mighty.”³⁴ The other voice, imaged throughout the book in contrast to the “God” of history, “has been silenced by the masculine voice, but today is finding her own voice. This is the voice of Gaia. Her voice does not translate into laws or intellectual knowledge, but beckons us into communion.”³⁵ Ruether’s conclusions lead to the exhortation to bring the feminine voice and masculine voice back together in order to bridge the gap that causes the destruction explained through the rest of the book. Thus, as Ruether imagines God with both these masculine and feminine voices contributing to theological understanding, so Origen’s Christology shows how both Sophia and Logos are integral to Christ’s ontology and thus divine attributes.³⁶

Following this conclusion, and intertwined with it, is the possibility for a deep connection to the physical, created world. Here, both Johnson’s and Origen’s reliance on the Colossians christological hymn—itsself heavily dependent on the Wisdom tradition—is seen clearly. Through Wisdom, Christ is the creator and sustainer of the cosmos—seen clearly in Origen’s theology—and added to this nature by the Colossians hymn, Christ is also the redeemer of the entire cosmos that Christ created by becoming a part of it. The integral relationship found here al-

lows the possibilities found in Ruether’s, as well as other ecotheologians’, hopes for realizing the direct relationship between spirituality, intellectuality, and theology of the created order that has had Christ’s Gospel preached to it as well.³⁷ Not only is creation integral to our existence, but its presence suggests that God’s relationship with it is deeper than we can understand. It is to the ecotheologians and ecologists that we must look to help redefine humanity’s relationship with the rest of creation after having exploited it so long.

Finally, as Johnson finds in her conclusions and again directly linked to the previous two conclusions, the possibilities for women’s roles in the church demand at least a further look. If it is possible for Scripture as well as for some of the church’s earliest theology to envisage Christ’s basic composition to include both male and female parts, intertwined and integral to each other, then we must find what it means to be fully human as Christ revealed. Though it may have consequences on the meaning of marriage or on celibate life (not in any way saying that celibate life is unnecessary) it certainly does seem that a completely male hierarchical structure within the Catholic Church is lacking half of the conversation when making decisions that affect the whole body of the church. With only the male half of the voices speaking for the body of the church, of which Christ is the head, half the basic makeup of Christ as we understand Sophia/Logos is missing and thus Christ is underrepresented.

Elizabeth Johnson’s christological basis allows one to see the historical framework through which the feminine figure of Wisdom came to influence the writers of the New Testament. Origen’s writings show recognition of these themes as he builds a Christology that is Sophia-centered but is also dependent on Logos to understand completely who Christ is cosmologically and soteriologically. The characteristics attributed to Christ by way of Sophia allows for many interesting possibilities in the current topics of humanity’s relationship with the cosmos, Wisdom Christology, and women’s position in church hierarchical structures. By taking Sophia-centered Christology seriously, it is possible to see that many relationships are lacking half of the individuals needed to fully understand it and be in true dialogue. Seeing Christology as dependent on Sophia is integral to understanding the trinitarian reality, as well as its individual persons, correctly.

³³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 255.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ To contrast with another current which can be found in Gerald Bostock’s article, *Origen’s Doctrine of Creation*, where he suggests a return to Logos-centered Christology. While his suggested results are agreeable, I believe the premise is inherently flawed in that it does not go far enough to correct the problem. Logos-centered Christology—being centered in Wisdom, as Bostock argues—does not have the potential that a dual-natured Christ has nor does it recognize Wisdom with the importance she finds in Origen’s Christology.

³⁷ Cf. Col 1:23.

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Vista d'una cupola dal
cortile del doge

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