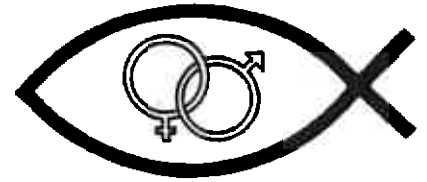


# Priscilla Papers



"Priscilla and Aquila instructed Apollos more perfectly in the way of the Lord"

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## WHO IS SOPHIA?

Tina J. Ostrander

The quest to find feminine attributes in the Godhead is ongoing, as many women yearn for an understanding of God that they can relate to and identify with. For them, the Church's traditional view of the "patriarchal God" is not only too limited but too limiting. This view is too limited in light of the richness of the full range of biblical language for God. It is too limited in that it can exclude believing Christian women from full participation in the Body of Christ, although they too are creatures made in the image of God and now equal children of God along with their Christian brothers.

In the search for a more inclusive understanding of God, the feminine "Sophia" has for many persons become a bridge between traditional Christianity and feminist concerns. So we ask: Who is Sophia, and where did she come from? Is she the long-awaited answer to this search?

"Sophia" is a transliteration of the Greek noun meaning "wisdom." In Hebrew, the word for wisdom is "chokmah." In the Old Testament (especially Proverbs 3 and 8), and in several apocryphal texts,<sup>1</sup> wisdom is personified as a woman. Some understand this personification of wisdom as nothing more than a literary device. Others are convinced that wisdom is intentionally personified as an aspect of divinity, or as a goddess, distinct from God.

Sophia appears to be gaining popularity among feminist theologians and among some secular women interested in goddess worship. One recent example of Sophia's popularity was an ecumenical Christian conference, "Re-Imagining ... God, Community, the Church", which was held in November 1993 in Minneapolis. The conference was part of The Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women, a program of the World Council of Churches. Sophia was a recurrent theme throughout the conference.<sup>2</sup>

However, interest in Sophia is not a new phenomenon. In Gnosticism<sup>3</sup>, a heresy in the early Christian church, Sophia is sometimes portrayed as a divine being superior to God, who reprimands God for arrogance. In other Gnostic texts, Sophia is a mischievous spirit who indirectly creates a world so evil that God has to rescue it by sending another emanation named Jesus. According to these texts, Jesus taught that we are rescued from evil and returned to God through knowledge (*gnosis*).<sup>4</sup>

More recently, the Shakers have understood Sophia as the fourth person of the Godhead. A Russian Orthodox priest named Sergei Bulgakov has taught that Sophia is the essence of the Trinity, the glue that binds Father, Son and Holy Spirit together.<sup>5</sup> Thus Sophia has been gaining popularity in Christian circles for many years. For a growing number of Christians, Sophia is the feminine symbol of divinity desperately needed to balance the patriarchal emphasis of the Church.

The central question is whether "sophia" is to be understood as a person or as a concept, as a divine entity or as an abstract attribute of God. The answer to this question is the subject of much current debate. Susan Cady, Marian Ronan and Hal Taussig, authors of *Wisdom's Feast*, argue that Sophia is in fact the female goddess of the Bible.<sup>6</sup> For Cady, Sophia is a real biblical person. "She is a co-creator with the Hebrew God, she is a heavenly queen, she is messenger from God, and she is God's lover."<sup>7</sup> Cady goes on to say that Sophia is "divine, creating, judging, and ruling just as God is."<sup>8</sup> Catherine Keller of Drew University Theological School insists that Sophia preaches, prophesies, judges and promises security to those who obey her. "Like the spirit," Keller writes, "this Sophia is at once something humans may seek as their own and something given by God of God's own nature."<sup>9</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that Sophia is the God of Israel expressed in the language and imagery of the goddess.<sup>10</sup> For some feminist theologians, including Cady, Sophia is the pre-incarnate Christ; Sophia was a

Tina J. Ostrander received a B.S. from the University of Washington and is studying for an M.A. in Theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. She is a member of The Episcopal Church.

divine entity which took the form of a male human to accommodate patriarchal culture. For those who understand her as a divine entity, Sophia has become an important link between traditional language for God and feminist spirituality. Proponents of Sophia worship claim that Sophia as a name for God is used to remind us that God has a feminine side and that solely masculine images and names for God are inadequate.

In contrast, those who argue that wisdom (*sophia*) is an attribute of God rather than an independent divine entity accuse "Sophia-worshippers" of taking relevant biblical texts out of context and relying heavily on apocryphal and Gnostic writings. They argue that, biblically, wisdom is an attribute of God similar to justice, holiness or mercy. In the Bible, "Sophia" is nowhere used as a name for God. While wisdom is indeed personified in Proverbs 7-10—"Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights along the way, where the paths meet, she takes her stand."8:1,2)—this personification is a literary device commonly found in wisdom literature: "Folly" is also personified as a woman in the book of Proverbs (chapters 5-7). However, wisdom is never equated with God.

John Oswalt of Asbury Theological Seminary writes that "[in Proverbs] 'wisdom' is regularly treated as a synonym of 'understanding' and 'discretion.' It is perfectly clear in this context that these latter two words are not proper nouns and that therefore 'wisdom' is not either... Wisdom is a creation, not a divine being." Oswalt argues that the personifications are intended to emphasize an abstract concept. The purpose of the book of Proverbs is to stress the principles of wisdom for effective living.<sup>11</sup>

The recent Re-Imagining conference serves as an effective example of the controversy regarding Sophia. The conference was largely centered around Sophia, but which Sophia? Was Sophia understood as a divine person or as an abstract concept? While much of the liturgy and worship focused on Sophia, many conference participants would deny that they worshipped Sophia as a goddess, or as an entity separate from God. For many attendees, Sophia was merely an understanding of wisdom in feminine terms, and prayers to Sophia were intended to revere the female aspect of the Christian God. Annie Wu King of Women's Ministries (PCUSA) stated, "There was no worship of a goddess Sophia. There [were references to] the Proverbs and the understanding of Wisdom [in feminine terms]. It certainly was not a separate goddess..."<sup>12</sup> These attendees insist that their prayers to Sophia were holy and honorable, and were not directed toward anything other than the Christian God.

It is true that the Re-Imagining liturgy does not explicitly mention a goddess. However, there are several aspects of the conference which cause one to question the

true nature of the Sophia worshipped there. Sophia was blessed, praised, invoked and thanked. Before each speaker came to the podium, a "Sophia blessing" was sung, inviting her to bring her wisdom: "Bless Sophia, dream a vision, share the wisdom dwelling deep within." The Re-Imagining packet included a poem which contained the lines, "Gracious God Sophia, Partner in Creation, tree of life, hidden treasure, born before these hills, before the brimming springs, before the lakes, Breathe on me."<sup>13</sup> The Re-Imagining Newsletter informs us that "Sophia" is used rather than "Wisdom" because it reminds us that Sophia is "someone who walks, talks, plays, cries, eats, creates, and loves."<sup>14</sup> During the conference, as part of the liturgy several proclamations were made which describe Sophia as a divine entity: "Sophia's voice has been silenced too long. Let her speak and bless us throughout these days;" "Sophia is the place in you where the entire universe resides;" "It is time to state clearly and dream wildly about who...we intend to be in the future through the power and guidance of the spirit of wisdom whom we name Sophia." One of the speakers, the Reverend Barbara Lundblad, stated, "Jesus appears as the prophet and the child of Sophia.... In all Jesus' compassionate, liberating words and deeds are the works of Sophia, re-establishing the right order of creation."<sup>15</sup>

To understand which Sophia various leaders of the Re-Imagining Conference had in mind, one must also take a close look at the "milk and honey" ritual which was performed in Sophia's honor on the final Sunday of the conference. Conference participants are adamant in insisting that this ritual was not intended to replace the Eucharist. However, there were many parallels between it and the traditional meal of bread and wine. The Re-Imagining ritual included the words, "Our maker Sophia, we are women in your image....With the hot blood of our wombs we give form to new life...Sophia Creator God, let your milk and honey flow....with nectar between our thighs we invite a lover, we birth a child; with our warm body fluids we remind the world of its pleasures and sensations....We celebrate the sensual life you give us...We celebrate the fingertips vibrating upon the skin of a lover. We celebrate the tongue which licks a wound or wets our lips. We celebrate our bodiliness, our physicality, the sensations of pleasure, our oneness with earth and water." These words would certainly appear to be prayers to a feminine divinity.

Presbyterian Church (USA) theologians Joseph D. Small and John P. Burgess responded to the conference with the criticism that the "Re-Imagining rituals failed to assist worshippers to understand the connection between Old Testament wisdom motifs and the self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ." They insist that in the New Testament, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God (1Cor. 1:24), "not wisdom as a divine manifesta-

tion apart from Jesus Christ." Small and Burgess go on to write that, "many of the prayers went beyond using wisdom as one of the metaphors appropriately employed in liturgical address of God. Wisdom/sophia, both in frequency and formulation, became an alternative employed in distinction from the triune God."<sup>16</sup>

While conference planners and attendees may not have intended to worship Sophia as an entity separate from God, it is clearly implied in the liturgies, and also in many of the statements made, that this was indeed the case. An attribute of God was transformed into a distinct and divine image.

Who is "Sophia"? For an increasing number of feminist theologians and probably for a great many of the Re-Imagining participants, Sophia is a unique and divine person. How she relates to God is a matter of varying interpretation. It has been argued that Sophia is superior to God, that she is equal to God, that she is God, or that she is inferior to God, yet still divine.

The biblical understanding of Sophia which is most true to the scriptural context is that sophia is none of these things. Sophia is nothing more than a Greek noun describing an important attribute of God. Wisdom is personified not because it has an existence of its own, apart from God, but as a literary tool used to stress its importance.

As we continue the search for an inclusive understanding of God, it is imperative that we remain within the bounds of Scripture. We can indeed learn from exploring the meaning of sophia. It is important that several of God's attributes are understood in feminine terms. This reality contributes to the concept of a God who transcends gender, and who is accessible to both men and women. The introduction of a goddess, however, merely obscures the fact that God is neither male nor female. The appeal of Sophia is understandable, yet we as Christian theologians must seek to meet the needs that women face apart from the goddess. The needs are real, and the search must go on.

<sup>1</sup> Including Baruch, Sirach and Ecclesiasticus

<sup>2</sup> There were 2,200 attendees at the conference, including 83 men. The denominations with the largest number of attendees were the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), United Methodist, Lutheran/ELCA, Roman Catholic, and United Church of Christ.

<sup>3</sup> Gnosticism was a dualistic heresy which taught that matter was evil and that spirit was good. As a result, the humanity of Jesus was denied and his divinity emphasized.

<sup>4</sup> See especially the Nag Hamamdi Codices, discovered in upper Egypt in 1945.

<sup>5</sup> Bulgakov, Sergei. *Sophia, The Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology*, [Hudson: Lindisfarne Press], 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Cady, Marian Ronan and Hal Taussig, *Wisdom's Feast: Sophia in Study and Celebration*, [San Francisco: Harper & Row], 1989.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p.28.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p.29.

<sup>9</sup> Keller, Catherine. "Inventing the goddess: A study in ecclesial backlash," *Christian Century*, April 6, 1994, pp. 340-42.

<sup>10</sup> Fiorenza, Elizabeth Schüssler. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, [New York: Crossroad], 1986.

<sup>11</sup> Oswalt, John. "Feminist Theology Examined: Sophia and the Bible," *Good News*, March/April 1994, pp. 20-22.

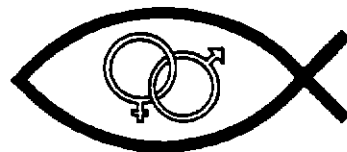
<sup>12</sup> Quoted by Gene Williams, "Charges, countercharges fly in wake of Minneapolis women's conference," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, January 17, 1993, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> "Sophia's Lace," in *Re-Imagining: The Newsletter*, Day 4, November 7, 1993, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Re-Imagining: The Newsletter*, Day 3, November 6, 1993, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Rev. Barbara Lundblad spoke on "Re-Imagining Jesus." She is Pastor of Our Savior Atonement Lutheran Church in New York City.

<sup>16</sup> Small, Joseph D. and John P. Burgess. "Re-Imagining: A Theological Appraisal," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, March 7, 1994, pp. 11-13.



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