



woman
18 No man hath seen God at any time; the

daughter
only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of

Mother her
the Father, he hath declared him.
she

Reflections on She Who Is

By Heather Isaacs

How can Seventh-day Adventists as a corporate body begin to examine the cultural biases we bring to our specific reading of the Bible? We might begin with our language about God. For example, we speak about the need to be “born again,” but never about the womb of God. In addition, we praise the “Father of All Creation” and the relationship between the Father and the Son without any inclusion of the Mother, a necessary counterpart to the Father.

The work of feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson on the biblical concept of Wisdom, or Sophia, helped me to understand better the current limits of Adventist language about God. Johnson’s book, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad,

1992), challenges classical Christian tradition that uses the Bible to reaffirm preexisting patriarchal systems. In this book Johnson is critical of readings that do not recognize the weight of cultural judgments on biblical interpretation and instead assume a literal, verbatim revelation.

Johnson is up front about her normative standard of reading the Bible: The experience of women must be brought to the center of biblical interpretation and the resultant theology pointed toward the well being of all women. According to her, this will make possible “a new configuration of theory and praxis and the genuine transformation of all societies, including churches, to open up more human ways of living for all people, with each other and the earth” (11).

If women are not able to affirm their own self-worth, if they are not able to oppose sexism, if they cannot recognize their *imago dei* and despair because of it, then Christian theology has failed them.

What makes Johnson’s work relevant to the Adventist principle of openness to new understandings of the Bible is her reliance on canonical writings. The canonization of the Bible excluded much of the Jewish Wisdom tradition that contains examples of feminine language for God. Still, the Bible has remained a “strong source of life for countless women throughout the centuries and continues to do so today” (63).

Johnson excavates the location of these sources for women’s strength and affirmation in her study of Wisdom and its application to the Doctrine of God. To her, the biblical image of Wisdom is

the most developed personification of God’s presence and activity in the Hebrew Scriptures, much more acutely limned than Spirit, torah, or word. The term itself is of feminine grammatical gender: *hokmah* in Hebrew, *Sophia* in Greek, *sapientia* in Latin. While this does not in itself determine anything, the biblical depiction of Wisdom is itself consistently female, casting her as sister, mother, female beloved, chef and hostess, preacher, judge, liberator, establisher of justice, and a myriad of other female roles where she symbolizes transcendent power ordering and delighting in the world. She pervades the world, both nature and human beings, interacting with them all to lure them along the right path of life. (87)

Sophia is manifested in each person of the Trinity and reveals the work of the Triune God, which is to seek justice in the world for all her creatures: Spirit-Sophia as Life-giving Spirit, Mother-Sophia as Compassionate Creator, Jesus-Sophia as Sophia Incarnate. Our first encounter with God in the Bible is in Spirit-Sophia, “the Spirit of God hovering over the waters” (Gen. 1:1).

Spirit, in Hebrew *Ruah*, denotes breath. Using the Adventist belief in the soul as breath, Spirit-Sophia is

the breath or soul of God exhaled across and into creation. Spirit-Sophia’s activity involves

a continuous energizing, an ongoing sustaining of the world throughout the broad sweep of history. She is the giver of life and the lover of life, pervading the cosmos and all of its interrelated creatures with life. If she were to withdraw her divine presence everything would go back to nothing. (134)

Mother-Sophia embodies the creative power of God, which includes the protective concern she has for her people. The Bible uses notable metaphors from mothering to describe God (Isa. 42:14; 46:3-4; 49:15; 66:13; Hos. 11:3-4). Like the she-bear in Hosea 13:8 (“Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack and rip them open”), Mother-Sophia is tirelessly seeking out justice on behalf of her creatures.

Part of the act of creating is protecting what one has created. Like loving human mothers, Mother-Sophia’s sentiment toward her children is one of love and acceptance. But judgment is reserved against those who thwart the full flourishing of her creatures and is part of the maternal care that Mother-Sophia gives. Rather than interacting with her creatures as master or king, Mother-Sophia is interested in being in relationship with her people in mutuality and love.

The wisdom of Mother-Sophia that is merciful and justice loving was made flesh in the life of Jesus. In Jesus, “Sophia pitches her tent in the midst of the world” (150) and gets about the business of redeeming and restoring the world. Johnson believes that Jesus-Sophia redeemed the world not from what Martin Luther or John Calvin would have characterized as sin—pride and/or selfishness—for it is only those in power for whom sin is egotism and pride. For the powerless and oppressed, sin is the despair of not knowing one was made in the image of God, and Jesus came to save both.

Jesus as a man in a patriarchal society continually subverted social norms in his interactions with women. As a result, women were drawn to his ministry and became disciples and supporters. In his Christhood, oppressed women find rest and affirmation because Jesus’ manhood does not constitute his Christhood and is therefore open to all.

In the same way, the metaphor of Son and Father should not be understood as a concrete, literal descrip-



tion of the relationship between the first and second persons of the Trinity. Rather, the work of Jesus-Sophia is the window to the true inner life of the Trinity and God's relationship to her people. "His solidarity with suffering people in the name of God even to death diagrams the heart of Sophia-God, the essence of her way with the world" (168).

Sophia-God, then, is God both transcendent and immanent in love. Each person of the Trinity exists in complete, divine freedom—the will to live freely enters into solidarity with creation. Though God is ineffable, the work of God is testifiable. There is not a place where God is not. She suffers with the suffering:

Holy Wisdom does not abhor the reality of women but identifies with the pain and violence that women experience on the cross, of whatever sort... Through the long night when the Bethlehem concubine is gang-raped and tortured, where is God? She is there, being abused and defiled. . . . Sophia-God enters into the pain of women whose humanity is profaned and keeps vigil with the godforsaken for whom there is no rescue. In turn, their devastation points to the depth of the suffering God. (264)

In every dark place of privation and hopelessness, our Suffering God is there. She is not a passive onlooker, but an active, life-giving force that works to save and restore her creation.

I have condensed Johnson's argument to a few key points. Reading her book showed me our limitations in our discussion about the Nature of *Man*, being "born again," the Father of All Creation, the complementary function of the sexes, and other traditional doctrines about and metaphors for God. If we want our message to be universal and reflect God's concern for all of God's people, then we will need to change our language.

Adventists believe that before God can come again the "gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14). Our language about God reveals that there is gospel left for us that we have not yet understood.

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