

# THE GENDER OF JESUS AND THE INCARNATION: A CASE STUDY IN FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS

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## Abstract

If Jesus was the prototypical feminist, as Christian feminist interpreters claim, why did he become incarnate in male form? Feminists explain this as cultural accommodation or say the NT actually describes Jesus only as ἀνθρωπος (*anthropos*, “genetically human”) not specifically as male. A careful study of the biblical text shows their arguments are without foundation.

While it may be true that no one's attempts at biblical hermeneutics are 100% objective, it is also true that some exegesis is more subjective than the rest. My overall thesis is that Bible-believing feminist interpreters are consistently guilty of mishandling biblical data in their zealous desire to provide a biblical basis for egalitarianism. This faulty hermeneutics is especially evident in their treatment of the data of the Gospels concerning Jesus Christ.

When studying the Bible feminists encounter basically two types of biblical passages and subjects. First are those texts and teachings which appear to contradict feminist beliefs or which have traditionally been taken to do so. These must somehow be explained, explained away, or otherwise reconciled with egalitarianism. Second are those texts and subjects which appear to support feminist beliefs or at least are compatible with them. These receive special attention and are energetically emphasized as to their importance.

When studying Jesus feminists are confronted with both categories. Some things about Jesus just do not seem consistent with their agenda, and thus must somehow be explained away. Included here are the facts that Jesus was incarnated as a male and that he chose no female apostles. Other aspects of christology seem to fortify the egalitarian gospel and thus are greatly emphasized. These include Christ's canceling the curse through his work of redemption, his teaching and example concerning power, his teaching as it relates to women in general, and the nature of his personal relationships with women.

This article focuses on only one of these topics, namely, Jesus' gender and the incarnation. How does the fact that Jesus was incarnated as a male affect the feminist agenda? How do feminists themselves try to reconcile this fact with their egalitarian philosophy? How may we evaluate their attempts to explain it? What we shall see here is the way feminists handle the Bible on this issue is open to serious criticism, and that Jesus' incarnation as a male cannot be adequately reconciled with the feminist gospel.

For many feminists the fact that the Logos "became flesh [i.e., was incarnated]" (John 1:14) in the form of a human *male* is a real stumbling block. They wonder *why* the world's prototypical feminist would have made his appearance as a man and not as a woman. This has led some non-biblical feminists to speculate whether we can expect a counterbalancing female incarnation sometime in the future. As Letty Russell says, "One possibility in approaching this question is to get rid of the scandal by looking for a further incarnation in the form of a woman."<sup>1</sup> Several nineteenth-century sectarians have already asserted that at the Second Coming the Messiah will be female.<sup>2</sup> Another possibility is to abandon Christianity altogether and reconstruct a feminism-friendly goddess religion, which Carol Christ and others have done.

## HOW FEMINISTS EXPLAIN THE MALE INCARNATION

Bible-believing feminists are not really open to such radical solutions, however. The Messiah came as a male, and that fact has to be accepted and then explained in a way that satisfies the feminist mentality. Most things about the incarnation are a mystery, but "part of the mystery is that Mary brought forth a *son*. Why did God choose to become flesh in male form?"<sup>3</sup> Several answers are offered.

### *Concession to the Culture of Patriarchal Judaism*

One answer is that it was a necessary concession to the culture into which the Messiah was born. In

that particular culture, namely, patriarchal Judaism, the only way he would be able to function properly as the Messiah was as a male. Thus it was a purely practical matter. This is how Scanzoni and Hardesty answer the question:

On the practical level, Jewish women were kept in subjection and sometimes even in seclusion. A female Messiah might have had little scriptural knowledge . . . . A female Messiah would not have been allowed to teach publicly in the synagogue, nor would she have been believed if she had, since the testimony of women was not accepted as veracious.<sup>4</sup>

Mollenkott says, "In patriarchal cultures, no incarnation of God in the flesh of a woman would have received a moment's serious notice!"<sup>5</sup> "Since nobody listened seriously to either women or slaves in first-century society, and since Jesus was coming to teach a whole new lifestyle, it is obvious that God would choose to be incarnated as a free male rather than a female or a slave."<sup>6</sup>

To be more specific, one of the purposes for which Jesus came was to show us the proper nature of and use of *power*. Since in that culture only a male would have had power in the first place, he had to come as a male in order to accomplish this purpose. That is, he had to *have* power in order to teach its proper use. Mollenkott says, "Had Christ been incarnated as a female or a slave, servitude would have been only the expected thing. It was essential that Christ be a *free* member of the *dominant* sex in order to demonstrate His own principle of self-giving, self-emptying love." As such he was in a position to retain his power and use it for his own ends, but he "voluntarily *chose* servanthood as an example to us all, male and female alike."<sup>7</sup>

#### *Jesus Was ἀνθρωπο~ Not Male*

Another feminist explanation of the male incarnation is that Jesus was mostly described with the word ἀνθρωπο~ (*anthropos*), the Greek word for "man" which is actually generic or gender-neutral. Thus, God does not intend for us to think of him as a male, but simply as a human being. If his gender had been important, he would have been described with those Greek words for "man," ἀνὴρ (*aner*) and ἀρσεν (*arsen*) which specifically mean "male."

Feminists often state or imply that Jesus was never called anything but . . . Mollenkott has said, "The New Testament authors refer to Jesus as *anthropos*, human, rather than as *aner*, male."<sup>8</sup> Also, "When New Testament writers refer to the incarnation of Jesus, they do not speak of his becoming *aner*, 'male,' but rather of his being *anthropos*, 'human.'"<sup>9</sup> English versions usually obscure the difference, she says.

Fortunately, even English translations of John 1:14 capture the fact that Jesus is God incarnate as a *human being* rather than as a *male*: "So the Word became flesh; [it] came to dwell among us, and we saw its glory, such glory as befits the Father's [or Mother's] only [Child], full of grace and truth" (NEB). The use of the Greek word for "flesh," *sarx*, made it absolutely impossible for the translators to say that "the Word became man," which promptly would have become confused with "the Word became male." The glorious truth is that "the Word became a human being," an embodying or tabernacling of the glory of God within the limitations of human nature, with its "male" and "female" components.<sup>10</sup>

Spencer repeats this idea: "Even the New Testament writers are always careful to describe Jesus with the generic Greek term 'human' or *anthropos* rather than the term 'male' or *aner*. Although God became a male, God primarily became a human; otherwise, in some way males would be more saved than females."<sup>11</sup>

In their first edition Scanzoni and Hardesty say, "Jesus was a man, but he was also Man. English obscures the distinction, but New Testament writers are careful to distinguish between *aner* (male) and *anthropos* (human). When speaking of the incarnation, they invariably choose *anthropos*." Thus "Jesus came to earth not primarily as a male but as a person."<sup>12</sup> (In the second edition they change the word "invariably" to "almost without exception,"<sup>13</sup> which is certainly more accurate, as we shall see shortly.)

#### *Jesus Was Both Male and Female*

Still another feminist response to the apparent fact that Jesus was incarnated as a male is to assert that he was actually both male *and* female in some significant way. One bizarre suggestion is that this may have been true physically. Since Jesus was born of a virgin and had only one human parent, a female, therefore he "was undoubtedly genetically female even though phenotypically male." I.e., "his genes must have been XX rather than XY . . . . Thus Jesus may well have been biologically both male and female."<sup>14</sup>

A more common suggestion is that Jesus was both masculine and feminine psychologically. To show that he is creating a "new gender-inclusive humanity," say the Torjesens, "in his work and ministry Christ demonstrates so many traditionally female characteristics--nurture, compassion, suffering, tenderness."<sup>15</sup> Atkins says, "Both feminine and masculine characteristics have their origin in Him, so we would expect Jesus to exemplify both." On the feminine side Jesus was meek and mild; he was "the epitome of patience and humility"; he "delighted in little children"; he cooked breakfast; he wept.<sup>16</sup> A frequently-cited example of this female imagery is Matt 23:37, where Jesus said to wayward Jerusalem, "How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings." This shows that "Jesus did not hesitate to speak of himself in female terms," says Mollenkott.<sup>17</sup>

Another indication that Jesus includes both genders, says Mollenkott, is "the emphasis of the whole New Testament of Christ as the new *Adam*" (1 Cor 15:45). This conclusion follows from the fact that *Adam* is "a Hebrew word including both male and female."<sup>18</sup>

Another attempt to find female elements in the incarnation is the equation of the crucifixion with childbirth. Through the pain and the blood of the cross Christ gave birth to his new creation, and even nurses us at his bleeding side. Rebecca Pentz says,

. . . Childbirth is gory. And so is the cross. Our birth into a new relationship with God was gory just as was our birth into this world. I some-times think we women have an advantage over men when we come to the cross: we can experience, albeit on the creature's level, what it is like to give birth. So what kind of savior is Jesus? He is a mother who gives us birth and who nurtures us in love. Certainly this is a savior for women as well as for men.<sup>19</sup>

Other attempts to identify Jesus as female focus on his divine nature. Since (it is assumed) the divine nature as such is gender-inclusive, i.e., just as much feminine as masculine, then Jesus' divine nature necessarily includes both. For example, the Torjesens assert that "what Christ assumed in the incarnation was not a particular individual male but our *common human nature* in all its aspects. Christian orthodoxy has always affirmed that the *person* of Christ is the individuality of the Logos and not that of a man." Though physically male, "the identity of Christ is *not* that of a male individual. It is that of the Logos, the second person of the Trinity. Christ is not male, for there is no male identity in Christ only the gender-inclusive individuality of the Logos." I.e., "the human existence of Christ is that of the divine Logos." Thus, "the humanity of Christ transcends the humanity of a male person." This is important "since what is not assumed cannot be redeemed." The Torjesens call this "high Christology" and declare that it was endorsed by the Council of Chalcedon.<sup>20</sup>

Another version of the idea that Christ's divine nature was feminine is the so-called Sophia Christology, popular among liberal feminists<sup>21</sup> but also being adopted in conservative feminist circles as well.<sup>22</sup> This view starts with the idea that Sophia is the female personification of God's wisdom. (*Sophia* is the Greek word for wisdom and is feminine in gender.) "In the Old Testament," says Mollenkott, "Wisdom is always pictured as a woman"; she is "invariably personified as female."<sup>23</sup> The next step is to recognize that the New Testament identifies Jesus as "the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24, 30). Thus Jesus is identified with "Sophia herself," in the view endorsed by Pentz. "Jesus is Sophia herself incarnate," she says.<sup>24</sup> Thus even though she became incarnate as a male, her femaleness shows through very clearly in the feminine characteristics exhibited by Jesus, e.g., his weeping, his love for children, and his special way with women. "A Sophia Christology makes sense of these facts. Jesus incarnated the feminine characteristics of the divine." A common idea is that "if Jesus had lived in the 20th century he would have been a feminist." Now, says Pentz, with this understanding of Sophia, "Jesus' feminism has an explicit theological explanation--Jesus is Sophia incarnate."<sup>25</sup>

These are the various ways in which feminists try to deal with the fact that the Messiah was incarnated as a male. First, it was a cultural necessity; second, he is described as ἀνθρώπος-, which means "human being" and not "male"; third, he embodies both male and female, either in his human nature or in his divine nature or in both.

## CRITIQUE OF FEMINISM'S APPROACH TO THE GENDER OF CHRIST

Our concern here is to examine each of the three points in the feminists' approach to the gender of Christ and to evaluate them in the light of solid facts. In this process we shall call attention to the weakness of their arguments, their inattention to detail, their magnification of minutiae, and in general their refusal to acknowledge the obvious biblical emphasis on the maleness of Christ.

### *A Concession to Culture?*

Feminists say the Messiah had to come as a male because a patriarchal culture such as that of rabbinic Judaism would have ignored or rejected a female in that role. In order to succeed in that particular culture, Christ had to be male. It was a purely practical matter.

We may say several things in response to this idea. First, it is a mistake to assume that the culture into which the Messiah was born was totally dominated by the patriarchal ethos of rabbinic Judaism. The teaching of some rabbis was without question misogynistic; but, as Stephen Clark has pointed out, the culture of first century Judaism was quite pluralistic, and there is no evidence that the narrow rabbinic view was the prevailing one.<sup>26</sup>

Second, if the maleness of Christ was a concession to culture, in order to make sure that he would receive a proper hearing, then in many ways the strategy was a failure, since even the *male* Christ was scorned and rejected by the rabbinic circle anyway. Would a female Christ have been treated with any more hostility and hatred than the male Jesus?

Third, it is clear from Jesus' own teaching that the mistaken elements of the prevailing culture and the prevailing human traditions were no barrier to the carrying out of his purpose. He met them head-on and slew them like dragons: "You have heard that it was said . . . but I say unto you." Such iconoclasm alienated the rabbinic circles, to be sure; but it increased his acceptance with ordinary people (Matt 7:28-29; Mark 12:37).

Finally, to say that the culture into which the Messiah was born presented logistical problems for God certainly ignores the fact that God himself is the one who *chose* that particular culture as the time and place for the incarnation. As Susan Foh says, "God chose the culture and time in which his Son was to be born."<sup>27</sup> He not only chose it, but he also to a large degree shaped it through the contents of the Law of Moses, which is unquestionably hierarchical. If he had wanted a female Messiah, he could have chosen or prepared a matriarchal culture.

For these reasons we conclude that the idea that Christ's maleness was a concession to culture is an extremely weak argument. It simply does not take account of the relevant facts.

### *The Meaning and Use of ἀἰσχροῦ-*

Feminists claim that Jesus is not described with the Greek words for "male" but rather is called ἀἰσχροῦ- which means "human being" rather than "male." They conclude that we are therefore not intended to think of Jesus as a male but rather simply as a generic human being.

This argument, however, is faulty from the beginning because it is based on incorrect data and an incorrect understanding of the term in question. The following points will make this clear.

First, the claim or implication that Jesus is described in Scripture only as ἀἰσχροῦ- and never with the words meaning "male" is simply false. It is true that ἀἰσχροῦ- is applied to Jesus more often, or about 32 times. But in fact two words that mean specifically "male," i.e., ἀἰσχροῦ- and ἀρσεν, are also applied to him in the biblical text. The word ἀἰσχροῦ- is used six times, in John 1:30; Luke 24:19; Acts 2:22; Acts 17:31; 2 Cor 11:2; and Rev 21:2. These are unequivocal references to Jesus. The word ἀρσεν is used in three texts. Luke 2:23 cites an OT requirement and refers it to Christ: "Every first-born *male* that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord." Revelation 12, in a symbolic scene which can be referring only to the incarnation of Jesus, uses this word twice. Verse 5 says that the "woman clothed with the sun" (12:1) "gave birth to a son, a *male* child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron." Revelation 12:13 refers again to "the woman who gave birth to the *male* child." This is a total of nine references to Jesus with terms that emphasize his maleness.

Still, someone may say that ἀἰσχροῦ- is used much more frequently than the terms for "male" (32 vs. 9). This is not significant. For one thing, some of the 32 uses of ἀἰσχροῦ- are parallel passages in the gospels. More importantly, all but 6 of these 32 references are quotations from uninspired people. These

include the people in general,<sup>28</sup> Peter denying Christ,<sup>29</sup> people friendly or not unfriendly toward Christ,<sup>30</sup> and people hostile toward him.<sup>31</sup> In only six places is Jesus called ἀἰσῆρ- with divine authority: in John 8:40 (by Jesus himself), and in Rom 5:15; 1 Cor 15:21, 47; Phil 2:8; 1 Tim 2:5 (by Paul). Of the nine references to Jesus as "male," we may exclude the rather indirect references in Luke 2:23 and Rev 21:2. Luke 24:19 may also be excluded since it is a quotation from uninspired persons. But that still leaves six uses of these terms by divinely-inspired persons: John the Baptist (John 1:30), Peter on Pentecost (Acts 2:22), Paul at Mars' Hill (Acts 17:31) and in 2 Cor 11:2; and the Apostle John (Rev. 12:5, 13). This means that of statements spoken with divine authority, the number is exactly even: six use ἀἰσῆρ-, and six use the terms for "male."

Sometimes feminists' claims on this point are qualified in language that appears to be technically correct but which is in fact incorrect as well as flagrantly misleading. An example is Mollenkott's statement cited above, "The New Testament authors refer to Jesus as *anthropos* human, rather than as *aner*, male." This is almost technically correct since the statements from John the Baptist and from Peter and Paul in Acts are not statements by the biblical authors themselves, and since the Apostle John uses ἀἰσῆρ rather than ἀἰσῆρ. However, one biblical writer does use ἀἰσῆρ for Jesus (Paul in 2 Cor 11:2), so her statement is simply wrong. More than this, when we recognize that John the Baptist as well as Peter and Paul in Acts are speaking under divine inspiration, and that ἀἰσῆρ in Revelation 12 means the same as ἀἰσῆρ, the statement by Mollenkott is revealed to be not only incorrect but totally misleading as well. Thus, this alleged support for the feminist position literally disappears into thin air.

The same is true for Spencer's statement, cited above, that "the New Testament writers are always careful to describe Jesus with the generic Greek term 'human' or ἀἰσῆρ- rather than the term 'male' or *aner*." In view of the data cited above, the carefully precise wording of such statements as these by Mollenkott and Spencer makes it clear that objectivity has been sacrificed on the altar of feminism, and makes one wonder whether or not honesty has met the same fate.

Scanzoni and Hardesty attempt to qualify the data in another way. As cited above they say that the NT writers "invariably" (first edition) or "almost without exception" (second edition) used ἀἰσῆρ- "when speaking of the Incarnation." Besides the by-now-familiar misleading reference to "the New Testament writers," they imply that ἀἰσῆρ- is the word of choice in serious theological contexts such as the Incarnation. For examples they cite Phil 2:7 and Rom 5:12, 15.<sup>32</sup> However, Rom 5:12 does not even refer to Jesus.

We do not dispute the fact that the six inspired references to Jesus as ἀἰσῆρ- make significant theological points. But does this mean that this term is deliberately chosen in order to emphasize Christ's humanness rather than his maleness? This can hardly be the case, especially in view of the heavy theological concepts and soteriological events associated with Christ as male in the six passages where ἀἰσῆρ and ἀἰσῆρ are used. In John 1:30 the Baptist says, "After me comes a Man [ἀἰσῆρ] who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me." Here pre-existence is attributed to Jesus in his maleness. In Acts 2:22 Peter refers to "Jesus the Nazarene, a man [ἀἰσῆρ] attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs," a man nailed to a cross but raised up again by God (verses 23-24). Here the male Jesus is approved by God and is crucified and raised up again for our salvation. In Acts 17:31 Paul says that God "has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man [ἀἰσῆρ] whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead." Here Jesus is raised from the dead as a male, and he will judge the world as a male. In 2 Cor 11:2 Paul says, "I betrothed you to one husband [ἀἰσῆρ], that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin." Here our present relationship to Christ is as a male, and it will be so at the Second Coming. Finally, Rev 12:5, 13 refers to the birth of "a son, a male [ἀἰσῆρ]" who will "rule all the nations with a rod of iron." There could be no clearer reference to Christ's maleness as a significant aspect of his incarnation and his kingly rule.

The data cited here should put to rest the myth that Jesus is just a generic ἀἰσῆρ- and not a male. They show that this particular attempt to neutralize the fact that the Messiah was incarnated as a male is completely unsuccessful.

A second point showing the same thing has to do with the meaning of ἀἰσῆρ- itself. This is indeed one of the terms used to describe the incarnate Christ. But is it true, as feminists assert or imply, that ἀἰσῆρ- always means "human being" and is therefore gender-neutral when it refers to Christ? This is without question the implication in the following statement by Scanzoni and Hardesty: "In Greek one can make a distinction between *aner* ("male") and *anthropos* ("human"). . . . The Nicene Creed originally

asserted that Jesus became human (*anthropos*), not man." Thus "Jesus came to earth primarily not as a male but as a person."<sup>33</sup>

The facts concerning the word ἀἰϰρῠπο~, however, are quite otherwise. In general this term is used in two distinct ways. First, it often refers to mankind or humanity or human beings *collectively*; second, it often refers to specific and particular *individuals*, in which case it always refers to males.

When used in the first way ἀἰϰρῠπο~ may be in the plural form; or it may be singular, referring to a representative person or individual but not to a specific person. When used in this sense the term is generic or gender-neutral; it refers to human beings as a class, whether male or female. The reference may be to human beings as distinct from animals, or from angels, or from God himself.

This last use is very common in the NT, notably, "With men it is impossible, but not with God" (Mark 10:27), and "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). The term may be used in this sense for mankind collectively or for particular individuals. This is probably the significance of several of the references to Jesus as ἀἰϰρῠπο~ namely, Matt 9:8; John 10:33; Phil 2:8; and 1 Tim 2:5, which says, "There is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." Thus it is certainly true that Jesus is called ἀἰϰρῠπο~ to emphasize the fact that he *is* human, and not just divine. But when this is the point, ἀἰϰρῠπο~ calls attention not to his genderlessness as distinct from his maleness, but to his humanness as distinct from his divinity.

The really important point here relates to the second meaning of ἀἰϰρῠπο~, namely, its reference to male individuals. The fact is this: in the New Testament, when this term is used for specific individuals, it *always* refers to *males*. There are no exceptions. Thus when it refers to specific individuals, it is a practical synonym for ἀἰἠρ or ἀἴσεν. It is never used of a woman when a specific woman or group of women is in view. The term used in such a case is almost always γυνῡ (*gune*, "woman" or "wife." (At times such words as "daughter" and "damsel" and "maiden" are used.)

The list of specific men of which ἀἰϰρῠπο~ is used is quite long and need not be recited here.<sup>34</sup> It includes some with names and some who are unnamed. It includes many specific fictional men in parables or illustrations, as distinct from the three times Christ refers to a woman (γυνῡ) in a parable (Matt 13:33; Luke 13:21; 15:8).<sup>35</sup>

That the term ἀἰϰρῠπο~ may have this distinct connotation of maleness is seen from other data about its use in the NT. First, on several occasions it is used interchangeably with ἀἰἠρ.<sup>36</sup> Second, it is sometimes used for males as contrasted with females, as in these cases: Matt 10:35; 19:5, 10; Luke 22:57-60; 1 Cor 7:1; and Eph 5:31.

The point is that ἀἰϰρῠπο~ can mean "male"; and when used of specific individuals, it is always intended to identify them as males. There is absolutely no reason to think that its use for the specific individual Jesus should deviate from this pattern. That Jesus is an ἀἰϰρῠπο~ means first of all that he is a human being; but it also *means* that he is a *male* human being.

A final point to be made under this section on ἀἰϰρῠπο~ has to do with its OT parallel, the Hebrew word '*adam*. In a quotation cited above, Mollenkott says this is "a Hebrew word including both male and female." Since it is used of Jesus in the NT (1 Cor 15:45), the implication is that Jesus embodies both male and female.

The problem here, though, is the same as with the word ἀἰϰρῠπο~. Although on occasion this Hebrew word *may* mean humanity in general, including males and females, it is also the specific name of the first specific male individual, Adam. To imply that when used for Jesus it is used in the former sense is simply to ignore the biblical contexts where the term is used. In the two passages where Jesus is compared with the OT Adam or called the "last Adam," the obvious reference is to the one individual male named Adam, not to humanity in general. Rom 5:12-19 refers to the "one man" (5:12, 19), Adam (5:14), who brought sin and death into the world. The contrast with this Adam is "the one Man, Jesus Christ" (5:15). The same contrast occurs in 1 Cor 15:21-22, 45, where the Adam with which Christ corresponds is the "first man" who "became a living soul" (15:45, referring to Gen 2:7). Thus the reference to Christ as "Adam" only reinforces his maleness, contrary to Mollenkott's groundless suggestion.

We conclude that there is nothing in the term ἀἰϰρῠπο~ to give any support whatsoever to feminists' attempt to neutralize the fact that Christ was incarnated as a male. In fact the application of this term to Jesus, as well as the little-noticed use of ἀἰἠρ and ἀἴσεν, actually points in the opposite direction and magnifies his maleness.

### *Is Christ both Male and Female?*

As we have seen, feminists have tried several ways to introduce a feminine element into the nature of Christ. One is Mollenkott's mistaken interpretation of the word '*adam*', which in many ways is typical of the desperate nature of all these suggestions. Here we shall comment on the others explained above.

What of the idea that the virgin birth requires a kind of physical femaleness in Christ? It is true that on a purely natural basis, parthenogenesis will produce offspring that are of the same gender as the parent, as will cloning. The virgin birth of Jesus, however, is not a purely natural event but an intensely supernatural act on the part of God. Scanzoni and Hardesty offer an insulting false choice when they state, "If one truly believes in the virgin birth and not in some pagan myth of a male god in the sky who copulates with comely human virgins, then Jesus was undoubtedly genetically female even though phenotypically [in outward appearance] male."<sup>37</sup>

But is there not a third possibility, namely, the *miraculous* conception of a male child in the womb of a virgin female? Has the miraculous power of God been forgotten? Do we think the Almighty God is bound by the limited possibilities of nature? That the offspring of the virgin was male is part of the miracle. The very fact that his maleness required a special miracle demonstrates the truth that the maleness of the Messiah was a deliberate choice on the part of God.

To think of the human Jesus as anything but male goes against the consistent testimony of Scripture. From prophecy to promise to reality, Mary's child was called a son. "Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son" (Isa 7:14). "And she will bear a Son" (Matt 1:21). "She gave birth to a Son" (Matt 1:25; see Luke 2:7). "And she gave birth to a son, a male child" (Rev 12:5).

A more common suggestion is that the *psychological* nature of Jesus included both male and female characteristics in perfect harmony. It is very interesting to see feminists make such a suggestion, since in other contexts they usually deny that there are such things as "female" traits as distinct from "male" traits. The usual claim is that such a distinction derives from perverted cultural practices and is not inherent in human nature. Whether this is the case or not, it is very difficult to avoid the impression that the identification of so-called "feminine" characteristics in Jesus is extremely arbitrary. Many men as well as women will find it surprising indeed to learn that such things as compassion, patience, humility, weeping, and love for children--all exhibited by Jesus--are not natural to men.

The most over-worked and over-valued example of femaleness in Jesus is his comparison of his desire to save Jerusalem with a hen's instinct for protecting her chicks under her wings (Matt 23:37; Luke 13:34). Feminists see this as an indication that Jesus freely spoke about himself "in female terms," as Mollenkott puts it. It is true that the hen is a female animal. But the serious question that must be answered here is this: does Jesus' comparison of one particular desire of his heart with this one example of a hen's behavior reveal some *female* side to his nature any more than it reveals some *animal* side to it? The hen is an animal; thus Jesus compares himself with an animal. No one feels compelled to say, "Jesus did not hesitate to speak of himself in animal terms," because the very idea is ludicrous. Everyone knows that such a limited comparison is only an analogy relating to behavior and does not imply any essential identity between the nature of Jesus and the nature of a chicken. We do not draw such a conclusion even when Jesus is actually *called* "the Lamb of God" (John 1:29) and "the Lion . . . of Judah" (Rev. 5:5).

Thus, it is even more odd to think that Jesus' comparing himself with one instinctive act of a *female* animal is intended to reveal some essential identity between his nature and *femaleness* as such. If anything should strike us as significant about the simile, it is the fact that he compares himself with an *animal* at all; but we rightly draw no conclusions from this about some possible *animalness* of Jesus, as noted above. Thus the incidental fact that this animal happens to be female gives us even less warrant to speculate about an alleged female side to Jesus' nature.<sup>38</sup>

The idea that the cross is a female act comparable to childbirth is another desperate attempt to identify some female aspect in Jesus' nature. Just because pain and blood are involved in any given event does not make it comparable to childbirth. The Bible itself never draws any parallel between the crucifixion and childbirth, even though it does connect the imagery of birth with other significant events. With regard to Jesus himself, his resurrection from the tomb is more like a birth than is the crucifixion, and Acts 13:33 may possibly suggest such an idea. But in such a case Jesus is the one being born (or begotten), not the one giving birth. In New Testament soteriology the Holy Spirit, not Jesus, is the agent of birth (John 3:5-8; see Titus

3:5), along with the word of God (1 Cor 4:15; 1 Pet 1:23). The events at which a kind of birth occurs are Pentecost (for the church as a whole) and baptism (for individuals, John 3:5; Titus 3:5). Interpreting the cross in such terms is pure poetic imagination.

The same can be said for the so-called Sophia christology. It is true that the OT sometimes personifies wisdom, using female terminology (Prov 8:12-31). It is true also that wisdom deities abounded in pagan pantheons. However, there is no basis for thinking that the biblical writers intended to identify their personified wisdom with a real person, much less some divine person.

In the NT itself there is no suggestion that Jesus is the incarnation of some divine female person called Sophia. Jesus is described as "the wisdom of God" in only two related texts, 1 Cor 1:24 and 1:30.<sup>39</sup> Verse 24 says, "To those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." Verse 30 says that Jesus became to us "wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption." That these verses are not concerned at all about incarnation is shown from the fact that Jesus is described in other terms also. He is "the power of God," as well as righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. In whatever sense he is "the wisdom of God," he is these things also. Obviously, these are not divine persons of whom Jesus is the incarnation. In 1:24 power and wisdom are *attributes* of God; Jesus is called by these "names" because in his work of salvation he is the ultimate display of these attributes. In 1:30 wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption are *gifts* God bestows upon us; Jesus is called by these "names" because they come to us through him.

In other places Jesus is called by similar "names": he is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6); he is the light of the world (John 8:12). These are simply characteristics possessed by Christ to such a degree that he can even be identified with them. No one would think to suggest that they are deities incarnated in him. Nor should we suggest such a thing about wisdom.

But surely there must be other texts that identify Jesus with wisdom. After all, Susan Cady and her co-authors state, "According to a whole series of NT texts, Jesus is Sophia." In John's gospel "text after text is proclaiming, 'Jesus is Sophia.'"<sup>40</sup> But where are these other texts? One suggestion is Matt 11:19, which concludes a lecture on John the Baptist with these words: "Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." (The parallel passage, Luke 7:35, has "Yet wisdom is vindicated by all her children.") But this ignores the context (11:7-19), which is a lesson mainly on the character and work of John the Baptist.<sup>41</sup> Jesus brings himself into the lesson only at the end, and only to show the inconsistency of John's opponents in that they rejected both John and Jesus but on contradictory grounds. The statement about wisdom is added as a sarcastic indictment of these opponents whose behavior exhibits the very opposite of it. The statement is a general principle, similar in content to "You will know them by their fruits" (Matt 7:20) and similar in rhetorical function to "Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather" (Matt 24:28).

Besides Matt 11:19 and its parallel, there is no other NT passage which even comes close to identifying Jesus with *sophia*. He is said to *have* wisdom as a characteristic (Matt 13:54; Mark 6:2; Luke 2:40, 52; Rev 5:12), but so are other people, like Solomon (Matt 12:42) and the church's first seven "deacons" (Acts 6:3). Every other connection between Jesus and some kind of pre-existing divine female person named Sophia is pure speculation and fallacious inference, often involving extra-biblical sources. For example, because "ben Sirach speaks extensively of Sophia's yoke" and because Jesus speaks of his yoke in Matt 11:28-30, Jesus must be equating himself with Sophia. Pentz uses this as evidence that "the case is fairly good that there is a full sophia christology in Matthew."<sup>42</sup> For another example, Cady and her co-authors say that John 1:1-3 is clearly referring to Sophia, even though it appears that John has given her a new name: Logos.<sup>43</sup> Such is the nature of the "evidence" for this point.

It is difficult to see how anyone can take this so-called Sophia Christology seriously, since the textual basis for it could hardly be more flimsy. How then can feminists such as Pentz state so dogmatically, "Jesus is Lady Sophia incarnate"?<sup>44</sup>

The Sophia christology is one example of the attempt to locate Jesus' alleged femaleness in his divine nature rather than his human nature. Any such attempt assumes that God as such is gender-inclusive, or that femaleness is included in the divine nature in the first place. This in itself is a tenuous idea. Even if it were so, the question would still remain whether such a gender-inclusive, male/female divine nature would nullify or neutralize the obvious fact of the maleness of Christ's human nature.

Throughout the history of orthodox Christian thought the point of affirming the divine nature of Jesus has been just that, to affirm the *divinity* of the Redeemer, not his unique "gender." To switch the emphasis to

the latter is to trivialize the whole point of the incarnation. At the same time, orthodox Christian thought has always affirmed the full human nature of Jesus; and this human nature has always been recognized as male. The gender of Jesus comes from his human nature, not his divine nature.

In their attempt to degenderize Jesus, the Torjesens (as cited above) claim that, in accordance with the Council of Chalcedon, Jesus' identity or personhood is not that of a male individual but that of the divine Logos. "The human existence of Christ is that of the divine Logos," they say. In other words, the gender of Jesus' human nature is totally irrelevant; his maleness is only "nominal." His true gender comes from his divine nature, which includes both male and female.<sup>45</sup>

Such an approach to the gender of Jesus, however, results in a conclusion that is far afield from anything intended by Chalcedon. In fact, it is hardly distinguishable from the Apollinarian heresy, one of the very doctrines that Chalcedon set out to refute. It is true (and quite Chalcedonian), as the Torjesens assert, that the Logos did not *assume* a particular individual male in the incarnation, as if somehow the Logos took possession of an existing male person named Jesus. This would have resulted in a being with two centers of personality; it would actually be two persons, one divine and one human.

But here is an important distinction overlooked by the Torjesens: though the Logos did not *assume* a particular male individual, he did *become* a particular human male individual, namely, Jesus of Nazareth. The personal (psychological, rational) center of Jesus was just as much human as it was divine; exactly how this could be so is the mystery of the incarnation. But to say, as do the Torjesens, "that the *person* of Christ is the individuality of the Logos and not that of a man," or that "the human existence of Christ was, is, and continues to be that of the gender-inclusive Logos,"<sup>46</sup> is to deny that Jesus has a complete human nature. If "the human existence of Christ *is* that of the divine Logos," then it is no longer a *human* existence. Some essential aspect of the latter has been *replaced* by the divine Logos. This eliminates the human element from the aspects of Jesus and his work that matter most, namely, those involving his personhood.

The Torjesens' view is no different in principle from Apollinarius' heretical view that the Logos replaced the rational soul in Jesus.<sup>47</sup> The criticism of the Torjesens and of Apollinarius must be the same: their Jesus has only a partial human nature. This is the error that led Gregory of Nazianzus to declare in criticism of Apollinarius, "That which he has not assumed he has not healed."<sup>48</sup> That is, if Christ is not fully human, then he has not redeemed the full human nature.

The Torjesens are concerned to affirm that Christ assumed the human nature that is common to everyone, males and females alike. This is commendable. Their error, however, is to assume that someone who is fully male (and presumably, someone who is fully female) would not possess this common human nature. A fully male (or female) individual possesses the common human nature but also possesses something *in addition to it*: maleness (or femaleness). Being male, as was Jesus, in no way subtracts from the fullness of the humanity shared by males and females alike. Eliminating his maleness does not make him *more* human; it makes him *less* than human.

This means that there is no basis for the claim or the fear that if the identity of Christ is that of a male, then in the incarnation he represents males only and is able to redeem males only. The common human nature of both sexes is fully represented by either sex. This is proved by the fact that the one man Adam, a male, acted for the whole race of human beings when he sinned in Eden. To say that a male Messiah could not redeem the whole race denies the validity of the parallel Paul draws between Adam and Christ (Rom 5:12-19; 1 Cor 15:22).

We conclude that all attempts to combine maleness and femaleness in the person of Christ are unsuccessful. The fact is that they *cannot* succeed, because there is no biblical basis for saying that Jesus is anything but male.

## SCRIPTURE AND THE MALENESS OF CHRIST

The Logos was incarnated as a male. This is a fact affirmed from the beginning of the Bible to its end, from the masculine seed of woman in Gen 3:15 to the bridegroom in Revelation 21. This fact cannot be denied, and its significance cannot be obscured by the sincere but misguided attempts of feminist interpreters to explain it away.

In his human nature Jesus was not just generic but was male. He is called ἀἰϰρῶπο-, which when applied to a specific human being identifies that person as a male. He is also called ἀἡῆρ and ἀἴσεν, words

that specifically mean "male." He is Mary's *son* (Luke 2:7), not daughter. He is the *son* of David and the *son* of Abraham (Matt 1:1). He is the second and last Adam (1 Cor 15:45).

In his divine nature, especially in his relation to God the Father, Jesus is represented by titles and descriptions that are unequivocally male. He is the *Son* of God (Matt 16:16; 26:63-64). The Father addresses him thus: "Thou art My Son, today I have begotten Thee" (Psa 2:7; quoted in Acts 13:33 and Heb 1:5). He also says, "I will be a Father to Him, and He shall be a Son to Me" (Heb 1:5). The Father twice declared from heaven, "This is My beloved Son" (Matt 3:17; 17:5). Jesus is not only the Son of God; he is also called the Son of Man (a title which is also best understood as reflecting Jesus' transcendent, divine nature.) Isaiah 9:6 calls the Son the Eternal *Father*.

Jesus accomplished his messianic work in specifically male roles. He came to earth as a Prince (Isa 9:6; Acts 3:15) and as a King (Matt 21:5; John 18:37). He came as the high priest to offer the true and final sacrifice for sins (Heb 2:17), a role which in the OT was always male. He was not only the high priest but the sacrifice as well, and the sacrifices of which he is the fulfillment had to be male. These include the Passover lamb (Exod 12:5; 1 Cor 5:7), and the bull and goats offered on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:3, 5; Heb 10:1-10). Jesus the male was crucified and raised again (Acts 2:22-24; 17:31). The Father has appointed his Son as "the heir of all things" (Heb 1:2), according to the principle "if a Son, then an heir" (Gal 4:7).

The Messiah's maleness was a factor not just during the course of his earthly ministry; it continues to be prominent even now in his heavenly ministry toward us who are his people. He is the bridegroom to whom we are betrothed (2 Cor 11:2). He is the "Son over His house whose house we are" (Heb 3:6). As the Son and heir he shares his inheritance with us (Rom 8:17). His ministry as our "great high priest" continues uninterrupted in heaven for us (Heb 4:14-16). He reigns from heaven even now as "King of kings and Lord of lords" (1 Tim 6:17). Every role in which Christ relates to us now is a male role.

In the eschaton his maleness will be magnified. To his people he will come as the bridegroom to receive us as his bride (Rev 19:7; 21:2, 9). To those who oppose him he will come as a triumphant and destroying warrior under the name "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS" (Rev 19:11-16). In the final judgment God "will judge the world in righteousness through a Man [αἰὴρ] whom He has appointed" (Acts 17:31).

The Bible's overwhelming emphasis on the maleness of Christ, as it assigns to him exclusively male titles and roles, shows unequivocally that it was God's intentional plan to redeem the world not just through a human being but through a human being who is male. It shows that the Messiah's maleness is not arbitrary or accidental. That he continues to relate to us in male roles shows that his gender was not just a cultural accommodation. In view of the abundant and weighty testimony to this maleness, the attempt to continue to push into the foreground the simile of the mother hen becomes a rather pitiful gesture.

We agree that the main point of the incarnation is that God became a *human being*, but this does not somehow nullify or contradict the fact that he became a *male* human being. This is obviously the divine choice; and even if we do not understand all the reasons why God chose to do it this way, it cannot be denied that his choice was deliberate and purposeful. As Thomas Howard has declared in a very perceptive article, "the imagery matters"! To say that the imagery (of maleness) does *not* matter is a kind of gnosticism. According to this gnostic-like view, says Howard, the images or pictures by which God speaks to us

. . . are connected with the reality in only a higgledy-piggledy sort of way--"culturally" is the usual word here. The images of Lord, King, or Father . . . have no connection with anything more far-reaching than monarchic and patriarchal Mediterranean antiquity. Heavens! He might just as well have chosen to speak of himself as an antenna if he had decided to wait a bit and come into an age oriented to high-speed communication, or as an androgyne to an age celebrating unisex. It's a question of culture. And the Incarnation? That imagery (of the Son) has nothing to do with reality either. It is *ad hoc*, attached to a question of convenient communication. (It is worth noting that the gnosticism that urges the foregoing line of thought makes with equal fervor the point that in the Incarnation, God broke up all the *other* entrenched, established prejudices of antiquity. He missed his cues on this point alone. The Incarnate was a revolutionary, an icon-smasher, a rebel, a liberator. But he came, O rue the day, as a man. He missed his main chance.)<sup>49</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective--A Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 138, cites Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (2 ed., Boston: Beacon Press, 1985) 79, 96, for this idea. Russell's statement does not do justice to the radicalness of Daly's view, however. Daly says the "further incarnation" is the women's movement itself; and it is not a new form of the Christ but rather is the Antichrist, which is not evil but good.

<sup>2</sup>Carol P. Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987) 147. These include Mother Ann Lee, founder of the Shakers; and Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science.

<sup>3</sup>Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Nancy A. Hardesty, *All We're Meant To Be: Biblical Feminism for Today*, new ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986) 70.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>5</sup>Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Women, Men, and the Bible* (rev. ed.; New York: Crossroad, 1989) 54.

<sup>6</sup>Mollenkott, "The Biblical Basis for Male-Female Equality," a brochure (Albuquerque: Galatians 3:28 Press, n.d.), column 2.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, columns 2 and 3.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, column 2.

<sup>9</sup>Mollenkott, *Women*, p. 48.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>11</sup>Aida Besançon Spencer, *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985) 22.

<sup>12</sup>Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant To Be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation* (Waco: Word, 1974) 56.

<sup>13</sup>Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant To Be*, 71.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.* They cite Edward L. Kessel, "A Proposed Biological Interpretation of the Virgin Birth," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* (September 1983) 129-136.

<sup>15</sup>Karen and Leif Torjesen, "Inclusive Orthodoxy: Recovering a Suppressed Tradition," *The Other Side* (December 1986) 17.

<sup>16</sup>Anne Atkins, *Split Image: Male and Female After God's Likeness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 67.

<sup>17</sup>Mollenkott, *Women*, p. 47. See chapter 16, "God as Mother Hen," in her book, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 92-96.

<sup>18</sup>Mollenkott, "The Biblical Basis," column 2.

<sup>19</sup>Rebecca D. Pentz, "And When the Hour of Birth Came . . .," *The Reformed Journal* (March 1988), 38:4.

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<sup>20</sup>Torjesen, "Inclusive Orthodoxy," 17.

<sup>21</sup>See Susan Cady, Marian Ronan, and Hal Taussig, *Wisdom's Feast: Sophia in Study and Celebration* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989). This is a revised version of their 1986 work, *Sophia: The Future of Feminist Spirituality*.

<sup>22</sup>See Pentz, "Jesus as Sophia," *The Reformed Journal* (December 1988), 38:17-22.

<sup>23</sup>Mollenkott, *Women*, 49-50. See her book, *The Divine Feminine*, chapter 17, "God as Dame Wisdom (pp. 97-105).

<sup>24</sup>Pentz, "Jesus as Sophia," 17-19.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>26</sup>Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1980) 239-245.

<sup>27</sup>Susan T. Foh, *Women and the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) 93.

<sup>28</sup>Matt 9:8; 11:19; Luke 7:34.

<sup>29</sup>Matt 26:72, 74; Mark 14:71.

<sup>30</sup>The centurion at the cross (Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47); the Samaritan woman (John 4:29); the temple guards (John 7:46); the man born blind (John 9:11); and the girl who questioned Peter (John 18:17).

<sup>31</sup>Pilate (Luke 23:4, 6, 14; John 18:29; 19:5); miscellaneous Jewish leaders (John 9:16, 24; 10:33; 11:47, 50; 18:14; Acts 5:28).

<sup>32</sup>Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant To Be*, 71.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup>A few examples are Matthew (Matt 9:9), John the Baptist (Matt 11:8), Judas (Matt 26:24), Simeon (Luke 2:25), Nicodemus (John 3:1), Stephen (Acts 6:13), Adam (Rom. 5:12, 19), and Elijah (Jam. 5:17).

<sup>35</sup>In Matthew 24:41 the feminine form for "one" (μία, *mia*) is used.

<sup>36</sup>For example, Matt 7:24, 26 has *aner*; Luke 6:48, a parallel passage, has ἀνθρωπο-. Similar comparisons may be made between Luke 8:29, 33, 35 and Luke 8:27, 38; also Matt 17:14 and Luke 9:38; also Matt 27:57 and Luke 23:50; also Acts 3:2 and 4:9, 14, 22; also Acts 15:25 and 15:26; also Acts 25:17 and 25:22; also Eph 4:13 and 4:24; also James 1:7 and 1:8.

<sup>37</sup>Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant To Be*, 71.

<sup>38</sup>We have no more warrant for this than for concluding that Jesus' nature embodies "plantness" since he compares himself with a vine (John 15:1); or that there is an inorganic side to his nature since he is compared with a rock (Matt 21:42; 1 Cor 10:4; 1 Pet 2:6-8).

<sup>39</sup>The fact that the Greek word *sophia* (σοφία) is feminine in gender and that this noun is applied to Jesus does not warrant the conclusion that Jesus must be somehow feminine. The grammatical gender of nouns is essentially unrelated to the gender of the realities to which they correspond.

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<sup>40</sup>Cady et al., *Wisdom's Feast*, 33.

<sup>41</sup>Contrary to Pentz's assertion that in Matt. 11:19 "it is Jesus' deeds which are under discussion" ("Jesus as Sophia," 18). For this connection she goes back to Matt. 11:2, but the "works of Christ" mentioned there are discussed in verses 4-6 only. The subject changes in verse 7 to the works of John, as objective exegesis will clearly recognize.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Cady et al., *Wisdom's Feast*, 37.

<sup>44</sup>Pentz, "Jesus as Sophia," 22.

<sup>45</sup>Torjesen, "Inclusive Orthodoxy," 17.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>For an explanation of Apollinarianism, see Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon* (451) (tr. J. S. Bowden; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965) 220-233.

<sup>48</sup>Gregory of Nazianzus, "Letter to Cledonius Against Apollinaris (Epistle 101)," in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy, "Library of Christian Classics," vol. III (Philadelphia: Westminster, n.d.) 218.

<sup>49</sup>Thomas Howard, "God Before Birth: The Imagery Matters," *Christianity Today* (Dec. 17, 1976), pp. 12-13.

***The Gender of Jesus and the Incarnation:  
A Case Study in Feminist Hermeneutics***

**By Jack Cottrell**

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