

Toward a Strategy of Inclusion: Jesus as Sophia

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Unitarian Universalist (UU) congregations ostensibly encourage theological and spiritual diversity. The Fourth Principle of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations sets boundaries on theological and spiritual activity by calling for the search for truth to be a free yet responsible process. One well-known result of this free environment is that UUs embrace a variety of theologies. A 1963 report, *The Free Church in a Changing World*, defines at least six theological labels that UUs apply to themselves (Commissions, 1963). For their part, UUs often claim multiple labels in order to capture their personal theologies with greater accuracy than a single label conveys. Examples of such labels include religious humanism, theism, deism, agnosticism, atheism, feminist theologies, earth-centered theologies, Eastern traditions, and liberal Christianity. However, it would be a mistake to say that all congregations welcome and honor all of these diverse outlooks within their ranks. Some categories are certainly marginalized, perhaps unintentionally, and probably the most maligned category is that of the liberal Christians. Regrettably, Jesus is less than fully welcome in many Unitarian Universalist congregations.

Liberal Christians among UUs have fought an uphill battle to gain respect and validation from their peers. There are probably a number of reasons for this. First, many UUs come to the faith as refugees from dogmatic Christian environments that can be oppressive, particularly toward women, in a variety of ways. Others are unchurched yet seek a spiritual community that does not demand the confessions of faith that Christian churches often do. Perhaps most important, humanists who often see Christianity as fundamentally problematic to their sense of community still comprise a large fraction of UU membership.

Christianity itself has contributed to these anti-Christian perceptions. Opponents to Christianity would cite skepticism regarding supernatural claims, oppression of women and people of color, and Christianity's triumphalist ethos as notable objections. The purpose of this discussion, however, is not to explain why Christianity is often marginalized in UU congregations. Rather, the purpose is to develop a theological strategy for dealing with this problem. The theme of this strategy is quite straightforward: By viewing Jesus as Sophia, the personification of wisdom, many of the objections to Christian theology that erupt in UU churches can be mitigated if not made to vanish. This can make it possible to restore Jesus to the diverse theological matrix found in most UU congregations. This strategy also serves to underscore Jesus' feminine aspect which certainly can relate to feminist theological issues in these same congregations. There is room for Jesus at the diverse, UU theological table, and his presence need not crowd anyone out.

Sophia: A Biographical Sketch

In Greek, the language of the New Testament, *sophia* means wisdom. Thus, to give a similar flavor to modern discussions of wisdom, I use the recognized, Western name *Sophia*. In antiquity, one would encounter a variety of names and personalities associated with wisdom.

In the Inanna-worshipping culture of ancient Sumer, in the second millennium B.C.E., the goddess Nisaba oversaw wisdom and writing, indeed all the cultural arts, which included accounting and surveying. She epitomized the wise woman, the great teacher who gives godly wisdom to kings and, more important, the gift of learning to humans. Reasons for practicing male scribes to image a female as their tutor had to do with the work that women did in that society. They performed the knowledge-based work: nursing children, making cloth and medicines, and, of great importance to the Sumerians, brewing beer. As Tikva Frymer-Kensky (1993) explains, women's roles required technological sophistication. Their roles must have seemed far more complicated than men's typical roles. Thus, it made sense, even in that male-dominated society, to accord the honor and responsibility for the culture's store of knowledge to a goddess.

Many other Near Eastern cultures used goddesses to represent wisdom. In Greece she was Athena, and in Egypt Ma'at represented wisdom. In Israel, monotheism had become well entrenched by the time the figure of Woman-Wisdom, or Sophia, appeared in the Book of Proverbs. Woman-Wisdom would not achieve the status of a goddess, yet she fulfills the fundamental role as connecting link between God and Israel in the realm

of acquisition and dissemination of knowledge in everyday life (Frymer-Kensky, 1993, pp. 179-181).

While other cultures had long histories of emergent wisdom goddesses, there was no “proto-Sophia” in Israel. She simply appears. She makes her biblical debut in Proverbs, a post-exilic book, which means Sophia was birthed perhaps as early as the sixth century, B.C.E. Her other appearances in scripture were somewhat later, chronologically in the last four centuries, B.C.E., notably in the Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach (also called Ecclesiasticus). At one time, there was a scholarly consensus that Sophia was the product of a ‘wisdom school,’ a specialized group of elite scribes and philosophers typically on retainer to kings. Arguments against this hypothesis are that there was no king in Israel during most of the last five centuries, B.C.E., and, that the Sophia literature does not reflect the elitist outlook that one would expect from such sources. Rather, her wisdom is socially inclusive. In Proverbs 1:20-22, for example, she preaches wisdom publicly at the busiest corners and at the city gates where she can implore all to take heed of her.

Chapters 1-9 of Proverbs comprise instruction that closely resembles Egyptian wisdom literature, which suggests a possible source for Wisdom Woman in this Hebrew scripture. The Wisdom of Solomon was composed in Greek, which suggests a possible connection between the increasingly linked Hebrew and Greek cultures that in turn may have led to Sophia’s creation in Israel. The character of Sophia is less than complete in the Hebrew tradition. Possible reasons include the interruption of literary development due to political unrest and her incompatibility with Hebrew monotheism (Cady, 1989, pp. 29-31). In other words, perhaps she simply did not fit Israel’s dominant theology. She

appeared and played an important role, but her biographical data is sketchy and somewhat ambivalent. Nevertheless, her presence in the biblical tradition can be seen as facilitating a feminist wisdom model later with Jesus' arrival on the scene.

To appreciate Sophia's presence in early biblical materials, we more closely examine Proverbs, Chapters 1-9, where she is the principal player. While this set of texts addresses wisdom, let us specifically examine Proverbs 4:5-9 (NRSV), with the proper name Sophia substituted for 'wisdom,'

Get Sophia; get insight: do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth.
Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you.
The beginning of wisdom is this: Get Sophia, and whatever else you get, get insight.
Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her.
She will place on your head a fair garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.

Clearly, Sophia is the key to discernment. She is perception. Our relationship to Sophia is the process of understanding, and that process holds one in the safety of understanding. She is both content and process, and she empowers those who embrace her. Part of her relationship with humanity is her encouragement to learning. This role is shown in Proverbs 1:20-22:

Sophia cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice.
At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?

The message is clear: Sophia, the teacher, will not suffer ignorance. God's children are challenged to rise above their foolish tendencies and to acquire wisdom, or Sophia. This is entirely consistent with the Fourth UU Principle, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Sophia's relationship with God, the transcendent creative power of the universe, is addressed in Sirach, which dates from the second century B.C.E. and is part of the

Apocrypha, several biblical books that were selected neither for the Hebrew nor for the Christian canons. Sirach describes the following genesis of Sophia:

Sophia was created before all other things,
and prudent understanding from eternity.
The root of Sophia—to whom has it been revealed?
Her subtleties—who knows them?
There is but one who is wise, greatly to be feared,
seated upon his throne—the Lord.
It is he who created her; he saw her and took her measure;
he poured her out upon all his works,
Upon all the living according to his gift;
he lavished her upon those who love him (1:4-10).

Sophia is thus the creation of God, and she has precedence in creation before the world. Given Sophia's order of creation and her relationship with humans, it is not difficult to discern her connective role between God and humanity. She is God's messenger and fulfills a capacity in creation.

As Cady *et al.* (1989, p. 28) point out, the sharp, binary distinction in Western theology between God and humanity is a modern concept. In the minds of people in biblical times, intermediary figures were entirely plausible, and Sophia was just such a figure. Yet, she did not have the status of a goddess as other incarnations in ancient cultures enjoyed.

Another book from the Apocrypha is the Wisdom of Solomon, or simply Wisdom. It dates from approximately the second century B.C.E. and also contains information about the Sophia-God relationship. For example, this is Wisdom 7:24-26:

For Sophia is more mobile than any motion;
because of pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.
For she is a breath of the power of God,
and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;
therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her.
For she is a reflection of eternal light,
a spotless mirror of the working of God,
and an image of his goodness.

Then, verse 28 asserts: “for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with Sophia.” Sophia is not God; she is “a breath of the power of God,” and “she is a reflection of eternal light.” The picture that emerges suggests a distinctly female connecting agent between God and humanity. Furthermore, there are many other text selections, from the same and other sources, that support this same thesis.

In terms we use today, she is female and she serves a most important theological purpose: connecting humans who seek knowledge and wisdom with the transcendent creative force of the universe, or what some call God. To seek such knowledge and understanding is fundamentally desirable and rewarding in that it empowers us to achieve our potential as humans. What we have so far is a biblical endorsement of a female-inspired basis for the quest for knowledge and wisdom, for Sophia. This endorsement is quite compatible with contemporary feminist as well as humanist epistemologies. Sophia speaks to both of these UU constituencies. Let us next turn to Sophia’s role in the New Testament.

Jesus as Sophia

A number of New Testament passages connect Jesus with Sophia. The apostle Paul is perhaps the most direct. Again, the name Sophia replaces ‘wisdom’ in the NRSV texts. In 1 Corinthians 1:30 Paul writes “He is the source of your life in Jesus Christ, who became for us Sophia from God ...” Other passages, such as 1 Corinthians 1:21, 24, explicitly mention God’s wisdom and similarly connect Sophia with Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 2:7, Paul writes that God “decreed” Sophia before time for eventual human glory.

The hypothesized Q source, from which the authors of Matthew and Luke probably drew, also reveals connections between Jesus and Sophia, a concept that is supported by a number of scholars (Levine, 1999, pp. 150-152). Let us consider some Q-source texts starting with Matt 11:19 and Luke 7:35. The Matthean version has Jesus saying “the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet Sophia is vindicated by her deeds,” in response to criticisms leveled at John the Baptist and him. The Lukan version ends “Nevertheless, Sophia is vindicated by all her children.” It is Jesus who acts rowdy and hangs out with undesirables, which apparently is meant to stand in contrast to the fact that his deeds will vindicate him. Yet, it is Sophia who will receive vindication. Given that these are words that are attributed to Jesus, a simple explanation is that he and Sophia are one and the same. In other words, Jesus speaks of himself as Sophia. Furthermore, just as Sophia in Proverbs refused to suffer ignorance of her stature, Jesus dismisses those who reject him. Society’s lesser, simpler folk accept Jesus as Sophia. Why can his critics not discern his identity?

Elsewhere, in Luke 11:49, Jesus is reported as saying “Therefore also the Sophia of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and emissaries some of whom they will kill and persecute...’ ” The point of this text, which has a parallel in Matthew 23:34, is that Jesus is speaking for a divine Sophia. Thus he himself acts as her emissary, even as he predicts his own fate. The would-be murderers in the story are not common folk; rather, they are scribes and Pharisees, the elitists of Jesus’ day. Presumably, people who correctly discern Jesus as Sophia will not engage in his persecution.

Deutsch (1996) presents a meticulous argument that Matthew connects Jesus and Sophia frequently where Sophia (Named *Lady Wisdom* by Deutsch) does not explicitly appear. For example, Jesus/Sophia is described as a mother/nurturer with the imagery of a mother hen in Matthew 23:37-39. Jesus teaches and sends out his disciples as envoys of Sophia, to heal and to teach in Matthew 23:33. In fact, the Matthean Jesus assumes all the functions of Sophia that Deutsch outlines: teacher and legitimator of the sages' teaching, prophet, mother, bride, wife and nurse (1996, pp. 10-14). Matthew sets boundaries on Jesus/Sophia by not referring to Jesus as an instrument of creation or as being pre-existent (p. 76).

Given that Q provides much of the Sophia material in Matthew, it comes as no surprise that there is considerable Sophia material in Luke as well. However, the case can be made that Matthew's author redacts available texts more purposefully toward equating Jesus as Sophia and to legitimating the mission of the disciples as Sophia's emissaries who are charged with preaching the Kingdom of God (Deutsch, 1996, esp. Ch. 4). In any event, the fact that both of these gospels consistently support the idea of Jesus as Sophia reinforces equating them.

The Gospel of John also connects Jesus with Sophia. The opening hymn celebrates the Word, or *logos* in Greek, in terms reminiscent of Sophia:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.
All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.
What has come into being
in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Borg (1994, p. 108) goes so far as to replace *logos* with *Sophia*, with gender edits, as follows:

In the beginning was Sophia, and Sophia was with God, and Sophia was God.
She was in the beginning with God.
All things came into being through her, and without her not one thing came into being.
What has come into being
in her was life, and the life was the light of all people.
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The climax is in John 1:14, “And Sophia became flesh and dwelt among us.” Thus, Jesus *is* the incarnation of Sophia. They are one and the same. Furthermore, this suggests a Wisdom Christology, one of the higher and earlier christologies (Witherington, 1994, p. 292).

However, there is the gender problem between *logos* and *sophia*. Witherington tackles this problem by noting that *logos* and *sophia* are used synonymously in the Wisdom of Solomon (9:1-2) and that the same terms were interchangeable earlier in Sirach. On the other hand, Witherington (1994, p. 285) dismisses the obvious fact of Jesus’ male gender as a reason for using the masculine in John. It is possible that the suspected gender shift in the Fourth Gospel was intended to minimize Jesus’ feminine traits. John 14:9 supports this gender morphology as follows: “Who has seen me has seen the father.” Literally, this means that the male Father-God incarnates the male Logos in the male son Jesus (Johnson, 1996, p. 307). Jesus becomes the incontrovertibly male savior. Yet, Sophia is sufficiently present to support a Sophia Christology. Gender issues cannot be completely ignored; however, Witherington (1994) concludes that gender simply meant less in ancient society than it does today.

Jesus’ private teachings in John’s gospel tend to be implicit Sophia discourses because they have close parallels in earlier wisdom literature (Witherington, 1994, p. 338). Examples of this are in “I am . . .” sayings, such as 6:35 where Jesus says “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me

will never be thirsty.” There is a parallel in Proverbs 9:5 where Sophia invites the listener to “Come eat of my bread, and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity and love and walk in the way of insight.” In this and other “I am...” texts in John, Jesus again identifies himself as Sophia.

Other New Testament texts and early Christian materials incorporated wisdom thinking as well. The canonical Letter of James, Chapter 3:13-17, provides an example. There, the writer distinguishes between pure, heavenly wisdom and worldly, false wisdom. Sophia, as the female personification of Wisdom, is a leading character in Gnostic texts, often considered important in UU circles, of the second to third century, C.E. In *Exegesis of the Soul*, she appears as living in the Father’s house from which she falls into the profane realm to be abused. However, her mythical role is at best ambiguous, as are attitudes toward gender and sexuality in these texts (Streete, 1997, pp. 170-171). Thus, there is certainly no shortage of Jesus/Sophia material in the early Christian literature.

Jesus as Sophia: Implications for UU Theology

Sophia continues to be important in contemporary theological discourse. Schüssler Fiorenza (1996, p. xxxiv) argues that feminist theology becomes Sophialogy, a “speaking of and about Divine transcendence.” She cites the dynamic connection, or oscillation, between the ultimate transcendence and human immanence, between humankind and ultimate reality. The connection is, as we have seen in scripture, Sophia, and knowledge of her is in turn connected to feminist theology. In any event, the

Jesus/Sophia connection offers something positive to modern UU feminists hoping to find for themselves a positive message in the Bible.

We need to recognize the presence of both the masculine Jesus and the feminine Sophia. Together, they form a more complete, balanced entity than either does separately in conveying God's revelation to the world. This balance is reminiscent of the yin and the yang of Taoism. The black and white shapes that form together into a balanced circle, each with its contrasting dot to symbolize the integral presence of the other, suggests the same kind of wholeness that the Jesus-as-Sophia thesis suggests.

There are other important issues brought up by the Jesus/Sophia thesis for religious liberals to consider. There is something for feminists and there is something for humanists. Let us consider that discovering the ultimate, transcendent reality of creation was important in antiquity just as it is today. There is an ultimate reality, a transcendent truth that humankind has sought to understand. In ancient Israel, this transcendent reality was called Yahweh, or God, and went by other names in other cultures. Some people still call it God, but some of us balk at using that word. We may prefer Goddess, or Oversoul, or Eternal Spirit. That transcendent reality witnessed the creation of the universe and acted upon the world. Wisdom has arguably existed all along, too, and one of humanity's functions has been to discern it. The ancients encouraged people to discern Sophia. Today, the process of discernment has become somewhat systematized thanks to the natural and social sciences, but this discernment is limited to factual knowledge that many will agree is less than true wisdom. Yet, those who live by this modern quest for wisdom often say that saving our world depends on these efforts. Jesus continued bringing to the oppressed people of Israel the salvific message of Sophia that

was first documented in Proverbs. Sophia holds even today a message of great significance for both feminists and humanists. For feminists, she represents a feminine connection between God and humankind that argues for balance in the world. For humanists, she symbolizes the great importance that humans, particularly Jews and early Christians, have always attached to developing their understanding of the cosmos. Since Sophia will automatically come along, perhaps its time to invite Jesus back to the UU theological table.

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