

Christ as the Woman Seeking Her Lost Coin: Luke 15:8-10 and Divine Sophia in the Latin West

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Abstract

Fathers, saints, and Doctors of the Church interpreted the woman of Luke 15:8-10 as a representation of Christ—and identified her with Woman Wisdom (*hokmāh/sophia*), whom they saw as divine. Medieval theologians related Luke 15:8-10 to other Scripture passages representing God in feminine form, and reflected on the appropriateness of portraying God as a woman. After the close of the Middle Ages a variety of publications continued to reinscribe this interpretation of the woman seeking her lost coin. Altogether, this illustrates one way in which belief in the divinity of Woman Wisdom survived throughout much of Christian history.

Keywords

Christ, feminist, God, medieval, mother, patristic, Scripture, Sophia, Wisdom, woman

Christian feminists often present the scriptural personification of Wisdom (*hokmāh/sophia*) as a female symbol for God, and they frequently place divine Sophia at the heart of their reflections and prayer practices.¹ Yet their attempts to promote a gender-inclusive repertoire of images for the divine have been met with

1. See, for instance, Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Herder & Herder, 2002), 86–100; Sandra M. Schneiders, *Women and the Word: The Gender of God in the New*

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a serious apprehension that feminine language for God would imply a departure from the Christian tradition.² Reinforcing this apprehension is the fact that on both sides of the contemporary debate over female imagery for God, it is commonly claimed that although Christ was sometimes identified with Woman Wisdom in the early church, this identification soon faded within the Christian tradition. Diverse thinkers have supported this opinion in various ways. On the one hand, feminist scholars of religion have indicated that divine Woman Wisdom was forgotten within the Western Christian tradition—or that the identification of Christ with Sophia was ignored after the fourth-century trinitarian debates and Sophia's attributes were transferred to the Virgin Mary instead. On the other hand, *ressourcement* theologians such as Louis Bouyer and Joseph Ratzinger have suggested that scriptural texts about Sophia came to be applied liturgically to Mary in the early Middle Ages because Sophia's status as a female figure prevented her from being completely identified with the divine figure of Jesus Christ—since, they say, women represent creation rather than the Creator.

Testament and the Spirituality of Women (New York: Paulist, 1986), 51–54; Susan Cady, Marian Ronan, and Hal Taussig, *Wisdom's Feast: Sophia in Study and Celebration* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980); Joan Chamberlain Engelsman, *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 74–120; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 221–28; Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Bos, *Reimagining God: The Case for Scriptural Diversity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 78–88; Lucy Reid, *She Changes Everything: Seeking the Divine on a Feminist Path* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 8–10; Jann Aldredge-Clanton, *She Lives! Sophia Wisdom Works in the World* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2014).

2. See, for example: Vernard Eller, *The Language of Canaan and the Grammar of Feminism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982); Donald G. Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity: The Debate over Inclusive God-Language* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1985); Manfred Hauke, *Women in the Priesthood? A Systematic Analysis in the Light of the Order of Creation and Redemption*, trans. David Kipp (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988); Alvin F. Kimel, ed., *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992); Benedict Ashley, *Justice in the Church: Gender and Participation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1996); Patrick Henry Reardon, “Father, Glorify Thy Name!,” in *Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Evangelicals, Catholics, and Orthodox in Dialogue*, ed. James Cutsinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 101–14; John W. Cooper, *Our Father in Heaven: Christian Faith and Inclusive Language for God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999); John W. Miller, *Calling God “Father”: Essays on the Bible, Fatherhood and Culture* (New York: Paulist, 1999).

For descriptions of the backlash against feminist proposals, see the preface and introduction to Nancy J. Berneking and Pamela Carter Joern, eds., *Re-Membering and Re-Imagining: Essays on the Episcopal Church* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 1995); Kaye Ashe, *The Feminization of the Church?* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997) 80–81; Cooper, *Our Father* 35–40; Mary E. Hunt, “Unfinished Business: The Flowering of Feminist/Womanist Theologies,” in *Feminist Theologies: Legacy and Prospect*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 79–92 at 82–84; and Jann Aldredge-Clanton, *She Lives! Sophia Wisdom Works in the World* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2014), 170.

After illustrating that this belief is widely held, this article will show that from the patristic era through the height of the Middle Ages, many Church Fathers, saints, and Doctors of the Church portrayed Jesus Christ as divine Woman Wisdom within their reflections on the parable of the woman seeking her lost coin in Luke 15:8-10. In the Gospel of Luke, this parable makes its appearance right after the story of the shepherd seeking his lost sheep (Luke 15:1-7) and just before the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31). In recent times, Christian feminists have frequently noted the parallels between these three passages displaying God's love and mercy. They have argued that just as the good shepherd and the father of the prodigal son are understood as images for God, the woman with the lost coin should likewise be recognized and promoted as a symbol for the divine.³ Yet in the history of the Latin West, the woman seeking her lost coin (Luke 15:8-10) was also frequently interpreted as a representation of God—and in particular, as a reference to the feminine figure of divine Wisdom—Sophia—searching for lost humanity through her incarnation in Christ. Moreover, medieval theologians related Luke 15:8-10 to numerous other Scripture passages that they saw as similarly portraying God in female form. In speaking of the woman of Luke 15, Western Christian theologians often actively reflected upon Scripture's use of feminine words for God, and offered their own explanations for the suitability of female portrayals of God. Their expositions upon this passage reveal one way in which divine Woman Wisdom survived in the memory of the later patristic and medieval church; and they show that patristic and medieval theologians viewed women as capable of representing the Creator, and not just creation.

Present-day portrayals of the early suppression or disappearance of the divinity of Sophia frequently appear in the works of feminist authors who otherwise have an interest in discovering past instances of female images of the divine.⁴ In *The Gnostic Gospels*, Elaine Pagels indicates that while Sophia was present as a feminine divine figure in "heretical" gnostic texts, "virtually all the feminine imagery for God had

3. See, for instance, Schneiders, *Women and the Word*, 38–39; Johnson, *She Who Is*, 80; Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson, eds., *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), s.v. "Motherhood of God"; Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Women* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 170–72; Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroads, 1983), 63–64.
4. Schüssler Fiorenza identifies four interpretive approaches among feminist scholars who engage the Sophia tradition theologically. One perspective evaluates Wisdom texts from a feminist-exegetical standpoint, employing the tools of historical-critical analysis. Another approach describes the figure and history of Sophia in terms drawn from psychoanalysis, portraying Sophia as a feminine "archetype" and describing her history in terms of "repression." A further standpoint focuses on developing a somewhat androgynous understanding of Christ—for example, by presenting the male Christ as the incarnation of divine, feminine Sophia. Schüssler Fiorenza herself advocates a "linguistic-symbolic" approach that embraces feminist exegesis and historical-critical analysis, while relativizing the gender of symbols for God and emphasizing the social construction of masculine and feminine identities. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 155–62. For further reflections on feminist methodologies, see also Gloria L. Schaab, "Feminist Theological Methodology: Toward a Kaleidoscopic Model," *Theological Studies* 62 (2001): 341–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390106200206>.

disappeared from orthodox Christian tradition” by the time the New Testament canon had been formed.⁵ In *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine*, Joan Chamberlain Engelsman speaks of a repression of Sophia during the christological controversies of the fourth century, claiming that “the early church fathers eventually had to redefine their Christology by abandoning all reference to Jesus as the incarnate Wisdom of God.” Thus she says that “orthodox circles” suppressed Jesus’s identification as incarnate Sophia, and Sophia “disappeared from the Western theological tradition.”⁶ In *Metaphorical Theology*, Sallie McFague indicates that “apart from the cult of Mary, feminine models for the relationship between God and human beings are found in the tradition only in the heretics, in the mystics, and in minor sects”; and in illustration of this she refers to the survival of “the Hebraic Wisdom tradition” within “Gnostic texts on the nature of the female aspect of the Godhead.”⁷ In *Sophia: The Future of Feminist Spirituality*, Susan Cady, Marian Ronan, and Hal Taussig reiterate the idea that Jesus as incarnate Sophia was abandoned during the fourth-century christological debates, claiming that “at that point Sophia disappeared from western theological consideration” and that “western society has chosen to ignore Sophia throughout its history.” As they describe it, the liturgical application of Wisdom texts to Mary means that Sophia is “robbed of her roles as creator and as Christ, and is relegated to that of a handmaiden within the tradition.”⁸ In *She Who Is*, Elizabeth Johnson follows Elaine Pagels in holding that the early exclusion of women from ministry “necessitated exclusively male, ruling images for God,” and she indicates that “the figure of Sophia herself was quite forgotten.”⁹ In *Reimagining God*, Johanna van Wijk-Bos again repeats the notion that although “the earliest witness of the New Testament” portrayed Jesus as Sophia’s personification, “Sophia disappeared from the awareness of believers.”¹⁰ Similarly, Rosemary Radford Ruether’s work *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* carries forward this portrayal of divine Woman Wisdom’s early repression. On the fourteenth-to-fifteenth-century anchoress Julian of Norwich and her celebrated statements describing God as Wisdom and Mother, Ruether says that “with these famous lines, Julian restored mothering language to the nature of God, language that had largely disappeared for Christians with the New Testament masculinization of Wisdom as Christ the ‘Son.’”¹¹ Similarly, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

5. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979; repr., New York: Random House, 1989), 57, 59. Page citations are to the reprint edition.

6. Engelsman, *Feminine Dimension of the Divine*, 141.

7. Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 172–73.

8. Susan Cady, Marian Ronan, and Hal Taussig, *Sophia: The Future of Feminist Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 12, 16, 59–60.

9. Johnson, *She Who Is*, 100, 173.

10. Van Wijk-Bos, *Reimagining God*, xii, 79.

11. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (Berkeley: University of California, 2005), 189; cf. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 58–59.

cites Cady, Ronan, and Taussig in *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* and echoes their claims about Sophia, saying that Wisdom-Sophia “has been virtually forgotten in Western Christocentric the*logy,” while “traces of her splendor have been reflected in Mary.”¹² Thus, among influential feminist theologians and scholars of religion, there seems to be a wide consensus that the female figure of divine Sophia was forgotten within the Western Christian tradition—or that the identification of Christ with Sophia was ignored after the fourth-century trinitarian debates, and Sophia’s attributes were transferred to the Virgin Mary instead.

On the other end of the theological spectrum, a similar view is shared by *ressourcement* theologians such as Louis Bouyer and Joseph Ratzinger. These thinkers posit that Sophia’s status as a female figure prevented her from being completely identified with a divine person, such as Jesus Christ; and they appeal to this notion in order to explain the historical fact that scriptural texts about Sophia came to be applied liturgically to Mary from the early Middle Ages onward. Thus, in *Seat of Wisdom*, Bouyer appeals to the salient female aspects of the scriptural portrayal of Wisdom, in order to offer the following explanation for the liturgical application of Wisdom texts to Mary: “The fact that the feminine elements were brought out so emphatically would, surely, rule out its [i.e., Wisdom’s] complete identification with any of the divine Persons.”¹³ Similarly, in *Daughter Zion*, Ratzinger opines that Wisdom texts came to be used for Marian liturgical feasts because *hokmāh/sophia*, as a female figure, was ultimately not identifiable with the divine person of Jesus Christ:

While it is correct to observe that Christology assimilated essential elements of the wisdom idea, so that one must speak of a christological strand in the New Testament’s continuation of the notion of wisdom, a remainder, nevertheless, resists total integration into Christology. In both Hebrew and Greek, “wisdom” is a feminine noun, in antiquity’s vivid awareness of language. “Sophia,” a feminine noun, stands on that side of reality which is represented by the woman, by what is purely and simply feminine. It signifies the answer which emerges from the divine call of creation and election.¹⁴

Viewing women as symbols of a responsive and answering creation rather than of an initiative-taking Creator, Ratzinger argues that to the extent that Sophia is female or feminine, she represents a creature and not the Creator.¹⁵

Amidst heated theological debates over this question of whether women can symbolically represent the Creator, recent popes and bishops—including Benedict XVI—have left the door open for further reflection upon this topic by occasionally using or allowing female imagery for God. Pope John Paul I famously said, “[God] is our

12. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Power of the Word*, 227.

13. Louis Bouyer, *Seat of Wisdom: An Essay on the Place of the Virgin Mary in Christian Theology*, trans. A. V. Littledale (New York: Random House, 1962), 192.

14. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion: Meditations on the Church’s Marian Belief*, trans. John M. McDermott (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983), 26.

15. Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion*, 25–28.

father; even more he is our mother.”¹⁶ Pope St. John Paul II addressed the topic of feminine language for God in his Apostolic Letter *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women*—saying, among other things, that “*like a mother God ‘has carried’* humanity, and in particular, his Chosen People, within his own womb; he has given birth to it in travail, has nourished and comforted it (cf. Is 42:14; 46:3-4).”¹⁷ On subsequent occasions John Paul II taught that “the Old Testament images in which God is compared to a mother are extremely significant”¹⁸—and that “the hands” of “God the Father” are “the hands of both a father and a mother.”¹⁹ In praising the life and thought of St. John Chrysostom, Pope Benedict XVI stated, “We can decipher creation in the light of Scripture, the letter that God has given to us. God is called . . . a healer of souls (*Homily on Genesis*, 40.3), a mother (*ibid.*) and an affectionate friend (*On Providence* 8.11-12).”²⁰ Pope Francis has said, “The biblical term ‘compassion’ recalls a mother’s womb. The mother in fact reacts in a way all her own in confronting the pain of her children. It is in this way, according to Scripture, that God loves us.”²¹ Pope Francis has also spoken directly of the “*maternità di Dio*” (motherhood of God), affirming that “*Dio è padre e madre*” (God is father and mother).²² Similarly, in addressing “whether . . . it is permissible to use female imagery for God,” the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Doctrine left room for such language, saying that “the Committee does not exclude all possibility of using feminine imagery” and that “the concern of the Committee was not the use of female or feminine imagery.”²³

This magisterial openness to female language for God has evoked grave concern—and even the suggestion of material heresy—within theological circles that place a

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16. John Paul I, “Angelus” (Vatican City, September 10, 1978), https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-i/en/angelus/documents/hf_jp-i_ang_10091978.html.
 17. John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (August 15, 1988) 8, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html. Citing cases of both female and male anthropomorphic imagery for God in the Scriptures, in this document John Paul II interpreted both types of imagery as pointing toward incorporeal generation within God as pure spirit (*MD* 8).
 18. John Paul II, “General Audience” (Vatican City, January 20, 1999), https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20011999.html.
 19. John Paul II, “General Audience” (Vatican City, September 8, 1999), https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_08091999.html.
 20. Benedict XVI, “General Audience” (Vatican City, September 26, 2007), https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20070926.html.
 21. Francis, “Angelus” (Vatican City, June 9, 2013), https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2013/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20130609.pdf.
 22. Holy See Press Office, “Intervista del Santo Padre Francesco al settimanale ‘Credere,’” *Bollettino*, December 2, 2015, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2015/12/02/0952/02135.html>.
 23. USCCB Committee on Doctrine, “Response to Observations by Sr. Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J., regarding the Committee on Doctrine’s Statement about the Book *Quest For The Living God*” (October 11, 2011), <http://www.usccb.org/about/doctrine/publications/upload/statement-quest-for-the-living-god-response-2011-10-11.pdf>.

high value on Catholic tradition.²⁴ Perhaps this is, in part, because many instances of feminine language for God within the works of Church Fathers, saints, and Doctors of the Church are as yet unknown on both sides of the contemporary theological debate. The following retrieval of the history of divine Sophia as the woman of Luke 15 adds to the growing body of data²⁵ which suggests that the present-day rejection of feminine language for God rests more upon an a priori position than upon an awareness of the history of the Christian tradition.

The Woman Is Incarnate Divine Wisdom

St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) identifies the woman of Luke 15 with divine Wisdom in his commentaries on Psalms 103 and 138. Psalm 103 sings of the marvels of creation made in God’s wisdom, which inspires Augustine to ask, “Where is that wisdom, in which you have made all things? [cf. Ps 103:24]”²⁶ Augustine answers this

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24. For instance: The Thomistic journal *Nova et Vetera* has published an article which likens Pope John Paul I to Pope Honorius I (whom the Third Council of Constantinople famously condemned as heretical) when discussing Pope John Paul I’s statement on God as both “our father” and “our mother.” John M. McDermott, “Elizabeth Johnson on Revelation, Faith, Theology, Analogy, and God’s Fatherhood,” *Nova et Vetera* (Eng. ed.) 10, no. 4 (2012): 923–83 at 967. Similarly, in response to Pope Francis’s affirmation that “God is father and mother,” the popular traditionalist Catholic blog *Rorate Caeli* has warned of “the *extreme danger* posed to Catholicity by the Pope’s assertion that God is ‘Father and Mother’.” “‘God is Father and Mother’: as Jubilee of Mercy Nears, Francis Calls for ‘Revolution of Tenderness’ and Criticizes His Own Church,” *Rorate Caeli* (blog), December 3, 2015, <http://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2015/12/god-is-father-and-mother-as-jubilee-of.html>; emphases in original.
25. See, for instance, Caroline Walker Bynum, “Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing,” in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 110–69; Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 42–88; Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 190–244; Daniel F. Stramara, *Praying with the Saints to God Our Mother* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012); and Shannon M. McAlister, “Born of the Father: Psalm 109:3 and the Divine Womb in Latin Nicene Theology,” *Worship* 91 (May 2017): 204–23.
26. Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* [Expositions on the Psalms] 103.4.2. Unless otherwise cited, Latin titles were accessed via the Library of Latin Texts (Brepols), <http://clt.brepols.net/LLTA> and translations from the Latin are mine. Although feminine and masculine nouns in Latin are generally referred to with neuter pronouns in English unless they denote a sexed living being, Latin nouns that are subject to feminine personification are often referred to with feminine pronouns even in English—as is the case with *ecclesia*—“church”—which frequently appears as “she” or “her” in translation. The Latin word *sapientia*—“Wisdom”—was subject to a similar feminine personification, particularly in the texts studied here; hence I use feminine pronouns when referring to Wisdom in these translations. I am careful to preserve masculine pronouns in reference to *Christus*,

question by speaking of divine Wisdom as the woman of Luke 15, who lights a lamp to search for her lost coin and celebrates with her neighbors when it is found:

Where is that wisdom, in which you have made all things? Hasn't she come down? Hasn't the Word become flesh, and dwelt among us? Didn't she set on fire the lamp of her own flesh, when she hung on the cross—and didn't she search for her lost drachma? She searched and she found it, and her neighbors rejoiced with her—that is, every spiritual creature that is very near to God. The drachma was found, and the neighbors rejoiced: the human soul was found, and the angels rejoiced.²⁷

This statement equates the “wisdom” of Psalm 103 with the Johannine divine Word, through which all things were made—the Word that became flesh in Jesus Christ (John 1:1-3, 1:14). This interpretation of “wisdom” is in keeping with Wisdom Christology in the New Testament, which described Christ as the Wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24) and ascribed to him many of the attributes of the personified Wisdom of the Jewish wisdom literature.²⁸ Augustine’s understanding of “wisdom” here is also in keeping with his belief that Scripture applies the term “Wisdom” to the Son in particular.²⁹ In this, Augustine echoes the scriptural interpretations of earlier Church Fathers who identified Wisdom with Christ, the Son of God—while he embraces the conclusions drawn by those pro-Nicene fathers who argued that this Wisdom is eternal and truly divine.³⁰

Deus, Dominus, and so forth. These translations thus reveal some of the gender fluidity that appears in the Latin originals.

27. Augustine, *Enarrat. Ps.* 103.4.2.

28. Wisdom/Christ appears as the firstborn of creation in Prov 8:22-26 and Col 1:15; as that through which everything exists in Prov 3:19; 8:22-31; Wis 7:22; 1 Cor 8:6; and John 1:3; as the radiance of God’s glory in Wis 7:25 and Heb 1:3; and as God’s mirror or image in Wis 7:26 and Col 1:15. The Gospels of Matthew and of John also apply many of Sophia’s attributes to Jesus. Much has been written on this topic—see, for instance, Robert L. Wilken, ed., *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975); Johnson, *She Who Is*, 86–100, 288n26–290n50; and Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus*, 139–54. On the figure of Woman Wisdom in scriptural wisdom literature, see Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 133–49, 227–29, 278–81.

29. Augustine, *De Trinitate* [On the Trinity] 7.3.5. Augustine, *De Trinitate Libri XV (Libri I–XII)*, ed. W. J. Mountain, Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina 50 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1968), 252–54. At the same time, it should be noted that in *De Trinitate* Augustine utilizes philosophical principles, such as the notion of divine simplicity, to argue that in reality, each person of the Trinity must be divine Wisdom, just as each person is divine essence (7.1-2). Yet Augustine continues to maintain that when Scripture speaks of divine Wisdom, it refers to the Son in particular (7.3.5). He also holds that only the Son is the Word of God and “nata sapientia”: “wisdom that has been born” (*Trin.* 7.2.3; cf. Prov 8:25).

30. Augustine accepts the pro-Nicene theologians’ conclusion that as God’s Wisdom, the Son is eternal—though he challenges their argumentation (namely, that God was never without Wisdom) when he reasons that divine Wisdom is not just the Son, but the divine essence itself—and that Father, Son, and Spirit are each this one divine Wisdom insofar as each is God (*Trin.* 6–7). He sees these philosophically informed considerations as compatible with

Drawing upon this scriptural and ecclesiastical tradition, Augustine thus understands the woman seeking her lost coin to be Christ as divine Wisdom, seeking lost humanity through the incarnation and crucifixion.

Augustine offers further reflections on this woman's coin and lamp when he comments on Psalm 138:11, which speaks of night as an "illumination." This contrast between night and light leads Augustine to ask, "How has the night been illuminated?"³¹ To answer this, Augustine turns once again to the incarnation of divine Wisdom and the woman seeking her lost coin: "How has the night been illuminated? Because Christ came down into the night. Christ took flesh from this world, and lit up the night for us. For that woman had lost her drachma; and she lit a lamp. The Wisdom of God had lost her drachma."³² Augustine proceeds to explain more fully the meaning of this drachma as representing the human being, impressed with the image of the divine ruler: "What is a drachma? A coin, on which there was the image of our ruler himself. For the human being was made according to the image of God, and was lost."³³ He also reflects upon the nature of the lamp in greater detail: "And what did the wise woman do? She lit a lamp. The lamp is made of clay, but it has the light by which the drachma is found. Therefore the lamp of Wisdom—the flesh of Christ—was made of clay; but by means of its own Word it shines and finds the lost."³⁴ The light of the lamp is the divine Word, shining in the darkness (cf. John 1:1-9) through the clay of Christ's humanity (cf. Gen 2:7).

Together these comments display aspects of what will become a prominent discourse on the woman seeking her lost coin in the medieval Latin West. First, this woman is interpreted as divine Wisdom. Second, the coin she seeks and finds is the human soul or the lost human being, made in the image of God. Third, the clay lamp that divine Wisdom enkindles is her incarnate flesh; and the light of this lamp is also another symbol for the Wisdom of God, or the divinity. Finally, it is angels who are divine Wisdom's neighbors, and who rejoice with her.³⁵ Gregory the Great's highly influential work will expand on these points. Augustine's comments on Psalm 138 and the woman of Luke 15 will also be taken up later, in summary form, into Peter Lombard's commentary on the Psalms (ca. 1095–1160)³⁶ as well as the widely read

the earlier patristic understanding that when Scripture speaks of divine Wisdom, it refers to the Son in particular—a hermeneutical position that he continues to maintain (7.3.5).

31. Augustine, *Enarrat. Ps.* 138.14.

32. Augustine, *Enarrat. Ps.* 138.14.

33. Augustine, *Enarrat. Ps.* 138.14.

34. Augustine, *Enarrat. Ps.* 138.14.

35. Joan Petersen shows that there are also Eastern precedents and analogues containing elements of this interpretation—in the works of Origen, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Cyril of Alexandria, for example. See Joan M. Petersen, "Greek Influences upon Gregory the Great's Exegesis of Luke 15, 1–10 in *Homelia in Euangelium* II, 34," in *Grégoire le Grand: Chantilly, Centre culturel Les Fontaines, 15–19 septembre 1982—Actes*, ed. Jacques Fontaine, Robert Gillet, and Stan Pellistrandi (Paris: Editions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1986), 521–29.

36. Peter Lombard, *Commentarium in Psalmos* [Commentary on the Psalms] 138:10.

Glossa ordinaria—a high-medieval compilation of patristic biblical commentary on the sacred page.³⁷

Pope St. Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604) enlarges upon this understanding of incarnate Wisdom within his homilies on the Gospels.³⁸ Here he discusses the story of the woman seeking her drachma along with the story of the shepherd seeking his lost sheep. Emphasizing the parallel between these two stories and highlighting the divine nature of the woman as Wisdom, Gregory says that the shepherd seeking his lost sheep and the woman seeking her lost coin refer to the very same thing: Christ, who is God and God’s Wisdom. On the story of the shepherd who leaves his 99 sheep to search for the one that was lost, Gregory indicates that the shepherd who places the lost sheep on his shoulders is Jesus Christ, the heavenly figure who took up human nature to find his lost human sheep.³⁹ When he comes next to the story of the woman with the lost coin, Gregory teaches that the shepherd and the woman point to one reality—Jesus Christ, incarnate deity, the Wisdom of God: “He who is signified by the shepherd, is also signified by the woman; for he himself is God, and he himself is the Wisdom of God.”⁴⁰ While identifying Christ in this way as both God and the Wisdom of God, Gregory appears to align the figure of the shepherd with the grammatically masculine name “God” (*Deus*)—and the figure of the woman with the grammatically feminine name “Wisdom” (*sapientia*).

Gregory also expands upon the meaning of the woman’s lamp, articulating with special clarity the belief that the enkindled lamp is yet another symbol for divine Wisdom, incarnate in Christ: “The woman lit a lamp because the Wisdom of God appeared in human nature (*in humanitate*). For a lamp is a light in an earthen vessel, but the light in the earthen vessel is the divinity in the flesh (*in carne*).”⁴¹ Gregory proceeds to correlate this concept of the woman’s lamp as an “earthen vessel” with the words of Psalm 21:16: “my strength has dried up, like an earthen vessel.”⁴² This verse appears in the psalm beginning with the phrase “God, my God, . . . why have you forsaken me?”—a line famous for its presence on the lips of Jesus dying on the cross (Ps 21:2 Vulg. acc. LXX, author’s translation; cf. Mark 15:34; Matt 27:46). In reference to the earthen vessel of the woman’s lamp, Gregory now rereads Psalm 21:16, with its mention of an earthen vessel, as a phrase that comes forth from the mouth of Wisdom herself, with Wisdom speaking of the body of Christ as her own body: “Wisdom herself says of this earthen vessel—namely, the earthen vessel of her own body [*corporis*]: ‘my strength has dried up, like an earthen vessel.’”⁴³ The corporeal

37. *Glossa ordinaria* [Ordinary gloss], Ps. 138. *Biblia latina cum Glossa ordinaria: Facsimile Reprint of the editio princeps, Adolph Rusch of Strassburg 1480/81* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1992), 2:637.

38. Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Evangelia* [Homilies on the Gospels] 2.34.6.

39. Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Evangelia* 2.34.3.

40. Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Evangelia* 2.34.6.

41. Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Evangelia* 2.34.6.

42. Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Evangelia* 2.34.6. Cf. Ps 21:16 Vulg. acc. LXX.

43. Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Evangelia* 2.34.6.

humanity of Christ crucified is the lamp that holds the light of divine Wisdom; and divine Wisdom is the woman who enkindles this lamp.

Gregory's remarks on other aspects of this woman's story repeatedly underscore the fact that he sees the woman as the heavenly and eternal Wisdom of God, incarnate in Christ. For instance, the woman's neighbors who are called to rejoice with her over the discovery of her lost coin are said to be the celestial beings "who are so close to heavenly Wisdom that they come near to her through the grace of the unending vision."⁴⁴ Furthermore, when Gregory speculates that the woman's ten drachmas represent the nine orders of angels plus the one human race—all of whom are made according to God's likeness—he repeats his previously stated belief that the woman and her lamp refer to divine Wisdom, incarnate in Christ: once again he refers to the woman in Luke 15:8-10 as "that woman, by whom the Wisdom of God is represented"; and once more he indicates that "through the flesh, eternal Wisdom [*aeterna sapientia*]⁴⁵—gleaming from the light of an earthen vessel—restored the human being by wondrous deeds." It is noteworthy here that Gregory makes explicit his understanding that this Wisdom is "eternal": by ascribing the attribute of eternity to her, Gregory highlights his belief in the full divinity of the Wisdom who is represented by the woman and her lamp.

Gregory the Great thus repeatedly and unabashedly interprets the woman seeking her lost coin as a symbol for the eternal Wisdom of God that became incarnate in Jesus Christ. In the female figure of the woman searching for her drachma, Gregory sees an occasion to recall the female figure of Wisdom, to reread Psalm 21 as a reference to her incarnate flesh, and to identify her incarnation in Jesus Christ as God's search for lost humanity.

Gregory's comments made a deep impression on the church of the West. His writings were highly revered during the Middle Ages—sometimes called the "Gregorian Middle Ages."⁴⁶ His developed treatment of the woman as divine Wisdom thus survived and thrived, having been copied and disseminated in multiple forms. St. Bede the Venerable (ca. 672/3–ca. 735) replicated the main outline of Gregory's homily within his own commentary on Luke.⁴⁷ Gregory's perspective also appeared in medieval works that functioned like encyclopedias for the interpretation of biblical words—containing entries that catalogued a variety of possible meanings for a given word, while illustrating these understandings with different scriptural verses where the word appeared. In a number of such works, under the heading "mulier" (woman), it is said that "woman" can mean "the Wisdom of God"—sometimes further described as "Christ" or "the Son"—and this information is illustrated with a reference to Luke 15:8-10.⁴⁸ Peter Lombard's magisterial *Sentences*—which guided theological

44. Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Evangelia* 2.34.6.

45. Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Evangelia* 2.34.6.

46. Henri de Lubac, "The Gregorian Middle Ages," in *Medieval Exegesis*, trans. E. M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 2:117–25.

47. Bede, *In Lucae evangelium expositio* [Exposition on the Gospel of Luke] 4.15.

48. Jacques-Paul Migne, ed., *Patrologiae cursus completus, series latina* (Paris: Migne, 1844–1865), 112:1002b–c, 193:140c, 210:865b–c (hereafter cited as *PL*).

education for a number of centuries during the high and late Middle Ages—further enshrined the woman with the lost coin as divine Wisdom, incarnate in Christ.⁴⁹ The influential *Glossa ordinaria* also disseminated a succinct summary of Gregory's views.⁵⁰ Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–74) included Gregory's perspective in his own compilation of patristic commentary on this Gospel.⁵¹ The woman with the lost coin continued to be identified as “sapientia divina”—divine Wisdom—in the *Postilla* of the renowned biblical scholar Nicholas of Lyra (d. 1349), whose respected commentaries were still being utilized three centuries after they were penned.⁵² The identification of the woman seeking her lost coin with the feminine figure of divine Wisdom, incarnate in Christ, thus became a commonplace in the theology of the medieval Latin West.⁵³

This widespread interpretation of Luke 15:8-10 was not necessarily the result of the medieval tendency to look for a “spiritual sense” in the biblical text beyond its “literal sense.”⁵⁴ For Gregory the Great as for Thomas Aquinas, the primary meaning of a parable constituted its foundational, “literal” sense—even though a parable's meaning

49. Peter Lombard, *Sententiae in iv libris distinctae* [The Sentences] 3.1.1.2.

50. *Glossa ordinaria*, Lc. 15 (*Facsimile Reprint* 4:175). For background information on the *Glossa Ordinaria*, see Lesley Smith, *The Glossa Ordinaria: The Making of a Medieval Bible Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

51. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena aurea in Lucam* [Golden Chain on Luke] 15. As Thomas's *Catena* makes clear, Gregory the Great's interpretation of the woman with the lost coin was not the only one available: alternative interpretations included the woman as a symbol for the Church (15.3) or as a symbol for humans seeking in themselves the image of God by the light of God's word (15.2).

52. Nicholas of Lyra, *Postilla super totam Bibliam* [Commentary on the Whole Bible], Lc. 15. Nicolaus de Lyra, *Postilla super totam Bibliam*, vol. 4 (1492; repr., Frankfurt: Minerva, 1971). See also James Kiecker, introduction to *The “Postilla” of Nicholas of Lyra on the Song of Songs* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1998), 10–26.

53. This pattern of interpretation for Luke 15:8-10 occurs within a broader context of medieval reverence for divine Wisdom. On this broader context, see Newman, *Sister of Wisdom* 42–88; Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 190–244.

54. Patristic and medieval authors distinguished between “literal” and “spiritual” interpretations of Scripture: what was immediately signified by the scriptural words constituted the “literal sense”; but the “spiritual sense” arose when the things that were directly signified by the words of Scripture were themselves understood to symbolize yet further realities. Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 1:261–62, 2:34. Though patristic and medieval authors described and divided the “spiritual” sense in various ways (De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 1:90–115, 2:33–39), de Lubac quotes Nicholas of Lyra's formulation as a particularly clear explanation: “The mystic or spiritual sense . . . is in general threefold; since if the things signified by the words are referred to so as to signify the things that are to be believed in the new law, this amounts to the allegorical sense; if they are referred to so as to signify things to be done by us, this is the moral or tropological sense; and if they are referred to so as to signify things that are to be hoped for in the beatitude to come, this is the anagogical sense.” De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 2:37.

was communicated in figurative terms.⁵⁵ Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, too, could speak of a parable's "literal sense."⁵⁶ Hence, although a parable is an extended trope, in order to interpret a parable these medievals did not need to seek in it a "spiritual sense" as opposed to a "literal sense." In expounding on the parable's primary meaning, they saw themselves as presenting its literal signification.⁵⁷

Christ Is Lord and Lady

Preachers and theologians built upon Augustine and Gregory the Great's basic understanding of divine Wisdom as the woman seeking her lost coin through her incarnation in Christ. In many cases, ecclesiastical writers correlated Luke 15:8-10 with other Scripture passages that they saw as naming God with similar feminine terminology. In doing so, they often actively reflected upon the female images for God found in Scripture.

One example of such a usage is provided by St. Agobard of Lyons (769–840),⁵⁸ an eminent archbishop of the Carolingian era. Within a work on the church, Agobard discusses various names applied by the Scriptures to the church and also to Christ. First, he shows how the Scriptures describe the church with a diversity of terms—such as wife, daughter, sister, wall, city, queen, handmaid, vineyard, garden, and fountain. Then, against this backdrop, Agobard argues that the Scriptures name Christ with "numerous names" as well.⁵⁹ Here he focuses on listing references that portray Christ with feminine terminology. In this context Agobard correlates Luke 15:8-10 with Psalm 122:2, identifying the "woman" searching for her lost coin with the "lady" of that psalm:

That bride [the church] is queen and wife and handmaiden, but this is not amazing. Yet it is amazing, and filled with every mercy, that her husband [*Christus Dominus*—"Christ the Lord"] is both Lord and also lady [*Domina*] to her, as the psalmist proclaims: "As the eyes of a maidservant are on the hands of her Lady, so are our eyes on the Lord, our God" [Ps 122:2]. This Lady is also called a woman who has ten drachmas—who, when one was lost, lit a lamp, turned her house upside down, searched for it, and found it.⁶⁰

55. G. R. Evans, *The Church in the Early Middle Ages*, I.B.Tauris History of the Christian Church 2 (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2007), 142; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1, q. 1, a. 10; Aquinas, *Super Ad Galatas reportatio* [Commentary on Galatians] 4.7; Aquinas, *Expositio super Iob ad litteram* [Literal Commentary on Job] 1.

56. Bonaventure, *Commentarius in Evangelium S. Lucae* 10.61, trans. Robert J. Karris as *St. Bonaventure's Commentary on the Gospel of Luke: Chapters 9–16* (Saint Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 2003), 988.

57. This is further borne out by the fact that the eighteenth-century compilations of patristic commentary on the Sunday Gospels, discussed below, replicate Gregory's words on Luke 15:8-10 under the heading "Commentarius Literalis."

58. I have consulted the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* on authors' dates and biographical information.

59. Agobard of Lyons, *De modo regiminis ecclesiastici* [On the Manner of Ecclesiastical Rule] 4.

60. Agobard of Lyons, *De modo regiminis ecclesiastici* 4.

In reading Psalm 122:2 as a verse that portrays God as Lady, Agobard thus finds an occasion to recall the woman seeking her lost coin as another feminine image for Christ. It is noteworthy here that Agobard feels no need to argue for the divinity of the woman of Luke 15—he simply cites the verse as containing an obvious reference to Christ. For Agobard and his intended audience, the line of interpretation offered by Augustine and Gregory appears to be an established fact. Christ is Lord and Christ is Lady—the woman who lit her lamp to find her lost coin.

Christ Is “Mother and Lady, Power and Wisdom”

St. Agobard continues this line of reasoning by immediately referencing further scriptural verses that also correlate with Christ as a feminine figure. One such verse is Isaiah 66:13, where God promises to console Israel like a mother. “[Christ] is also called a ‘mother,’” says Agobard, “as he himself utters through Isaiah, saying: ‘As one whom the mother caresseth, so will I comfort you.’”⁶¹ To further support his point that the Scriptures give Christ “numerous names” such as “Lady,” “Woman,” and “Mother,” Agobard proceeds to recite a list of names for Christ that can be derived from various biblical verses—names that are all feminine-gendered in the Latin tongue: “For truly, [Christ] is Mother [Isa 66:13] and Lady [Ps 122:2], Power and Wisdom [1 Cor 1:24], Strength [Ps 26:1] and Glory [cf. Heb 1:3], the Resurrection and the Life [John 11:25], the Way and the Truth [John 14:6], Illumination and Salvation [cf. Ps 26:1]—and all the rest of the things of this kind.”⁶² For this prominent medieval archbishop, therefore, the woman of Luke 15 is but one of many female images for God; and the feminine gender of the abstract Latin words routinely predicated of Christ serve as evidence that referring to Christ as a “woman” and a “Lady” aligns with a broader biblical pattern. The Scriptures resound with feminine names for Christ—our Mother and Lady, the Power and Wisdom of God.

Domina Sapientia: God Compared Himself to a Woman

A similar viewpoint is further elaborated by Gerhoh of Reichersberg (1093/4–1169)—a prominent German theologian, churchman, and Gregorian-style reformer. Gerhoh discusses the woman of Luke 15 in his commentary on the Psalms: like Agobard, he sees a similarity between this woman and the Lady of Psalm 122. While commenting on Psalm 122 and its portrayal of God as both Lord and Lady, Gerhoh not only draws a connection to the woman with the lost coin, but he also notes the parallels between the story of the woman and the preceding story of the shepherd. In particular, the parallel uses of “lord” and “lady” in Psalm 122 inspire Gerhoh to appeal to the parallel stories of the shepherd and the woman—arguing that God compares himself both to a man and to a woman in these verses:

61. Agobard of Lyons, *De modo regiminis eccl.* 4; Isa 66:13, Douay–Rheims.

62. Agobard of Lyons, *De modo regiminis eccl.* 4.

Behold, just as the eyes of the male servants are on the hands of their lords—and just as the eyes of a handmaid are on the hands of her lady, . . . so are our eyes on “our Lord God” [Ps 122:2]—who to us is Lord and Lady—just as he himself, in the gospel parable, compared himself at the same time to a man and a woman, saying: “What man among you, who has a hundred sheep? . . .” [Luke 15:4]—and again: “Or what woman, having ten drachmas?” [Luke 15:8]. Our eyes are on this Lord and this Lady, until [s/he] has mercy on us by seeking us like a lost sheep torn to pieces among thickets of thorns [and] harassed by wolves—and like a drachma, sullied with much dust . . . when we wander away from the Lord God or from Lady Wisdom [*domina sapientia*].⁶³

These comments suggest a scriptural rationale for Gerhoh’s use of the term “Lady Wisdom”—*domina sapientia*: Gerhoh does not add “Lady” to the term “Wisdom” simply as a creative title of honor; he believes that the Wisdom who seeks her lost coin in Luke 15 is in fact the divine Lady of Psalm 122.⁶⁴ For Gerhoh, God is our Lord and God is our Lady; God compares himself at the same time to a man and to a woman.

The Maternal Love of Christ the Baker-Woman

St. Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–67) also finds an occasion to correlate the woman of Luke 15 with yet another passage depicting God in female form; and in doing so, he offers an explanation for why the Scriptures portray women as representing Christ. Aelred’s brief reflection on this topic occurs in the midst of a homily where he offers a spiritual interpretation of the Mosaic law prescribing a time of waiting and purification for a woman after childbirth (Lev 12). In the process of rereading this law as figuratively containing moral advice, Aelred takes a moment to reflect upon the meanings that the word “woman” can carry. Aelred declares that when the word “woman” is employed by the Scriptures to signify something good, this is usually “on account of [women’s] fertility, or the affection of love that women are accustomed to have toward their children.”⁶⁵ In illustration of how Scripture uses the word “woman” in a good sense, Aelred references two women from the Gospel of Luke—the baker-woman of Luke 13, and the woman with the lost coin in Luke 15. He explains that both of these women represent Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God: “The word ‘woman’ is used in a

63. Gerhoh of Reichersberg, *Expositio in Psalmos* [Commentary on the Psalms] 122 (Migne, *PL* 194.851a–b).

64. A number of feminists have critiqued the alignment of divine Wisdom with the kyriarchal lady (particularly the colonial white lady). For a summary of their perspectives, see Schüssler Fiorenza, *Power of the Word*, 223–25. Schüssler Fiorenza argues that the figure of Wisdom still offers important resources for speaking of the divine.

65. Aelred of Rievaulx, *Sermones* [Sermons] 33.6. Caroline Walker Bynum has shown that historically, medieval characterizations of divine motherhood often comprised a form of gender stereotyping, serving the psychological and social needs of male authors more than the spiritual needs of medieval women. Bynum, “Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing,” in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 110–69.

good sense in the Gospel, where the Lord says: ‘the kingdom of heaven is like the leaven that a woman hid in three measures of flour’ [Luke 13:20–21]. And in another place: ‘What woman, having ten drachmas’ [Luke 15:8]—and so forth. In these passages, ‘woman’ means ‘the Wisdom of God’ (that is, our Lord Jesus Christ).”⁶⁶ Aelred further explains that Jesus Christ is represented by a woman in these passages “on account of the love—great beyond measure—with which [Christ] sought, found, and redeemed us.”⁶⁷ For St. Aelred of Rievaulx, therefore, the woman seeking her lost coin is also the baker-woman who holds in her hands the leaven of the kingdom of God: she is divine Wisdom—Jesus Christ—whom Scripture portrays as a woman because of her boundless maternal love.

Sophia, Hiding in the Flesh

Divine Wisdom also appears as the woman seeking her lost coin in a poem on the Catholic faith attributed to Bernard of Cluny, a reform-minded twelfth-century monk and poet. In the midst of verses that speak of the Trinity, this work reinscribes the main lines of Augustine and Gregory’s interpretation of the woman and her drachma: the woman is “the Father’s Wisdom [*sapientia*]”; we are the lost drachma; and the woman’s lit lamp symbolizes divine Wisdom, incarnate in Christ. This work refers to this woman with both the Latin and Greek forms of the word “wisdom”—it calls her not only “*sapientia*” but also “*sophya*”: “hiding in the flesh, *Sophia* [*sophya*] kindled the lamp of the flesh.”⁶⁸ It is noteworthy that a poem on the Trinity and the Catholic faith finds room to incorporate this woman in illustration of basic Catholic beliefs. Divine Wisdom—*Sophia*—hides in the flesh of Christ in order to find humanity, her lost coin.

Strong Woman, Mother of All Good Things

The expansive repertoire of female images for God surrounding the woman of Luke 15 receives further elaboration by Adam of Perseigne (d. 1221), a respected Cistercian abbot and spiritual guide who was revered as “Blessed” by the members of his monastery after his death. In one of his sermons, Adam takes some time to reflect on the “strong woman” discussed at the end of the book of Proverbs: “Who will find a strong woman?” (Prov 31:10 Vulg., author’s translation). Adam offers a variety of possible interpretations of this verse—including the perspective that this “strong woman” is divine Wisdom. Here Adam explains that God’s Wisdom is called a “woman” because of her abundant fecundity in bringing things forth: “The Wisdom of God is called a ‘woman’ on account of her fertility in all good things—which flow from her.”⁶⁹ With

66. Aelred of Rievaulx, *Serm.* 33.7.

67. Aelred of Rievaulx, *Serm.* 33.7.

68. Bernard of Cluny, *De trinitate et de fide catholica carmen* [Poem on the Trinity and the Catholic Faith] 339–40.

69. Adam of Perseigne, *Sermo in Assumptione B. Mariae* [Sermon on the Assumption of Blessed Mary] (Migne, *PL* 211.734a).

this reference to the Wisdom of God as the source of “all good things,” Adam alludes to Wisdom 7:11-12, which reads, “Now all good things came to me together with her [Wisdom], and immense honor came to me by her hands—and I rejoiced in everything, because this Wisdom took the lead; and I did not know that she is the mother of all these things” (Wis 7:11-12 Vulg., author’s translation). Thus, in order to support the idea that Wisdom is called a woman because of her fertility in bringing forth everything good, Adam draws upon a scriptural passage that explicitly calls Wisdom the “mother” of all good things.

Adam proceeds to back up this consideration with a list of other Scripture passages that portray Wisdom as a woman or as the source of numerous goods. Adam includes Luke 15:8 as one of these passages:

For it is she herself who says: “I am the mother of beautiful love, and of fear, and of knowledge, and of holy hope” [Sir 24:24]. The psalmist shows that she is the parent of all things, speaking in this way to the Lord: “You have made all things in Wisdom” [Ps 103:24]. Indeed, Wisdom is called a woman by the evangelist, when by means of a parable it is said by the Wisdom of God herself: “What woman, having ten drachmas, if she loses one of them—” [Luke 15:8] and so forth.⁷⁰

Woman Wisdom is the mother of beautiful love and the parent of all things: Christ, who speaks of himself as a woman in the parable of the lost drachma.

Having thus argued that Wisdom is called a woman thanks to her fertility in bringing forth everything good, Adam proceeds to reflect on why Wisdom is called not just a woman but a “strong woman”—as she is in Adam’s interpretation of Proverbs 31:10—“Who will find a strong woman?” In so doing, he quotes yet another verse from the Book of Wisdom describing Wisdom’s omnipotent activity. “For she is called a woman,” says Adam, “on account of her fertility; she is called strong on account of her power. ‘Power’ is said on account of omnipotence; ‘fertile’ is said on account of abundance. She is called strong, because ‘she reaches powerfully from end to end’ [Wis 8:1]; she is called fertile because ‘she orders all things sweetly’ [Wis 8:1].”⁷¹ Adam proceeds to expound on these qualities of the strong woman, Wisdom, in a manner that highlights the christological character of Wisdom and recalls the creative and salvific activity of the woman seeking her lost coin. This woman is powerful and also powerfully patient: “having no need, she created all things from nothing”; and “possessing every innocence, she calmly endured every injury from the unjust.”⁷² Similarly, her maternal fecundity in producing abundant goodness appears in both her creative wisdom and her merciful activities: “by her plentiful wisdom, she gave form and order to the whole world of existing things”; and “by her plentiful mercy, she released the old human being from the debt of death—by the grace of a death she did not owe, and

70. Adam of Perseigne, *Serm. Assumpt. B. Mariae* (Migne, PL 211.734a–b).

71. Adam of Perseigne, *Serm. Assumpt. B. Mariae* (Migne, PL 211.734d–735a). Emphases are mine.

72. Adam of Perseigne, *Serm. Assumpt. B. Mariae* (Migne, PL 211.735a).

the price of her own blood.”⁷³ Adam poetically concludes by singing the praises of Woman Wisdom: “O, how powerful is her fertility, and how fertile is her power! How strong in weakness, how fruitful in poverty was this woman!”⁷⁴ For blessed Adam of Perseigne, the woman with the lost coin was indeed the strong woman of Proverbs 31: divine Wisdom herself, mother of all good things—fertile and strong in her creative power and in the powerful patience of her redemptive activity.

Woman Wisdom, a Beautiful Spouse

St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio’s (1217–74) commentary on the story of the woman with the lost coin is particularly lengthy and creative, weaving together many of the Scripture passages we have seen already, and adding further ones as well.⁷⁵ In his *Commentary on Luke*, Bonaventure draws his basic interpretation of Luke 15:8-10 from the *Glossa*, where Gregory the Great’s views were enshrined in summary form.⁷⁶ With the brief comments of the *Glossa* as his starting point, Bonaventure enlarges upon this textbook interpretation by quoting numerous passages about Sophia from wisdom literature, as well as other passages about women that he takes to refer to divine Wisdom.

Bonaventure’s observations begin with some reflections on why divine Wisdom is portrayed as a woman in Luke 15. His first explanation draws on the scriptural depiction of Wisdom as a beloved wife: “This woman is divine Wisdom, which is called a ‘woman’ because she should be loved as a most beautiful spouse. In Wisdom 8 the wise person, speaking of Wisdom, says: ‘I have loved her, and I have searched for her from my youth; and I have sought to take her to myself as a spouse, and I have become a lover of her beauty’ [Wis 8:2].” Drawing on additional wisdom literature, Bonaventure further describes Wisdom’s beauty as the type of loveliness that shines forth from good women. He explains that divine Wisdom is represented by the “good and beautiful woman” of Sirach 26:21, which reads, “Like the sun when it rises to the world . . . is the beauty of a good woman” (Vulg., author’s translation). Thus, divine Wisdom is portrayed as a woman in Luke 15 because she is to be loved like a woman who is resplendent with the beauty of goodness.

73. Adam of Perseigne, *Serm. Assumpt. B. Mariae* (Migne, PL 211.735a–b).

74. Adam of Perseigne, *Serm. Assumpt. B. Mariae* (Migne, PL 211.735b).

75. Bonaventure, *Commentarius in Evangelium Lucae* [Commentary on the Gospel of Luke], in *Opera omnia* (Ad Claras Aquas [Quaracchi]: Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1882–1902), 7:387–89.

76. As E. Ann Matter notes, “The famous commentaries of Ambrose and Bede are the obvious sources for the *Glossa ordinaria* to the Gospel of Luke.” Matter, “The Church Fathers and the *Glossa Ordinaria*,” in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West*, ed. Irena Backus (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1:83–111 at 106. In turn, Venerable Bede’s commentary on Luke replicated the main points of Gregory’s homily on Luke 15:8-10.

Mother of Love

Like Aelred, Bonaventure sees God's maternal affection as another explanation for why divine Wisdom is portrayed as a woman in Luke 15. Bonaventure explains that divine Wisdom "is called a 'woman' not on account of the weakness of the sex, but on account of the affection of divine love and mercy."⁷⁷ He backs up this assertion with an appeal to two Scripture passages that portray God or divine Wisdom in maternal terms—Isaiah 49:15 and Sirach 24:24: "God compares himself to a mother's love in Isaiah 49: 'Can a woman forget her own baby, so that she does not feel pity for the child of her own womb?'—and so forth [Isa 49:15]. Therefore, Wisdom says of herself in Sirach 24: 'I am the mother of beautiful love'—and so forth [Sir 24:24]."⁷⁸ The woman who searches for her coin in Luke 15 is the divine mother of love—a mother who can never forget her children.

Woman Wisdom: A Strong, Beautiful, Provident, Merciful Creator

Bonaventure proceeds to highlight four of divine Wisdom's traits, which she possesses to a superlative degree: power, beauty, providence, and mercy. He illustrates each of these traits with a reference to some woman in Scripture, whom he interprets as a symbol for God's Wisdom. Like Adam of Perseigne, Bonaventure illustrates Wisdom's power by referencing the "strong woman" of Proverbs 31:10 as a symbol for divine Wisdom—and by pointing to Wisdom 8:1, where Wisdom is portrayed as reaching mightily from one end of creation to the other, ordering all things. Bonaventure similarly sees a reference to Wisdom's beauty in the good woman of Sirach 26:21, whose beautiful character shines like the sun. He also paints a picture of Wisdom's providence by interpreting the wise woman in Proverbs 14:1 ("A wise woman built her own house" [Vulg., author's translation]) as yet another symbol for the work of divine providence.⁷⁹ Finally, Bonaventure presents the woman of Luke 15, searching for her lost coin, as a representation of divine Wisdom's great mercy: "Wisdom is referred to by the woman with merciful love—as in this parable [Luke 15:8-10]. Thus, the *Glossa* says: 'The woman—that is, the Wisdom of God—had ten drachmas, when she created human beings and angels.'"⁸⁰ A strong, beautiful, and provident woman—divine Wisdom—created humanity and mercifully searched for it when it was lost.

Sophia's Friends

In explaining the woman's search for her coin and her neighbors' jubilation upon her discovery of it, Bonaventure references a number of texts about Sophia from wisdom

77. Bonaventure, *Comm. Ev. Luc.*, Quaracchi 7.387.

78. Bonaventure, *Comm. Ev. Luc.*, Quaracchi 7.387.

79. Bonaventure, *Comm. Ev. Luc.*, Quaracchi 7.387.

80. Bonaventure, *Comm. Ev. Luc.*, Quaracchi 7.387.

literature—using these texts to further embellish the picture of divine Wisdom as the woman of Luke 15. For instance, in commenting on the woman’s search for her coin, he inserts a text from the book of Wisdom about Wisdom’s own search for her people: “‘And she searches carefully, until she finds it’—with our redemption. So Wisdom 6 reads: ‘she goes around seeking those who are worthy of her; and she shows herself to them cheerfully on her own paths; and with all foresight, she runs to meet them’ [Wis 6:17].”⁸¹ When Bonaventure proceeds to expound upon the woman’s invitation to her neighbors to rejoice with her upon her discovery of the lost coin, he repeatedly identifies this woman with divine Wisdom and inserts further references to wisdom literature in explication of this part of the parable. Identifying the woman with God’s Wisdom, he calls the woman’s invitees “the friends and neighbors of divine Wisdom” and explains that “Wisdom invites people to rejoice together, because this is the law of love.”⁸² In order to explain why the woman’s invitees are called her friends, he cites another reference to divine Wisdom in the Book of Wisdom: “These are said to be the friends of Wisdom because they love her and are loved by her, according to what is said in Wisdom 7: ‘Throughout the nations she conveys herself into holy souls and makes them friends of God and prophets. For God loves no one except someone who dwells with Wisdom’ [Wis 7:27-28].”⁸³ Finally, he once more appeals to the Book of Wisdom to elucidate this friendship with divine Wisdom: “And the wise person says in Wisdom 8: ‘There is immortality in thinking of Wisdom, and . . . there is good delight in her friendship’ [Wis 8:17-18].”⁸⁴ Throughout his comments, therefore, Bonaventure repeatedly highlights his belief that the woman seeking her lost coin is the female figure of divine Sophia, who rejoices in human salvation. Not only does he constantly refer to the woman with the lost coin as the divine Wisdom that became incarnate in Jesus, but he also purposefully sets out to explicate the various ways in which God’s Wisdom is presented as a woman—not only in this parable but also in a multitude of other scriptural texts as well.

While medieval theologians thus freely expanded upon this understanding of the woman of Luke 15 as divine Wisdom, and related her to other female symbols for God, the received teaching of Augustine and Gregory formed the bedrock of their speculations. Scholars of the Middle Ages approached Scripture through the lens of patristic authority, conveniently gathered together in *catenae*, *glossae*, and *sententiae*. As we have seen, Gregory the Great’s interpretation of the woman of Luke 15 was widely disseminated in the Middle Ages through each of these means, as well as through its replication in the preservation of his own homilies on the Gospels and in the commentaries of theologians such as Bede and Bonaventure. Similarly, Augustine’s view on divine Wisdom as the woman of Luke 15 lived on not only in his own writings, but also in Peter Lombard’s commentary on the Psalms and in the *Glossa ordinaria*.

Subsequent to Bonaventure, this interpretation of the woman of Luke 15:8-10 continued to flourish in formative theological works. Those included the scriptural

81. Bonaventure, *Comm. Ev. Luc.*, Quaracchi 7.388.

82. Bonaventure, *Comm. Ev. Luc.*, Quaracchi 7.387.

83. Bonaventure, *Comm. Ev. Luc.*, Quaracchi 7.387.

84. Bonaventure, *Comm. Ev. Luc.*, Quaracchi 7.387.

commentary of Nicholas of Lyra (d. 1349), whose contributions—as mentioned above—were still being consulted three centuries after they first appeared. Standing in the stream of the tradition shaped by Augustine, Gregory, and the *Glossa ordinaria*, Nicholas of Lyra’s commentary on Luke 15 preserved the memory of the woman with the lost coin as “sapientia divina”—divine Wisdom.⁸⁵ Likewise, this patristic interpretation perpetuated itself within the magisterial *Sentences* of Peter Lombard—which influenced Catholic theology into the seventeenth century,⁸⁶ and which presented the woman with the lost coin as divine Wisdom, incarnate in Christ.⁸⁷

In her literary study of female imagery for God in the Middle Ages, Barbara Newman observes that beginning in the sixteenth century, interest in the worship of divine Wisdom waned.⁸⁸ A review of a number of foundational Protestant commentators on the Gospels suggests that the woman of Luke 15 was not immune to this trend in their works. In keeping with the fact that Reformation theologians did not grant to the Church Fathers the same authority they had enjoyed in the Middle Ages,⁸⁹ influential Protestant exegetes often did not replicate the patristic and medieval tradition of interpretation that had presented the woman of Luke 15 as a reference to God in the feminine form of divine Sophia. Moreover, a number of the passages in which Wisdom was most clearly personified in female imagery as mother and bride (e.g., Wis 7:11-12, 8:2; Sir 24:24) were viewed as non-canonical within Protestant circles.

In his *Harmony of the Gospels*, John Calvin did not mention the woman of Luke 15, while he did spend considerable time discussing the stories of the shepherd and the prodigal son.⁹⁰ In his annotations on the Gospels, Hugo Grotius commented at length on the stories of the shepherd and the prodigal son; but he entirely passed over the woman and her coin in verses 8–9, while remarking only briefly on the angelic rejoicing in verse 10.⁹¹ *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*, attributed to Matthew Poole,⁹² offered extensive reflections on the parables of the lost sheep and of the prodigal son; but when it came to the story of Luke 15:8-10, the commentary briefly noted that this parable “is of the same import” as the surrounding parables—without mentioning the

85. Nicholas of Lyra, *Postilla super totam Bibliam*, Lc. 15.

86. Aidan Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology: An Introduction to Its Sources, Principles, and History* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991), 295.

87. Peter Lombard, *Sententiae in iv libris distinctae* 3.1.1.2.

88. Newman, *God and the Goddesses* 316.

89. See Richard A. Muller, “Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: The View from the Middle Ages,” in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: Essays Presented to David C. Steinmetz in Honor of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 3–22 at 14.

90. Jean Calvin, *Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, vol. 45, ed. G. Baum et al. (Brunsvigae: C.A. Schwetschke, 1891), 504–11, <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:650>.

91. Hugo Grotius, *Annotationes in libros Evangeliorum* [Annotations on the Books of the Gospels] (Amsterdam: Blau, 1641), 751–6, <https://books.google.com/books?id=xKE-AAAAcAAJ>.

92. In reality, this work was the result of a number of authors. See Donald K. McKim, ed., *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), s.v. “Poole, Matthew.”

woman or her lamp.⁹³ Similarly, Samuel Clark presented the parables of Luke 15, in general, as portraying God's care for sinners' conversion; but he did not comment on the woman in particular.⁹⁴ In *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament*, Matthew Henry did discuss this woman, her lamp, and her sweeping and searching—describing the woman's actions as those of God: "This represents the various means and methods God makes use of to bring lost souls home to himself: he hath *lighted the candle* of the gospel, not to show himself the way to us, but to show us the way to him, to discover us to ourselves; he has *swept the house* by the convictions of the word; he *seeks diligently*, his heart is upon it, to bring lost souls to himself."⁹⁵ Henry even speculated upon the appropriateness of the female symbolism in this parable, drawing on gender stereotypes: "The *loser* is here supposed to be *a woman*, who will more passionately grieve for her loss, and rejoice in the finding of what she lost, than perhaps a man would do, and therefore it the better serves the purpose of the parable."⁹⁶ Yet Matthew Henry was not reinscribing the patristic and medieval tradition in his reflections. Gone were the Augustinian and Gregorian portrayals of this woman as divine Wisdom, seeking her lost coin through the lamp of her incarnation—the light in the clay, the divinity in the flesh. Likewise, in his *Family Expositor*, Philip Doddridge referred in general to the parables of Luke 15 as "moving Representations of the Divine Mercy," and he commented on the female sex of the woman's friends in verse 9—suggesting there that "the impressible and social Temper of the *Sex* may perhaps be thought of, as adding some Propriety to the Representation"—but he did not expand upon the woman herself as a symbol for God.⁹⁷ In his *Exposition on the New Testament*, John Gill held that both the shepherd and the woman of Luke 15 represent Christ—though he did not elaborate on the significance of this female symbolism.⁹⁸ In his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, John Wesley did not directly address the woman of Luke 15:8–10, but focused instead upon the surrounding parables.⁹⁹ On Luke 15, Adam

93. Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible* (repr., Edinburgh: Turnbull, 1801), 4:71. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Gale), Document Number: CB3331970131.

94. Samuel Clark, *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testament: Or, a Family Bible, with Annotations and Parallel Scriptures* (1690; repr., London: J. Fuller, 1760), Luke 15. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Gale), Document Numbers: CW3322821960 and CW3322821961.

95. Matthew Henry, *An Exposition on the Old and New Testament*, 4th ed., vol. 4 (London: 1737), Lk. 15. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Gale), Document Numbers: CB3331827233 and CB3331827234.

96. Henry, *Exposition*, Lk. 15.

97. Philip Doddridge, *The Family Expositor* (London: Wilson, 1739), 2:158, 160. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Gale), Document Numbers: CW3320347533 and CW3320347535.

98. John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament, both Doctrinal and Practical*, a new edition, corrected (London: George Keith, 1774), 2:201–4. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Gale), Document Numbers: CW3317837323–CW3317837326.

99. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: Bowyer, 1755), 188–91. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Gale), Document Numbers: CW3317750303–CW3317750306.

Clarke indicated that “he who wishes to find the image of God, which he has lost by sin; must . . . *sweep the house*—put away the evil of his doings; and *seek diligently*—use every mean of grace, and cry incessantly to God, till he restore to him the light of his countenance”—thus presenting the woman’s sweeping and seeking not as a portrayal of God’s saving activity but as an example for sinners to imitate.¹⁰⁰ In short, many of these Protestant commentators did not present the woman of Luke 15 as a symbol for Christ or God, and those who did were not replicating the patristic and medieval tradition that had interpreted her as a reference to divine Woman Wisdom.

In the Catholic world as well, the remarks of the Capuchin preacher, superior, and diplomat St. Lawrence of Brindisi (1559–1619) on Luke 15 also appear to exemplify the more general decline in attention to divine Wisdom observed by Barbara Newman.¹⁰¹ Like his medieval predecessors, Lawrence continued to identify the woman of Luke 15 with Christ, and he continued the medieval practice of relating such a reading to other Scripture passages where God is portrayed in female form—but in doing so, he did not appeal to the Augustinian and Gregorian interpretations of her in terms of divine Woman Wisdom.

Christ Calls Himself a Diligent Woman

St. Lawrence of Brindisi repeatedly touched upon the story of the woman with the lost coin in his sermons, which drew large audiences. Along with the story of the shepherd and the story of the prodigal son, the story of the woman with the lost coin stood, in Lawrence’s preaching, as a powerful reminder of divine love and compassion. Lawrence treats these stories as having parallel meanings; and he identifies the woman as Christ, just as he sees the shepherd and the father of the prodigal son as Christ. In fact, Lawrence teaches that Christ meant to portray himself as a woman in this parable, just as he meant to portray himself as a shepherd and as a loving father: “Christ literally speaks about himself, and shows that he himself is a kind shepherd, a most diligent woman, and a most loving father—that is, he shows that he loves sinners as the shepherd loves the sheep, as the woman loves the lost drachma, and as the father loves the son who departs from him.”¹⁰² In homiletic style, Lawrence elsewhere challenges his audience to action by asking them to contemplate the love of the divine Christ, portrayed as both the shepherd seeking his sheep and the woman seeking her coin: “O Brothers, if for our salvation God labored so much—Christ, true God, that shepherd seeking the sheep that was lost, that most diligent woman of divine compassion,

100. Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible: With a Commentary and Critical Notes*, new ed., with the author’s final corrections (repr., Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), 3:457.

101. In *God and the Goddesses*, Newman notes that Blessed Henry Suso’s “devotion to Christ as Eternal Wisdom” manifested itself in his “*Horologium Sapientiae* or *Clock of Wisdom*,” a pious work of the mid-fourteenth century that “enjoyed a phenomenal success” (206–7); yet “in 1570 Alcuin’s *Missa de sancta Sapientia* [Mass of Holy Wisdom], which had inspired Suso, was purged from the revised missal after nearly eight centuries” (315).

102. Lawrence of Brindisi, *Dominicale secundum*, *In dominica III post pentecosten* [On the third Sunday after Pentecost] 3, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 8.

seeking with such carefulness the lost drachma—Ah! Doesn't reason itself demand that we, too, do something on behalf of our salvation?"¹⁰³ For Lawrence, as for so many others before him, the woman seeking her lost coin is God—Jesus Christ; and Christ intended to portray himself as the woman of this parable.

The Love of a Mother Hen

Lawrence also speaks of these three parables in conjunction with other passages that portray God's mercy with female imagery. In one sermon, he mentions these parables right after he discusses Christ comparing himself to a mother hen (Matt 23:37; Luke 13:34). Lawrence says that "Christ rightly compared his own love to the love of a hen toward her chicks," and he describes the hen as tenacious in its protective love: "By virtue of its total love for its chicks, this bird scorns every danger and fights with birds of prey—in order to save its chick."¹⁰⁴ Lawrence immediately goes on to explain that in the three parables of the shepherd, the woman, and the loving father, Christ shows how much he values human salvation. For Lawrence, the strength of Christ's longing for human salvation is displayed in the mother hen fighting for her endangered chick, as well as in the woman searching for her missing drachma.

God is the Father and Mother of Us All

In addition to identifying this woman as Christ and discussing her in connection with the mother bird who also displays Christ's love, Lawrence raises the question of why Christ is called a woman (and a shepherd and a father) in this passage. In answering this query, Lawrence explains that "Christ is certainly called a shepherd, a woman, and a father because all these are entirely names of compassion and love."¹⁰⁵ In the word "woman"—as in the word "father"—Lawrence finds a name for Christ that calls to mind his compassion and symbolizes his love.

Lawrence's understanding of the connection between divine compassion and maternal love is brought out even more clearly in another homily where he considers these three parables of divine love. Shortly before introducing the woman "searching everywhere for her lost drachma with greatest diligence" as an example of how "the Lord wished to show that he himself longs for the salvation of sinners in this way," Lawrence reflects upon the parental love of God as displayed in Psalm 102:13 and Isaiah 49:15.¹⁰⁶ He quotes Psalm 102:13—"Just as a father feels pity for his children, the Lord has pitied those who fear him"—and Isaiah 49:15-16: "Can a woman forget

103. Lawrence of Brindisi, *Quadragesimale secundum, In sabbato dominicae secundae quadragesimae* [On the Saturday of the second Sunday of Lent] 6, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 5, pt. 2.

104. Lawrence of Brindisi, *Dominicale primum, In dominica XVI post pentecosten* [On the sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost] 1.6, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 8.

105. Lawrence of Brindisi, *Dominicale primum, In dominica III post pentecosten* [On the third Sunday after Pentecost] 2, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 8.

106. Lawrence of Brindisi, *Quadragesimale tertium, In feria quinta dominicae primae quadragesimae* [On the Friday of the first Sunday of Lent] 1.6, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 6.

her own baby, so that she does not feel pity for the child of her own womb? Even if she herself forgets, I will still not forget you. Behold, I have marked you on my hands.”¹⁰⁷ Reflecting on the compassion of God displayed in these texts—which he describes as “more than maternal”¹⁰⁸—Lawrence explains that the love that fathers and mothers have for their children is a created reflection of God’s love. He indicates that just as fatherly and motherly love reflect God’s love, God is likewise both a father and also a mother to us: “God wished this innate compassion to be also inborn in the hearts of fathers and mothers—so that from this source, we would know the heart of the mercy of God, who is simultaneously both the father and the mother of us all.”¹⁰⁹ According to St. Lawrence of Brindisi, Christ is the woman searching everywhere for what she lost—and God is a mother to us all.

Thus St. Lawrence of Brindisi continued the tradition of identifying the woman and the shepherd of Luke 15 as Christ, and of drawing out feminine imagery for God; yet he did not reduplicate the Augustinian and Gregorian line of interpretation that had been enshrined in such places as the medieval *Glossa*, Lombard’s *Sentences*, and the *Postilla* of Nicholas of Lyra. Gone were the usual references to the woman as the feminine figure of divine Wisdom in particular—as well as the traditional explanations that the woman lit her lamp when divine Wisdom illuminated the clay of Christ’s flesh through her incarnation.

Yet this Augustinian and Gregorian line of interpretation was not lost altogether within the stream of Christian thought: it endured in the continued practice of reinscribing patristic interpretations of the biblical text. Across the centuries that followed the rise of the Reformation—in addition to reprintings of the original works of Augustine and Gregory themselves—the perspective of these Fathers on Luke 15 retained a place within various Catholic publications.

In his commentary on Luke, the renowned Jesuit Catholic biblical exegete Cornelius a Lapide (d. 1637) quoted in depth from Gregory the Great’s homily on the woman with the lost coin.¹¹⁰ Likewise, in a seventeenth-century treatise on the sources of Christian wisdom—covering such topics as loving God with one’s whole heart, fleeing from sin, spurning the things of this world, and contemplating eternity—the Jesuit author Franciscus Le Roy cited at length the words of Augustine as well as Gregory the Great on divine Wisdom as the woman of Luke 15, seeking her coin by lighting her lamp in her incarnation.¹¹¹

107. Lawrence of Brindisi, *Quadragesimale tertium*, *In feria quinta dominicae primae quadragesimae* 1.5, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 6.

108. Lawrence of Brindisi, *Quadragesimale tertium*, *In feria quinta dominicae primae quadragesimae* 1.5, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 6.

109. Lawrence of Brindisi, *Quadragesimale tertium*, *In feria quinta dominicae primae quadragesimae* 1.5, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 6.

110. Cornelius a Lapide, *Commentaria in quatuor evangelia* [Commentaries on the Four Gospels], 4th ed., emended (Turin: Marietti, 1935), 370–71.

111. Franciscus Le Roy, *Porticus Salomonis* [Solomon’s Portico] (Liège: Hovius, 1668), 197, <https://books.google.com/books?id=T19oAAAAcAAJ>.

In 1668 an Oratorian priest in Rome named Giuseppe Mansi published a compilation of previous commentaries on the Gospels, arranged according to the order of Sunday readings. On Luke 15:8-10, read on the third Sunday after Pentecost, Mansi replicated the Gregorian line of interpretation as it was preserved in the *Glossa ordinaria* and the work of Nicholas of Lyra—perpetuating the understanding that the woman of Luke 15 is “Dei Sapientia”—the “Wisdom of God”—who lights her lamp to search for lost humanity when she appears in the flesh. Given its liturgical arrangement, it seems reasonable to suppose that this work would have had a direct influence on the content of preaching in its time.

In 1670 David Lenfant, OP, published a compilation of St. Augustine of Hippo’s explanations of various Scripture passages, gathered from throughout Augustine’s corpus and conveniently arranged according to the order of biblical text. This included, on Luke 15:8-10, St. Augustine’s commentaries on Psalms 103 and 138—where Augustine identified the woman of Luke 15 with “Sapientia Dei,” the Wisdom of God, and indicated that the flesh of Christ is the lamp of divine Wisdom.¹¹²

In 1740 Jacques-François Willerval published a compilation of Scripture readings and corresponding traditional commentaries—to be read, after the manner of a breviary, on the feasts of various saints honored locally in Douai. In celebration of the repentant sinner St. Mary of Egypt, Luke 15:8-10 was read, along with a replication of Gregory the Great’s homily on this passage.¹¹³ The eighteenth century likewise saw the publication of more than one edition of Sunday Gospel readings with corresponding commentary, which replicated the words of Gregory the Great on the woman with the lost coin in explanation of the Gospel text for the third Sunday after Pentecost (Luke 15:1-10). These included editions printed by the Jesuits in Wroclaw in 1734¹¹⁴ as well as an edition put forth by another publisher in Innsbruck and Augsburg in 1772.¹¹⁵

In the nineteenth century, Gregory’s perspective on the woman of Luke 15 was well enough known that a priest in France would find an occasion to replicate and expound upon it while writing a book on the symbolism of church bells. For this author, the monastic ringing of the bells during the darkness of the night in connection with Matins and the *Te Deum* was enough to call to mind Gregory’s portrayal of divine Wisdom lighting her lamp to search for sinners through her incarnation in Christ. This French work not only reprinted Gregory’s Latin text but also summarized and expanded upon it at length in the vernacular. The author perpetuated Gregory’s portrayal of this woman as “eternal Wisdom” incarnate in Christ: “La femme, dit ce grand docteur,

112. David Lenfant, ed., *Biblia Augustiniana* [Augustinian Bible], vol. 2 (Paris: Cramoisy, 1670), 293, <https://books.google.com/books?id=clfUIWqWNG0C>.

113. Willerval, Jacques-François, *Officia propria sanctorum* [Special Offices of the Saints] (Douay: Willerval, 1740), 51–52, <https://books.google.com/books?id=i1W7ch8m94kC>.

114. *Breviarium scripturisticum in dominicalia totius anni Evangelia* [A Scriptural Breviary on the Sunday Gospels of the Whole Year] (Wroclaw: Typis Academicis Collegii Societatis Jesu, [1734]), 164–66, <https://books.google.com/books?id=2vFgAAAaAAJ>.

115. *Breviarium scripturisticum in dominicalia totius anni Evangelia* (Wolff, 1772), 160, <https://books.google.com/books?id=6INyAAAaAAJ>.

figure en ce lieu Jésus-Christ lui-même l'éternelle sagesse de Dieu: *Christus significatur per mulierem.*"¹¹⁶ In connection with the nighttime office of Matins, he emphasized that divine Wisdom lights her lamp in the incarnation in order to dispel this world's darkness—and he presented the ringing of the bells during the *Te Deum* as symbolic of this woman's wild rejoicing at the recovery of her drachma, lost humanity.¹¹⁷ This work was popular enough to be published again, in a revised form, in 1883.¹¹⁸

Within the world of Anglicanism, the controversial Oxford Movement occasioned renewed contact, in the nineteenth century, with medieval and patristic sources that interpreted the woman of Luke 15 as divine Wisdom. In 1843 John Henry Parker and Rivington—presses associated with the Oxford Movement—published an English translation of Thomas Aquinas's *Catena Aurea*, which reproduced Gregory's view of the woman seeking her lost coin as divine Wisdom incarnate in Christ.¹¹⁹ In 1876 James Parker followed this up with the publication of *A Commentary on the Epistles and Gospels in the Book of Common Prayer*, which included patristic commentary on Luke 15:1-10, read on the third Sunday after Trinity Sunday. The editor of this work provides quotations from Augustine on this woman as "the Wisdom of God," and also promotes Gregory's perspective as perpetuated in Thomas Aquinas's "golden chain" of patristic commentary: "He Who is signified by the Shepherd, is signified also by the woman. For it is God Himself, God and the wisdom of God; . . . The woman lighted a candle, because the wisdom of God appeared in man. For the candle is a light in an earthen vessel, but the light in an earthen vessel is the Godhead in the flesh."¹²⁰ To the extent that authors throughout the ages have replicated Augustinian and Gregorian interpretations of this passage, they have kept alive the memory of the woman of Luke 15 as a symbol for divine Wisdom incarnate in Christ.

Conclusion

While theologians on both sides of the contemporary debate over feminine-gendered language for God have frequently portrayed Christ's identification with Sophia as fading or disappearing after the days of the early church, this article has illustrated one way in which belief in the divinity of Woman Wisdom survived and thrived throughout much of Christian history. The woman seeking her lost coin (Luke 15:8-10) was

116. Prêtre du clergé paroissial, *Essai sur le symbolisme de la cloche dans ses rapports et ses harmonies avec la religion* (Poitiers: Henri Oudin, 1859), 336, <https://books.google.com/books?id=x3qCOqY31CYC>.

117. Prêtre du clergé paroissial, *Essai*, 336–39.

118. Abbé Sauveterre, *Essai sur le symbolisme de la cloche dans ses rapports et ses harmonies avec la religion* (Paris: Librairie Catholique internationale de l'oeuvre de Saint-Paul, 1883), <https://books.google.com/books?id=Yc5iu6jvaEoC>.

119. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers*, vol. 3, pt. 2 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1843), 527–28.

120. E. F. S., *A Commentary on the Epistles and Gospels in the Book of Common Prayer* (Oxford: James Parker, 1876), 3:69–70, <https://books.google.com/books?id=CbICAAQAQAAJ>.

frequently interpreted as a representation of God—and in particular, as a reference to the feminine figure of divine Sophia searching for lost humanity. In the course of Catholic thought, this belief was embedded at the very center of ecclesiastical theology. It was promoted by Fathers and Doctors of the Church such as St. Augustine of Hippo and Pope St. Gregory the Great—and after them, by foundational theologians such as St. Bede the Venerable, Peter Lombard, the compilers of the *Glossa ordinaria*, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Nicholas of Lyra. The divinity of the woman with the lost coin was embraced by saints such as St. Agobard of Lyons and St. Aelred of Rievaulx, by reformers such as Gerhoh of Reichersburg, and by other Doctors of the Church such as St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio and St. Lawrence of Brindisi. Theologians and preachers replicated Augustinian and Gregorian statements on Luke 15:8-10 and also offered their own additional, speculative reflections on the fittingness of portraying God with female imagery—relating the woman of Luke 15 to numerous other Scripture passages that they saw as similarly representing God in feminine form.

The practice of reading texts with an eye toward a deeper, spiritual meaning¹²¹ also allowed medieval theologians to see God portrayed as a female figure not only in texts that are clearly talking about God, but also in texts that—to the eyes of a present-day historical-critical exegete—are simply talking about flesh-and-blood women. Thus, the “good woman” of Sirach 26:21, whose beauty of character is as radiant as the sun, was read in the Middle Ages as a reference to divine Wisdom herself; and the wise woman of Proverbs 14:1, who builds up her own house instead of tearing it down, was another symbol for God. Similarly, the “strong woman” at the end of Proverbs (Prov 31:10)—who orders her house’s affairs, clothes herself in purple, and considers a field and buys it—was not seen just as an ideal human being, but was also viewed as a symbol for divine Wisdom herself in all the splendor of her omnipotent providence.

These past theologians were not profeminists. They did not employ feminine language for God as frequently as they used masculine language for God; and imagining God in female form did not free them from gender stereotyping. Nor did their use of female language for God occur in the context of challenging patriarchy. Yet these interpreters of Luke 15 viewed “shepherd,” “father,” and “woman” as parallel images for God—just as feminist theologians do today. They believed that the Gospel of Luke portrayed God as a woman, without any fear that such a portrayal might be incompatible with other evangelical depictions of God and Jesus as Father and Son.¹²² Perhaps

121. See footnote 53, above.

122. Present-day arguments against various forms of feminine language for God often appeal to Gospel narratives such as Jesus calling God “Abba” (Mark 14:36), presenting himself as the Son and revelation of God the Father (John 14:9–13; cf. Matt 11:27; Luke 10:22), teaching the disciples to pray to God as “Father,” or commissioning the disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19). See, e.g., the arguments of Robert Jenson, Gerhard Forde, Thomas Torrance, Thomas Hopko, and Alvin Kimel in Kimel, ed., *Speaking the Christian God*, 101, 103; 117–19; 120, 132, 140–43; 161; 188–94, 199, 204, 207. Benedict Ashley similarly asserts that “maleness is essential to Jesus as New Adam” and as “the image of the Father” (*Justice* 101, 103). For alternative interpretations of the scriptural data, see Ruether, “Christology: Can a Male Savior Save

in part because their reflections on female symbolism for God did not take place in the context of a debate over gender roles, past theologians were more accepting of feminine language for God than are many today who argue against such language in the name of the Christian tradition.

When the four most recent popes employed female imagery for God, they were in fact carrying forward a long tradition shaped by numerous Church Fathers, saints, and Doctors of the Church. With their elaborations on scriptural images of God in female form, these early and medieval ecclesiastical authorities lend their voices to those today who wish to reimagine God as a woman searching for her lost coin and to reverence Christ as incarnate divine Sophia. In the fullness of Catholic belief in the Latin West, God is a baker-woman and a woman searching diligently, protective as a mother bird—like a man and like a woman, our Lord and our Lady, truly our Father and also our Mother.

Author biography

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