". . . a brave attempt to take discussion of the creed out of the hands of theologians and academics and turn it over to ordinary Christians. A good introduction to alternative theological positions, it blends careful scholarship with experiential and sermonic materials in an interesting and engaging way."

The Rev. Suzanne R. Hiatt, L.L.D.
Professor of Pastoral Theology
Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Mass.

"This book will make those who insist on exclusively patriarchal claims about God very uncomfortable, for they will find their point of view countered both in Scripture and in the writings of the early church fathers, leading mystics, and revered saints. Examining the Nicene Creed, the foundational creed of orthodox theology, it becomes increasingly clear to the reader that God is beyond gender specificity, but also that our worship and our theology are enhanced in the use of the rich feminine imagery found in our Christian tradition."

The Rt. Rev Joe Morris Doss
Bishop of the Diocese of New Jersey

"Geitz' blend of traditional Christian belief and piety with feminist convictions is an eye-opener. Especially for the many dedicated church people who question whether Christian faith and feminism can live happily and honestly together, her work is a great help. Geitz is a good guide for all who want to live the fullness of Christian faith as twentieth-century women."

The Rev. Patricia Wilson-Kastner, Ph.D.
author of Faith, Feminism, and the Christ

"*Gender and the Nicene Creed* stays within the parameters of the historic faith . . . is theologically sound . . . mediating in tone, irenic in spirit . . . quite accessible and readable . . . distinctive within its genre. I know of no such other book."

Timothy Sedgwick, Ph.D.
Professor, of Church Ethics and Moral Theology
Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, Evanston, Ill.

GENDER AND THE NICENE CREED

ELIZABETH RANKIN GEITZ

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CHAPTER FOUR

One Lord Jesus Christ

In the second article of the Nicene Creed, we affirm that the creator became creature.[1] How impossible this seems, yet this is the central understanding of ourselves as Christian people. It is here, in the second article, that we diverge from our Jewish and Islamic sisters and brothers. It is here that our identity as Christians, as distinct from other world religions, becomes manifest.

Karl Barth writes: "Here the hidden, the eternal and incomprehensible God has taken visible form. Here the Almighty is mighty in a quite definite, particular, earthly happening. Here the Creator Himself has become creature and therefore objective reality."[2]

In this "quite definite, particular, earthly happening" God is revealed as male. This fact leads theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether to ask, "Can a male savior save women?"[3] and leads other theologians to assert that God is revealed as male, and therefore exclusively masculine imagery and pronouns for God are appropriate. For example, Donald Bloesch insists that male language for God better expresses God's nature because "for the most part God chooses to relate himself to us as masculine"[4] (as the male Jesus). Similarly, Thomas F. Torrance writes: "In the indissoluble oneness between God and man in the person of his incarnate Son, God has once and for all incorporated *anthropic* ingredients into his self-revelation in Christ — that is, ingredients that cannot be treated as merely figurative, for they are integral to the word of God *become*

flesh . . . This means that it is utterly — indeed, divinely — impossible for us to probe behind the revelation with which God has once and for all clothed himself in Jesus Christ."[5]

It is important to state that as creator became creature, the scandal of particularity was unavoidable. By the scandal of particularity, I mean all the particulars of God's "creatureliness." As Jesus Christ, God came to us as a Middle Eastern Jewish male. Yet, in discussions of the particularity of God's revelation, it is often only Jesus' maleness that is mentioned.

In my first field education parish in seminary, I vividly remember being asked, "How can you be a priest? Jesus was not female." I have since asked men of color if they have ever been asked a similar question, such as, "How can you be a priest? Jesus was not Hispanic, Asian, Black, or Korean." Not surprisingly, not one had ever encountered such a question. Thus, it is to the particularity of Jesus' maleness that I now turn.

In *Faith, Feminism, and the Christ*, Patricia Wilson-Kastner states: "To exalt the concrete details of Jesus' life in an exclusive way is to miss the whole point of the Incarnation, to misapprehend the nature of divine revelation, and in the most proper sense, to espouse heresy."[6] Why? Because throughout the tradition of our church, it is Jesus' humanity that is stressed in the incarnation, not his maleness.

Womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant agrees. "If Jesus Christ were a Saviour of men then it is true the maleness of Christ would be paramount. But if Christ is a Saviour of all, then it is the humanity — the wholeness — of Christ which is significant."[7]

In echoing such sentiments, Wilson-Kastner and Grant take their place in a long history of Christian tradition. In his treatise *On the Incarnation*, written in the fourth century, St. Athanasius writes: "It was our sorry case that caused the Word to come down, our transgression that called out His love for us, so that He made haste to help us and to appear among us. It is we who were the cause of

His taking human form, and for our salvation that in His great love He was both born and manifested in a human body."[8]

St. Athanasius is asserting here that the significance of the incarnation is that God assumed *human* form, not that God assumed a *male* form. Athanasius goes on to state that "what has not been assumed has not been redeemed."[9] Since Jesus is the redeemer of all humankind, God assumed human form, which of necessity had to be either male or female. Since Jesus came to save all of humankind and in Christ "there is no longer male and female" (Gal. 3:28), it is not gender that is of significance, but Jesus' humanity.

St. Paul also stresses Jesus' humanity rather than his maleness, in the great Christological hymn in Philippians 2:5-11:

> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
> who, though he was in the form of God,
> did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
> but emptied himself
> taking the form of a slave
> being born in human likeness.
> And being found in human form
> he humbled himself
> and became obedient to the point of death —
> even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:5 - 8)

In this passage, St. Paul could have used the Greek word *aner*, meaning "male" but instead he uses the word *anthropos*, which means "human."

Similarly, a homily written by St. Basil of Caesarea in 379 states: "God on earth, God among us! No longer the God who gives his law amid flashes of lightening . . . but the God who speaks gently and with kindness in a human body to his kindred."[10]

In 389, St. Gregory of Nazianzus wrote: "Conceived of the Virgin who had been purified by the Spirit in her body and soul, it is truly God who assumes humanity ..."[11]

Thus, it is clear throughout the tradition of our church

and in scripture itself that it is God's assumption of human form that is of significance in the incarnation, not God's assumption of a male form.

Perhaps it is to make just such a distinction that Jesus refers to himself as a mother hen in both Matthew and Luke. In imaging himself as a female bird, Jesus moves beyond the constraints of the particularity of the incarnation. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34).

Jesus knew, when he compared himself to a mother hen, that he was using a well-known image for God from the Hebrew scriptures. "Certainly the author of 2 Esdras, an apocryphal book dating from the first century C.E., understood Jesus' hen image as tapping into a Hebrew understanding of God as both father and mother and internal authentic Self."[12] 2 Esdras 1:28 - 30 states: "Thus says the Lord Almighty; Have I not entreated you as a father entreats his sons or a mother her daughters or a nurse her children, so that you should be my people and I should be your God, and that you should be my children and I should be your father? I gathered you as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings."

Jesus' imaging of himself as mother hen was compelling enough to be quoted by both St. Augustine and St. Anselm of Canterbury, two men of immense theological importance in Western Christianity. In the fourth century, St. Augustine wrote: "Let us put our egg under the wings of that Hen of the Gospel, which crieth out to that false and abandoned city, 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen her chickens, and thou wouldest not!'"[13] Similarly, St. Anselm, who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1093, wrote: "But you, Jesus, good lord, are you not also a mother? Are you not that mother who, like a hen, collects her chickens under her wings? Truly, master, you are a mother."[14]

If Jesus, St. Augustine, and St. Anselm of Canterbury

can all image Jesus as mother hen, why is similar imaging so difficult for us today? The Supplemental Liturgical Texts of 1989 was a trial liturgy in the Episcopal Church using inclusive imagery for God and Jesus, taken from scripture. The service of Holy Communion stated: "Living among us, Jesus loved us. He yearned to draw all the world to himself, as a hen gathers her young under her wings, yet we would not . . ."[15] Labeled as "too controversial" this section was changed in subsequent trial liturgies to, "He yearned to draw all the world to himself yet we were heedless of his call to walk in love."[16]

Perhaps this imagery was labeled controversial because most people focus on the "quite definite, particular, earthly happening,"[17] as Barth mentions. The earthly happening was indeed male, yet, as male, Jesus imaged himself as mother hen.

Furthermore, while the incarnate Christ was male, it can be argued that the pre-incarnate Word is without body and therefore, like the first person of the Trinity, is neither male nor female. In writing of the pre-existent Christ, the Word, in the fourth century, St. Athanasius states: "He has not assumed a body as proper to His own nature, far from it, for *as the Word He is without body.*"[18]

Contemporary Lutheran theologian Robert W. Bertram agrees: "By now it should no longer be necessary (though alas it is) to demonstrate that Jesus' addressing God as *'Abba'* and 'Father' hardly implies that God is male, any more than the pre-incarnate 'Son' is."[19]

Although some theologians such as St. Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin view Christ's ascension as bodily, others view it as the ascension of a spiritual body in keeping with Pauline theology. In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul asserts: "So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15:42-44).

In line with this Pauline understanding, Anglican theologian Sarah Coakley stated in a speech given at the

Lambeth Conference in 1988: "Of course Jesus of Nazareth was indisputably a man, but surely we cannot say that the risen Christ, the second person of the Trinity, is physically male, any more than we really want to say ... that the Father is a man."[20]

In making such an assertion, it must be noted that whereas the incarnation had a beginning, it has not ended. In *Loving the Questions*, Marianne H. Micks writes: "It was Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate Logos, who was resurrected and who ascended. Humanity is bonded to divinity for all time."[21]

Coakley's assertion is not meant to suggest that the incarnation is negated when Christ ascends. It means, rather, that the risen and ascended Christ is beyond the boundaries of sexual distinction. It is humanity that is bonded to divinity for all time, not mere maleness. Coakley's statement facilitates this correct theological understanding of the incarnation.

In addition, it is important to stress that throughout the Christian tradition, even the incarnate Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, was consistently imaged as both male and female. It is for this reason that Anglican theologian Mary Tanner stated at the Lambeth Conference of 1988 that the church needs to "recapture certain neglected strands of the tradition, especially from the mystics of the church, that help to point our way into the future."[22]

Recapturing and recovering lost tradition is what I am suggesting here, not inventing something out of whole cloth to answer only a twentieth-century concern. As committed Christians isn't it appropriate that we teach all of the tradition of our church rather than just part of it?

One of the earliest images of Jesus as both male and female was written in the second century by St. Clement of Alexandria: "The Word (Christ) is everything to His little ones, both father and mother."[23] Similarly, in his *Baptismal Instructions*, St. John Chrysostom writes: "Just as a woman nurtures her offspring with her own blood and milk, so also Christ continuously nurtures with his own blood those whom He has begotten."[24]

St. Augustine speaks of Christ as a nursing mother: "He who has promised us heavenly food has nourished us on milk, having recourse to a mother's tenderness. For just as a mother, suckling her infant, transfers from her flesh the very same food which otherwise would be unsuited to a babe . . . so our Lord, in order to convert His wisdom into milk for our benefit came to us clothed in flesh."[25] In his *Confessions* he wrote, "For 'the Word was made flesh,' that Thy wisdom, whereby Thou createdst all things, might provide milk for our infant state."[26]

In the twelfth century, St. Bernard of Clairvaux also refers to Jesus as mother: "Do not let the roughness of our life frighten your tender years. If you feel the stings of temptation . . . suck not so much the wounds as the breasts of the Crucified. He will be your mother, and you will be his son."[27] Similarly, in the fourteenth century, St. Catherine of Siena wrote to Pope Urban VI, urging him to "amend in truth those who are feeding at the breast of your sweet Spouse."[28]

In addition, Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth-century English anchoress, observes: "As we know, our own mother bore us only into pain and dying. But our true mother Jesus, who is all love, bears us into joy and endless living."[29] In her book of revelations, *Showings,* she goes on to state: "(When we are afraid, Christ) wants us to act as a meek child, saying: My kind Mother, my gracious Mother, my beloved Mother, have mercy on me . . . The sweet and gracious hands of our Mother are ready and diligent about us; for (Christ) in all this work exercises the true office of a kind nurse, who has nothing else to do but attend to the safety of her child."[30]

For an excellent discussion of Jesus as mother, see Caroline Walker Bynum's *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages.*

Contemporary theologian William Eichelberger sees Jesus not only as female, but as Black female: "It is my feeling that God is now manifesting Himself, and has been for over 450 years, in the form of the Black American Woman as mother, as wife, as nourisher, sustainer and pre-

server of life, the Suffering Servant who is despised and rejected by men (sic), a personality of sorrow who is acquainted with grief."[31] In my own life I have been blessed by knowing two such women, who through their love and caring taught me much about the love of God, Anner Weakley and Annie Ruth Livingston. Knowing them makes Eichelberger's assertion seem quite plausible to me.

When I first began reading of Christ as female, I was definitely confused. How could anyone think of Jesus Christ, so obviously a male, as female? I was, of course, focusing on the "particular earthly happening" of the second person of the Trinity as discussed by Barth. The concept of Christ as female had never occurred to me. And why would it? Such teaching is hardly part of most Sunday School curricula. Even so, saints and theologians throughout the history of Christianity have referred to Jesus as mother.

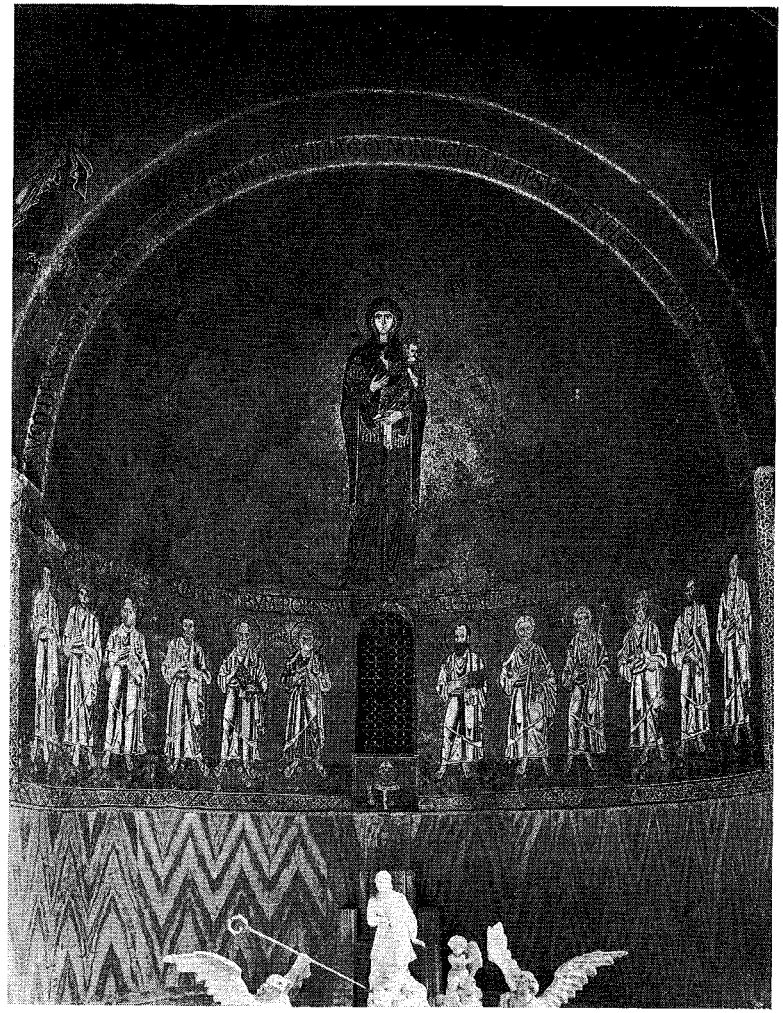
In the twelfth century, St. Hildegard of Bingen had a vision of Christ as female:

> During the celebration on the eve of our Lord's Nativity, around the hour of the divine sacrifice, I entered a trance and saw something like a sun of marvelous brightness in the heaven, and in the middle of the sun the likeness of a virgin whose appearance was exceedingly beautiful in form and desirable to see. She was seated on a throne. Her hair was loosened over her shoulders, and on her head was a crown of the most splendid gold. In her right hand was a golden chalice. She was emerging from the sun which surrounded her on all sides. From the virgin herself emanated a splendor of great brilliance, which seemed at first to fill the place of our dwelling. Then gradually expanding after some period of time, it seemed to fill the whole earth.
>
> Now next to that same sun there appeared a great cloud, extremely dark and horrible to see. When I gazed at the cloud, it rushed abruptly against the sun, darkened it, and cut off its splendor from the earth for some time. I saw this happen very often, moreover, so that the world was by turns darkened by the cloud and again illuminated by the sun. Whenever it happened that the cloud approached the sun and obstructed its light from the earth, the virgin who was enthroned within the sun seemed to be weeping copiously, as if grieving greatly because of the darkening of the world. I beheld this vision throughout that day without interruption, and all the following night, for I remained ever wakeful in prayer.
>
> On the holy day of Christmas, now, when the solemnities of the masses were being celebrated, I asked the holy angel of God who appeared to me what sort of vision that was and what significance it had. He replied to me concerning that virgin, for I especially desired to know who she was, and he said: "That virgin who you see is the sacred humanity of the Lord Jesus."[32]

Just as female images for God can be healing for both women and men, so too can feminine images of Jesus that have been used throughout the tradition of our church. Kathleen Fischer observes: "Theological assertions that the risen Christ transcends the concrete particulars of history do not have the power that a single image has to bring about this emotional healing and focus for worship. Women's imaginations need the deep emotional healing and affirmation that come from seeing the image and likeness of Christ conveyed more fully in relation to them . . . To say that Christ cannot be imaged as a woman is to imply that women cannot, in fact, image Christ."[33] What might it do to your self-image never to see yourself in the likeness of Christ? How might the world be different if both women and men could be seen in Christ's image?

Yes, "We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ." When I repeat these words of the Nicene Creed, I mean: "I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, who is imaged as both male and female, by Jesus himself and throughout the tradition of our church."

When will this tradition be recovered in the liturgy and creeds of our church? When will there be another ecumenical council to consider this question?



"I am both God and flesh.
I am the image of father
and of mother."
(Translation of Latin in the mosaic)

Virgin and Child with Apostles, 12th century. Apse mosaic.
Cattedrale di S. Maria Assunta, Torcello, Italy.
Photo credit: Alinari/Art Resource, NY.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ONLY SON OF GOD

Needless to say, the issue of masculine and feminine imagery for Jesus was hardly a concern when the creeds were being formulated. The christological controversy of the fourth century involved the question of Jesus' humanity and divinity.

This question arose at a particular time in the history of the Christian church. It is important to place the controversy within its proper historical context. The first Council of Nicea met in 325, thirteen years after a major turning point in Christian history. In 312, Constantine entered Rome as victor. When he became emperor he granted all Christians full freedom of worship. Before his victory, Christians who publicly confessed their faith were persecuted. Once the persecutions ended and pressure from the central government was removed, intra-Christian issues began to emerge.[1] One such issue was related to the identity of Jesus as both God and human.

Arius was an Alexandrian presbyter who believed that the Logos, or second person of the Trinity, could not be God in the proper sense but instead performed a mediatorial role in the relation of God to the world. He believed that the Logos belonged to the created order and was "a quite superior creature, ranking above all others."[2] Nevertheless, the Logos was not God.

St. Athanasius, on the other hand, believed that "redemption can occur only through God's active presence with people . . . His understanding of redemption made no

sense if the Logos was a being 'between' the divine and the human. It made sense only if the Logos was God's way of being personally present and active in the world."[3]

Arius' position was repudiated in the creed formulated at the Council of Nicaea in 325. The creed declares that "the Logos is not a creature but is eternally born out of God himself and is therefore divine in the same sense as the Father."[4] Hence the words in the Nicene Creed, "the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father."

In *The Making of the Creeds*, Frances Young states: "The one Lord was 'of the same substance' as the Father, one God identical in substance, action and will . . . It really was God, God's self, who was born in the Lord Jesus Christ."[5]

When I say that Jesus is of one being with the Father, I am asserting that he is of one being with the first person of the Trinity, who is described in scripture with numerous images, one of which is Father. In the tradition of apophatic theology, discussed earlier, just as the first person of the Trinity is Father, the first person is not Father. Just as the first person is Mother, the first person is not Mother. Just as the first person is Rock, the first person is not Rock.

In keeping with this tradition, the Eleventh Council of Toledo in Spain left us a long creed that presented the Son as being generated "from the womb of the Father."[6]

The juxtaposition of such images breaks down irreparably any use of one image as an absolute. Whatever one might say after mentioning "the womb of the Father," the masculine and feminine are never the same. Throughout the history of our church, such images have been placed side by side with an awareness that it expresses that God is this and also that, that none of the images can be taken literally.

In addition, in reciting the second article of the creed, I am stating that Christ is of one Being with God who is beyond gender. Classical theology has always held that God is beyond gender, even while imaging God with pri-

marily male imagery. If the creed states that the second person of the Trinity is "of one Being" with the first, does it not follow that Christ, too, must of necessity be eternally and essentially beyond gender distinctions? How can a gender-bound being be of the same substance, or *homoousios*, with a being beyond gender restrictions? Yes, the incarnate Christ was male, which belongs to Christ's person, or *hypostasis*. However, his substance, or *ousia*, belongs to the universal and is beyond gender designation.

In addition to referring to Jesus as *homoousios* with God, sources from the early church refer to Jesus as the "child" of God, rather than exclusively as the "Son" of God. The first written record of a eucharistic service is contained in the *Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, written in the early third century. In this service, Jesus is referred to twice as "child" rather than "son": "We render thanks to you, O God, through your beloved child Jesus Christ, whom in the last times you sent to us a saviour and redeemer and angel of your will."[7] Further, "that we may praise and glorify you through your child Jesus Christ."[8]

This service refers to Jesus as both the child and the son of God. This reference to Jesus as the "child of God" enables both women and men to feel included in such a description. It also does justice to Jesus' use of maternal images of himself, as well as the witness of numerous church fathers and theologians of both male and female images of Christ.

Yes, "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ . . . of one Being with the Father." In making this assertion, I am conscious that if the Father is beyond gender distinction and Jesus is of "one being with the Father", then Jesus too, must essentially and eternally be beyond gender designation. This fact bears significant relevance to a correct theological understanding of who Jesus is and will be discussed in more depth in chapter IX on the Trinity.

May the light shine on this and other truths regarding the nature of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the only child of God.

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4. Ibid., 18.

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6. Gerald O'Collins, S.J. and Mary Venturini, *Believing: Understanding the Creed* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 50.

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8. Ibid., 24.

Chapter VI

1. Regarding the depiction of Mary in classical art, womanist theologian Cain Hope Felder writes: "Throughout the world it has become standard for Christians to think of almost all biblical characters from Noah, Abraham,

Miriam, Moses, the pharaohs, even the Queen of Sheba, to Mary and Joseph, and virtually all of the New Testament personalities as typical Europeans. For example . . . pictorial representations of her [Mary] today are invariably the image of a European. This centerpiece of much modern Christian art is perceived as an accurate image of the original Madonna. Consequently, most people believe that the mother of Jesus of Nazareth was a woman who resembled the ordinary European of today. Such presumptions are only now beginning to be substantively challenged by Afrocentric modes of biblical interpretation as studies devote more attention to ancient iconography and the importance of Egyptian and Ethiopian civilizations in the shaping of the biblical world." "Cultural Ideology, Afrocentrism and Biblical Interpretation", in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, vol. II 1980-1992, ed. James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 188. It should be noted that not all womanist theologians agree with Felder's viewpoint.

2. Renita J. Weems, *Just A Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego, CA: LuraMedia, 1988), 122.

3. Quoted in Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 259.

4. Deborah F. Middleton, "The Story of Mary: Luke's Version," *New Blackfriars* (1989), 561.

5. J. Robert Wright, Patristics Handout, General Theological Seminary.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Middleton, "The Story of Mary," 561.