

Differentiated Mutuality in Genesis 1–3 and Proverbs 1–9: a Feminist Hermeneutic Against Dualism and Inversion

Employing a dialogical¹ and rhetorical² feminist hermeneutic, this essay argues that Genesis 1–3 and Proverbs 1–9 articulate a theology of differentiated mutuality in which man and woman together manifest the *imago Dei*. A dialogical approach honours each text in its ancient setting and listens to its voice as an interlocutor; a rhetorical approach examines literary form and lexical nuance as bearers of theological meaning. Together, these methods sustain the thesis that the biblical witness presents sexual difference as a gift ordered to relational communion rather than domination. Where later interpreters reintroduce dualism or inversion, Scripture speaks in a register of mutuality that finds renewed expression in the feminine figure of Wisdom.

Section 1 undertakes a lexical and literary analysis of Genesis 1–3, showing that the creation narratives affirm equality-in-difference and portray hierarchy only as a consequence of the Fall. Section 2 turns to Proverbs 1–9, where personified Wisdom extends the grammar of creation into a sapiential vision of ordered harmony. Section 3 sets these claims within reception history, placing the biblical vision alongside the dualistic subordination of Philo of Alexandria and the separatist soteriology exemplified in Mary Daly, before showing how the methods of Phyllis Trible and Phyllis Bird—attentive to rhetoric, history, and textual integrity—offer constructive correctives.

Overarching these movements is the essay's interpretive arc: that the Hebrew Bible inaugurates a radical re-imagining of creation, gender, and divine-human relationality—one obscured by subsequent interpretative trajectories, whether Hellenistic hierarchies or modern inversions. Accordingly, a feminist hermeneutic grounded in dialogue and rhetoric both retrieves the

¹ Phyllis A. Bird defines her interpretive method as 'fundamentally dialogical', beginning with 'an attempt to formulate the sense of the text in its ancient social and literary context' (p. 126). She maintains that there is 'no tension between historical criticism and feminist commitment' (p. 128), but acknowledges the risk that 'feminist readings can distort ancient meanings to suit modern sensibilities' (p. 129). With this in mind, her dialogical approach aims at 'a more adequate account of our gendered human nature and history', since 'feminism is concerned with wholeness' (p. 130). See Phyllis A. Bird, 'What Makes a Feminist Reading Feminist? A Qualified Answer', in *Escaping Eden: New Feminist Perspectives on the Bible*, ed. by Harold C. Washington, Susan Lochrie Graham, and Pamela Thimmes (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 124–131.

² Phyllis Trible defines her interpretive practice as 'rhetorical criticism', in which 'the major clue to interpretation is the text itself', viewing Scripture as 'a literary creation with an interlocking structure of words and motifs' and insisting that 'proper analysis of form yields proper articulation of meaning' (p. 8). As she writes, 'I want to show how stylistic and rhetorical features of the language illuminate its interpretations' (p. xvii). In this way, Trible's rhetorical method treats literary form as the medium of theology, reading Genesis and other texts through their own linguistic and structural design rather than through external ideological frameworks. See Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. xvii, 8.

Bible's witness to mutuality and exposes readings that reinscribe the antagonisms that the biblical witness resists.

Our reading begins by situating Genesis within its ancient Near Eastern milieu, where it appears as a radical revaluation of God's relationship with creation—one with profound implications for humanity's relationality before God and between the sexes. In the *Enūma Eliš*, Babylonian cosmology grounds order in divine violence, as Marduk subdues chaos personified in the feminine Tīāmat, while Greek metaphysics recasts that struggle as a hierarchy in which form/reason (masculinised) disciplines matter/body (feminised). Against these frameworks, Genesis 1–3 portrays differentiation itself—including sexual difference—as intrinsic to divine harmony. Male and female appear not as rivals but as co-agents of the *imago Dei*, sharing a vocation fractured in neighbouring cosmologies. Subsequent interpretations—from Hellenistic allegory to modern radical feminism—would later re-import the dualisms that the Hebrew text itself resists. Against such readings, this study returns to the language of Genesis 1–3 to test its theology of equality through lexical and rhetorical analysis, hearing the ancient author's voice on its own terms³ and tracing how its literary form encodes mutuality.⁴ Having overturned the violent and hierarchical cosmologies of its world, Genesis articulates a vision of creation as ordered harmony.

Genesis 1:26–27 opens with a collective anthropology: *ādhām*—functioning as a collective singular⁵—denotes “humankind”, so that “male and female” are included from the outset within the bearer of the divine image (Gen. 1:26–27), expressing the universalism inherent within ancient Israel's conception of humanity.⁶ *Ṣelem* (“image”) and *demût* (“likeness”)⁷ express an analogical rather than ontological correspondence between humanity and God,⁸ safeguarding divine transcendence while grounding shared dignity and vocation.⁹ Sexual differentiation in 1:27 marks the *imago Dei* as relational:

³ Bird, 'What Makes a Feminist Reading Feminist? A Qualified Answer', pp. 126, 128.

⁴ Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. xvii, 8.

⁵ F. Maas, 'ādhām', in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. I, ed. by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), pp. 75–87 (p. 75).

⁶ Ibid., pp. 79, 83.

⁷ See F. J. Stendebach, 'ṣelem', in *TDOT*, vol. XII, ed. by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 386–396 (pp. 387–388); and H. D. Preuss, 'dāmāh', in *TDOT*, vol. III, ed. by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 250–260 (p. 257).

⁸ Preuss, 'dāmāh', in *TDOT*, vol. III, p. 259.

⁹ Christin E. Bøsterud observes that woman, 'alongside with her counterpart, the male human being', is created as 'his counterpart and equal partner', together forming 'a collective team . . . necessary for the performance of God's plans for humanity and the wider creation'. See Christin E. Bøsterud, 'Women in the Bible: What can they teach us about gender equality?', *die Skriflig*, 55.1 (2021), e1–e9 (p. 2) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v55i1.2754>.

only in their polarity do humanity's two sexes together reflect the divine image.¹⁰ This shared image issues in the commission *rādâ* ("to rule, have dominion"; Gen. 1:26, 28), which here denotes stewardship, as dominion mirrors God's beneficent governance and is entrusted equally to both sexes.¹¹

Genesis 2 deepens the theme of mutuality through relational lexemes. The simultaneous emergence of *'ish* and *'ishshah* ("man/woman"; Gen. 2:23) expresses equality through wordplay—*'ishshah me'ish* ("woman from man")—highlighting likeness of nature and rendering differentiation as correspondence, not hierarchy.¹² The man takes no part in the woman's formation and, like her, owes his life solely to God; they are interrelated and interdependent.¹³ Central to this portrayal of partnership is the noun *'ēzer* ("helper"; Gen. 2:18, 20). Elsewhere applied to God's aid to Israel,¹⁴ *'ēzer* signifies not subservience but enabling aid—a partnership marked by mutuality and reciprocity rather than hierarchy.¹⁵ Furthermore, *ṣēlā* ("side"; Gen 2:21–22)—rendered *pleura* ("side") in the LXX¹⁶—supports a non-hierarchical reading,¹⁷ depicting the woman's origin not as derivative from the male but as a divine completion of the human creation, fashioned from his side to signify equality of nature and a vocation to mutual communion.¹⁸ Together they stand as counterparts whose union as "one flesh" (Gen 2:24) establishes the conjugal pair as the foundation of social and cultural life in Israel's vision of creation.¹⁹ Yet this harmony is precisely what Genesis 3 depicts as ruptured through the Fall.

The lexicon of Genesis 3 traces the transition from mutuality to hierarchy, depicting the distortion of God's original order. The divine

¹⁰ Stendebach, '*ṣelem*', in *TDOT*, vol. XII, p. 394.

¹¹ H.-J. Zobel, '*rādâ*', in *TDOT*, vol. XIII, ed. by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgreen, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 330–336 (p. 335).

¹² N. P. Bratsiotis, '*'ish*', in *TDOT*, vol. I, pp. 222–235 (pp. 226–227).

¹³ Phyllis Trible, 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Tradition', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, XLI.1 (1973), pp. 30–48 (p. 37).

¹⁴ See H.-J. Fabry, '*āzar*', in *TDOT*, vol. XI, ed. by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 12–18 (p. 14); and Trible, 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Tradition', p. 36.

¹⁵ Mary Daly acknowledges that linguistic studies confirm this equality reading of *'ēzer*, yet she argues that for centuries theological tradition has used such readings to legitimise women's subordination. See Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 36.

¹⁶ H.-J. Fabry, '*ṣēlā*', in *TDOT*, vol. XII, pp. 400–405 (p. 405).

¹⁷ While many traditions follow the rendering of *ṣēlā* as "rib", the translation is uncertain; the term more commonly denotes "side", and the LXX's *pleura* reflects this broader sense. Interpreting *ṣēlā* as "rib" has often encouraged anti-female readings by implying that woman was created from an inessential part of man, yet this is the only passage in which *ṣēlā* could be translated in that way. See *Ibid.*, pp. 401–402.

¹⁸ Trible, 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Tradition', p. 37.

¹⁹ Susan Niditch, 'Genesis', in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. by C.A. Newsom and S.H. Ringe (London: SPCK, 1992), pp. 10–25 (p. 13).

pronouncement to the woman, “your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen 3:16), describes a new condition of broken reciprocity—not a divine command.²⁰ Across the Old Testament, *māšal* (“to rule”) denotes acts of judgement or governance that arise from human initiative rather than prescriptive order.²¹ Likewise, the noun *ʾiššābôn* (“work”) signifies the burdensome labour of survival and subsistence.²² Subjugation is thus symptomatic of the Fall. God’s postlapsarian judgements are not mandates; they are descriptive, not prescriptive.²³ The narrative does not assign blame to the woman alone; rather, it portrays the human pair sharing responsibility for disobedience and its consequences.²⁴ The ensuing condition—mortality, labour, and relational tension that fractures the harmony between man and woman and between humanity and God—marks a new tragic order within creation but not a divine retraction of grace. The woman’s act of taking and eating (Gen. 3:6) may be understood as an expression of human curiosity and moral agency rather than passive deception, revealing the restless intellect that characterises humanity even in its fall.²⁵ Yet in this awakening to knowledge, freedom itself turns upon its source, and the rupture between obedience and autonomy becomes the beginning of disorder.²⁶

Yet even within judgement, the naming of the woman as *chavvāh* (“Eve”) restores a note of grace: her designation as “the mother of all living” (*ēm kol-chai*; Gen. 3:20) re-centres the narrative on life and continuity so that—together with the man, entrusted to cultivate and guard the earth (Gen. 2:15; 3:17–19)—the woman becomes the vessel through whom divine vitality persists in the world.²⁷ This prepares for the soteriological *chokhmāh* of

²⁰ According to Genesis 3:16, Deuteronomy 15:6, and Psalm 106:41, *māšal* signifies judgement on sin, revealing dominion as a consequence of the Fall rather than an element of God’s original design. See H. Gross, ‘*māšal* II’, in *TDOT*, vol. IX, ed. by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgreen, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 68–71 (p. 71).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²² C. Meyers, ‘*ʾiššābôn*’, in *TDOT*, vol. XI, pp. 278–280 (p. 280).

²³ Tribble argues that ‘[s]ubjugation and supremacy are perversions of creation’—symptomatic of sin’s rupture of equality between man and woman. See Tribble, ‘Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Tradition’, p. 41.

²⁴ Niditch, ‘Genesis’, p. 14.

²⁵ See *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14; and Bøsterud, ‘Women in the Bible: What can they teach us about gender equality?’, p. 2.

²⁶ Augustine interprets the first sin not as an act of enlightenment but as a deformation of love: the will, created to rest in God, turns inwards upon itself through pride. In seeking self-sufficiency, humanity misuses its freedom and falls from the right order of love into self-possession. See Augustine, *The City of God*, vol. I, ed. and trans. by Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871), XIV.13, pp. 25–27.

²⁷ The name *chavvāh* (“Eve”) is traditionally linked with *chāyā* (“to live”), underscoring woman’s role as life-bearer and sustainer of the human line. See A. S. Kapelrud, ‘*chavvāh*’, in *TDOT*, vol. IV, ed. by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 257–260 (pp. 257, 259); and H. Ringgren, ‘*chāyā*’, in *TDOT*, vol. IV, pp. 324–344 (p. 342).

Proverbs 1–9, where Wisdom again mediates life and order. Genesis 3 thus presents domination as distortion, not divine decree; equality and shared vocation remain inscribed in creation.

Genesis 1–3 therefore articulates a vision in which sexual difference serves communion, and hierarchy arises only from disordered desire. Though the Fall unsettles creation's equilibrium, it does not erase humanity's mutual vocation. It is this enduring relationality that Proverbs 1–9 develops through the feminine Wisdom, who re-articulates the lost Edenic order.

Having traced the way in which Genesis 1–3 grounds equality in creation and narrates its distortion in the Fall, we now turn to Proverbs 1–9, where the same divine vitality is given voice in the soteriological figure of *chokhmāh* ("Wisdom").²⁸ Here, Wisdom steps forth as a feminine, public presence beside God in creation and throughout history, re-articulating harmony, order, and life in sapiential form.

Chokhmāh is a feminine noun whose personification as Wisdom functions not as poetic embellishment but as theological affirmation: she embodies the divine intelligence that orders creation and instructs humanity in harmony with God's will.²⁹ Throughout Proverbs 1–9, Wisdom articulates the unity of natural, social, and spiritual order,³⁰ promising peace (Prov. 3:17). She cries out in the most public of spaces (Prov. 8:1–3), summons all who live (Prov. 8:4), and bestows prudence, strength, and righteousness upon those who love her (Prov. 8:12–21), binding together the harmony of creation and the integrity of human life. Read in continuity with Genesis, this portrayal develops the *imago Dei* through Wisdom—the divine voice inviting humanity into mature discernment. The feminine figure of Wisdom thus extends the life-giving, relational agency intimated in *ēzer* ("helper"; Gen. 2:18, 20), and the mutuality of male and female through her procession from and communion with the Father, without in any way rivalling the transcendent God from whom she proceeds.

Present "at the beginning of [H]is work" (Prov. 8:22), the debated verb—"created", "begot", or "acquired"—expresses Wisdom's origin both *in* and *from* God. In Catholic theology, this "beginning" does not signify a secondary being but rather the manifestation of divine Wisdom within creation—the created reflection of the eternal Word through whom all things were made.³¹ Here, Wisdom may be understood as the feminine mediation of God's self-

²⁸ H.-P. Müller, 'chākham', in *TDOT*, vol. IV, pp. 364–385 (p. 380).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 379.

³¹ Keith Lemna observes that eternal Wisdom 'is communicated by the Father to the Son in the Spirit in order to impart the Trinitarian life to creation', revealing creation itself as the outward expression of God's eternal Wisdom. Accordingly, he describes divine Wisdom as 'a mirror reflecting the communion of the divine persons', distinguishing creation as participation in—rather than diminution of—the divine life. Divine Wisdom is the way in which God's own inner love and knowledge overflow into creation, allowing the world to share—without division—in the divine harmony. See Keith Lemna, *The Apocalypse of Wisdom: Louis Bouyer's Theological Recovery of the Cosmos* (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2019), p. 287.

communication within creation.³² Proverbs 8:22 thus portrays participation without compromising divine unity, distinguishing between uncreated Wisdom, consubstantial with the Father, and created wisdom, the temporal expression of that eternal plan within the cosmos.³³ This distinction matures into a nuptial analogy whereby uncreated Wisdom (the Word eternally with God) espouses created wisdom—manifest in the ordered cosmos and, ultimately, in the Church—as bride.³⁴ Through this spousal relation, divine transcendence and creaturely dependence are united without confusion, allowing Proverbs’ feminine imagery to signify reciprocal communion rather than subordination. Proverbs 8:30 situates Wisdom “beside” God during creation as a “master worker”, portraying both intimacy with and participation in divine activity.³⁵ She is the delight of God, “rejoicing in [H]is inhabited world and delighting in the human race” (Prov. 8:31); she is the hypostasis of divine truth within the ordered world,³⁶ expressing both the paternal and maternal dimensions of divine creativity.³⁷

In continuity with this depiction of Wisdom as God’s ordering presence in creation, *chokhmāh* stands in close parallel with *binah* (“understanding”) and *tôrāh* (“instruction”)—terms that further express the relational nature of divine Wisdom. Their consistent pairing (Prov. 1:2; 3:19; 8:1, 14) indicates that human insight is never autonomous but proceeds from God Himself (Prov. 2:6). Functioning as the movement of divine truth into human discernment, *binah* is explicitly bound to Wisdom.³⁸ Similarly, *tôrāh* denotes not the Mosaic code but a sapiential teaching rooted in relational instruction—associated directly with the mother (*tôrath ’immekā*) in Proverbs 1:8 and 6:20—conveying nurture, persuasion, and life.³⁹ Together, they form a sapiential triad in which divine Wisdom is mirrored both in moral discernment through *binah* and

³² Louis Bouyer, *Women and the Church*, trans. by Marilyn Teichert (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1976), pp. 43–46.

³³ Uncreated Wisdom, as Lemna explains, ‘can be spoken of as a spotless mirror of the Trinitarian life but only as ordered to its communication *ad extra* in a way that would not speak with regard to the divine Name’—a distinction that safeguards divine unity while accounting for the creaturely reflection of the eternal Word. Therefore, what is “created” in Proverbs 8:22 refers not to a secondary divinity, but to the outpouring of God’s eternal Wisdom into creation. See Lemna, *The Apocalypse of Wisdom*, p. 288.

³⁴ Bouyer, *Women and the Church*, pp. 43–46.

³⁵ Carole R. Fontaine, ‘Proverbs’, in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, pp. 145–152 (p. 148).

³⁶ Müller, ‘*chākhām*’, p. 383.

³⁷ Tribble notes that Scripture portrays divine creativity through both paternal and maternal imagery: God is simultaneously the father “who has begotten the drops of dew” and the mother “who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven” (Job 38:28–29). This paradox of transcendence and nurture illuminates the feminine personification of *chokhmāh* in Proverbs, where God’s Wisdom acts as the maternal presence through whom creation is brought into being. See Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 68.

³⁸ H. Ringgren, ‘*bîn*’, in *TDOT*, vol. II, ed. by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgreen (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), pp. 99–107, p. 105.

³⁹ H.-J. Fabry, ‘*tôrā*’, in *TDOT*, vol. XV, ed. by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgreen, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 609–646 (p. 632).

faithful obedience through *tôrāh*.

Viewed within this canonical arc from Genesis to Proverbs, Wisdom appears as the living continuity of creation itself—the feminine mediation of divine order and joy. What was breathed into humanity as *rûah* (“spirit/life”) in Genesis 2:7⁴⁰ now speaks in *chokhmāh*: the self-communication of God’s wisdom through which creation participates in divine life. Through her, the text affirms that difference need not imply division, for the same divine Wisdom sustains all reality in harmonious reciprocity, where the feminine is integral—not peripheral—to the *imago Dei*.

Having read Genesis 1–3 and Proverbs 1–9 through a dialogical and rhetorical framework, we now turn to reception and critique—setting this vision of differentiated communion against two counter-trajectories: a Hellenistic construal that subordinates the feminine and a modern inversion that makes the feminine salvific by locating redemption in a self-generated escape from the masculine. In both, the polarity of male and female hardens into metaphysical antagonism.

Philo of Alexandria reads Genesis through a Platonic lens. In his exegesis, he distinguishes between two acts of creation: the first, in Genesis 1, produces a sexless, intelligible archetype fashioned in the divine image; the second, in Genesis 2, brings forth embodied humanity—divided into male and female and subject to passion and decay.⁴¹ Mapping *mind* to the masculine and *sense* to the feminine,⁴² he implicitly figures woman as the symbol of the body’s mutability set against the permanence of reason; she embodies the soul’s descent from contemplation into the passions of the temporal world. Salvation thus entails the ascent of intellect from the mutable to the divine—transcendence of the sensory and, by implication, of the feminine itself.⁴³ Philo’s synthesis thus recasts the scriptural witness of mutuality into a metaphysic of asymmetry, later reconciled by the Catholic affirmation—through Augustine’s refined theology—of the shared participation of man and woman in

⁴⁰ *Rûah* denotes ‘the particular process of breathing in which the dynamic vitality of the human being is expressed’, distinct from *nešāmâ*, the mere ‘breath that distinguishes the living from the dead’. In this sense, *rûah* conveys more than biological animation; it signifies the divine vitality that sustains and transcends corporeal existence. Thus, ‘[a] person’s spirit or life . . . could be seen as something transcending corporeality’, for ‘*rûah* is God’s special gift’. See H.-J. Fabry, ‘*rûah*’, in *TDOT*, vol. XIII, pp. 365–402 (pp. 368, 378–379).

⁴¹ Richard A. Baer, *Philo's Use of the Categories Male and Female*, ed. by K. H. Rengstorff (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970), p. 21.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁴³ Monica Migliorino Miller, *Sexuality and Authority in the Catholic Church* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 1995), p. 24.

the one *imago Dei*.⁴⁴

Some feminist trajectories risk inverting the same dualism and thereby losing the biblical vision of relational complementarity. In Mary Daly's polemic, patriarchy appears as a vampiric order that feeds upon the bodies and minds of women, sapping their vitality;⁴⁵ redemption is conceived as separation—from men, from ecclesial and sacramental symbols,⁴⁶ and finally into an autonomous act of self-generation that creates its own being.⁴⁷ Monica Miller observes that this worldview, however trenchant its exposure of patriarchal distortions, ultimately becomes a retrogression: a reinvention of the primordial dualism it seeks to escape—essentially a reverse mirror-image of Philo's conception.⁴⁸ It portrays relational difference not as a site to be transfigured but as a structure to be overcome, thereby undermining the potential for restored relational communion.⁴⁹ Where Philo cast the feminine as the principle to be mastered, Daly casts the masculine as the principle to be repudiated; both construe salvation as a withdrawal from relationality. Both Genesis and

⁴⁴ Philo's division between the intelligible (masculine) and the sensible (feminine) dimensions of humanity developed into a hermeneutical tradition within Alexandrian allegory (Origen; Clement), where the feminine came to signify corporeality and passion. These holdovers of Platonism arose as Alexandrian interpreters absorbed Philo's dualism, in which the intelligible realm of reason and spirit—identified as masculine—was regarded as superior to the sensible realm of body and matter—coded as feminine. This metaphysical hierarchy, though Christianised, endured in patristic anthropology and was further reinforced by Aristotle's depiction of woman as a "misbegotten male"—a notion echoed in Clement and other early Fathers. Such hierarchical assumptions continued to shape Christian conceptions of sexuality and embodiment until Augustine's re-reading of Genesis re-centred the conjoint *imago Dei*, affirming sexual difference within a theology of nuptial communion rather than hierarchy.

⁴⁵ Mary Daly describes patriarchy in strikingly visceral terms: 'For men in the past—and most are living in the past rather than now—life has meant feeding on the bodies and minds of women, sapping energy at the expense of female deaths. Like Dracula, the he-male has lived on women's blood. Perhaps this is one reason why patriarchal lore has expressed such a horror of female blood. The priests of patriarchy have eaten the body and have drunk the blood of the Sacrificial Victim in their Mass, but they have not wished to know who has really been the Victim whose blood supported this parasitic life'. See Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 172.

⁴⁶ Daly's critique of liturgy and ecclesial symbolism culminates in the claim that 'the churches have been the murderers of women' (p. 146). She urges that 'the patriarchal space of alienative identity' must be left behind as women 'enter new space' with 'the promise of integrated, transformed, androgynous being' (pp. 168–69). See *Ibid.*, pp. 146, 168–169.

⁴⁷ Daly depicts the feminist consciousness as a self-originating force: 'feminism is the final and therefore the first cause . . . *this movement is movement . . . a qualitative leap in be-ing*'. Radical feminism thereby becomes the initiative that 'awakens women and consequently men to become ourselves', generating a new mode of existence 'in our imaginative-cerebral-emotional-active-creative be-ing'. See *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁴⁸ Monica Migliorino Miller interprets Daly's soteriology as a structural repetition of ancient dualisms—'a retreat back either to ancient cosmology or to Platonic and Gnostic views of salvation'. See Miller, *Sexuality and Authority*, p. 24.

⁴⁹ According to Miller, Daly's philosophy ultimately imagines redemption as withdrawal into the autonomous Self; salvation is achieved 'isolated and apart from the world and from men', where 'the woman possesses herself and creates herself' (p. 25). Such a trajectory, Miller argues, makes differentiation itself 'the enemy of unity', collapsing the mediatory structures of creation (p. 26). See *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.

Proverbs, by contrast, envisage not escape from the other but the ordered co-operation of man and woman in the single *imago Dei*.

An Augustinian reception thus retrieves this scriptural instinct by reading sexual difference through the Bible's spousal logic. Here, the polarity of Bridegroom and Bride is not a sacralised dominance but a sacrament of reciprocity: Christ's headship is kenotic, and the Church's feminine receptivity is active co-operation—co-agency, not passivity.⁵⁰ The Incarnation witnesses to the goodness of embodiment and to God's acknowledgement of both sexes; redemption is effected not by abstraction from the body but by the Word made flesh, enacted ecclesially in a communion that neither collapses Creator and creature nor sets them in rivalry.⁵¹ From this perspective, created wisdom—the ordered cosmos and, pre-eminently, the Church—stands "beside" (Prov. 8:30) uncreated Wisdom: a spousal correspondence that retains God's transcendence, safeguards divine paternity, and yet honours the feminine as the very medium of mediation.⁵²

Set within this theological frame, feminist readings such as Tribble's and Bird's serve as valuable correctives in uncovering interpretative distortions and restoring the biblical vision of man and woman in reciprocal communion—an emphasis fully consonant with the Church's own hermeneutic.⁵³ Together, they expose androcentric distortions without recasting the canon as a battleground of irreconcilable opposites. Tribble's rhetorical criticism traces how structure, vocabulary, and imagery encode meaning.⁵⁴ Bird's dialogical, historically grounded exegesis insists that the text be heard first as an "other" in its own

⁵⁰ Augustine interprets Genesis 2:24 and 1 Corinthians 11 in explicitly reciprocal terms, insisting that 'woman is not without man, and man is not without woman in the Lord', for 'as the woman is from the man, so the man is through the woman, but all things are from God'. See Augustine, *On Genesis*, trans. Roland J. Teske (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), *Two Books on Genesis Against the Manichees*, II.26 (p. 137).

⁵¹ Against Manichean dualism, Augustine insists that 'all the things which God made are very good; natural things are not evil', affirming the goodness of corporeal existence and denying that embodiment is inferior or corrupt. Because sexual difference is borne in the body, this affirmation extends to the dignity of both sexes, and the Word's assumption of flesh thus confirms the honour of bodily life. See *Ibid.*, *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book*, I.3 (p. 146).

⁵² Reading Genesis typologically, Augustine holds that Christ 'clung to his wife, that is, the Church, so that they might be two in one flesh'—that 'a wife [was] formed from out of his side', thereby framing the Church as the feminine partner in a spousal union that images divine-human communion. See *Ibid.*, *Two Books on Genesis Against the Manichees*, II.24.37 (p. 133).

⁵³ The Pontifical Biblical Commission affirms that Scripture itself contains 'many ways of interpreting the same events' and 'urges us to avoid excessive simplification and narrowness of spirit' (p. 90). Because the biblical tradition has continually renewed itself to meet new situations, interpretation 'ought also to confront new questions, so as to respond to them out of the Bible' (p. 91). Such engagement requires both continuity and discrimination, for genuine dialogue with Scripture 'involves a work of sifting and setting aside', preserving earlier insights while 'in other matters it will go its own way, seeking to make further progress' (p. 92). See Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), III.A.1, pp. 90–92.

⁵⁴ Tribble notes that to 'establish . . . meaning, structure and content must mesh—and they do'. See Tribble, 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Tradition', p. 37.

ancient setting and addressed as a partner in conversation,⁵⁵ while her later work stresses that Scripture occupies a public forum in which feminist reflection must engage faithfully rather than polemically.⁵⁶ Ultimately, feminist interpretation demonstrates its strength in ethical vigilance and in resisting the legitimation of oppression; its vulnerability shows when protest becomes metaphysics—when the scriptural harmony of differentiated communion is refracted through the separatist cosmologies present in some strands of radical feminism, exemplified in Daly’s soteriology.

Thus the arc holds: Genesis articulates a theology of mutuality; Proverbs transposes that theology into a feminine register; and a critically attuned reception refuses both ancient hierarchy and modern inversion, discerning instead the path of Wisdom—difference ordered to communion, life, and Edenic harmony.

Taken in their canonical sequence, Genesis and Proverbs disclose a coherent theology of differentiated communion. Genesis 1–3 locates mutuality at the very grammar of creation, portraying man and woman not as opposing terms but as co-agents of the divine image whose unity is obscured—though not lost—through the Fall. Proverbs 1–9 then renders this relational ontology in an explicitly feminine register, giving voice to Wisdom as mediator of divine order—standing beside God and summoning humanity into discernment and peace. Read dialogically and rhetorically, the two texts share a single persuasion: that difference is ordained for communion rather than conflict.

Reception history, however, shows how readily that conviction has been misread or displaced. Philo’s Hellenistic dualism collapses the scriptural symmetry into a hierarchy of intellect over embodiment; while Daly’s radical feminist inversion threatens to re-open rather than heal that ancient wound, for it regresses to—rather than removes—the antagonism it seeks to overcome. Yet the dialogical and rhetorical methods of Tribble and Bird demonstrate how feminist interpretation—when undertaken in the manner commended by the Church, combining continuity with biblical tradition, critical discrimination, and a willingness to confront new questions—can recover the relational vision that Philonic and Dalyan perspectives obscure.

Approached through a dialogical and rhetorical feminist hermeneutic, Genesis and Proverbs together offer a wisdom of communion—an order in which sexual difference expresses the relational fullness of the *imago Dei* and becomes a primary site where that image is disclosed, sustained, and shared.

⁵⁵ Bird, ‘What Makes a Feminist Reading Feminist?’, p. 126.

⁵⁶ Bird argues that any responsible theology of the Hebrew Bible must reckon with ‘the fundamentally skewed nature of our data’, insisting that ‘every theological idea or expression needs to be examined for implications of this gender bias’. See Phyllis A. Bird, *Faith, Feminism, and the Forum of Scripture: Essays on Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), p. 41.

In doing so, Bird maintains that a feminist interpretation ‘is not idiosyncratic—concerned only with female history and female nature—but aims to provide a more adequate account of our gendered human nature and history’. She adds that feminism is ‘concerned with wholeness, which can only be achieved through dialogue and interchange’ and ‘seeks to enable that dialogue by empowering women’, and that ‘feminist goals cannot be achieved by women alone’. See Bird, ‘What Makes a Feminist Reading Feminist?’, p. 130.

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