Introduction

Joseph Ratzinger’s notion of “the female line in the Bible” retrieves the voice of the women of Scripture for Christian faith and theology, placing the women of the Bible at the heart of salvation history. Ratzinger describes his idea as follows:

[I]n the Old Testament, alongside the line from Adam through the Patriarchs down to the Servant of God, there appears another line from Eve through the Matriarchs to figures like Deborah, Esther, Ruth and finally to the personified Divine Wisdom. . . . The line from Adam receives its full meaning in Christ. Similarly, the significance of the female line in its inseparable interaction with the Christological mystery is revealed in Mary and in the symbolism applied to the Church.¹

What Ratzinger argues is that the male line of salvation, Adam to the second Adam, is accompanied by a female line, Eve to Mary. Salvation history does not consist of a male line alone, but a line of women, the female line, of equal and conjunctive significance.

¹ Joseph Ratzinger, “The Sign of the Woman,” introduction to Mary: God’s Yes to Man: John Paul’s Encyclical Letter Redemptoris Mater, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 17–18; also published in Joseph Ratzinger and Hans Urs von Balthasar, Mary: The Church at the Source, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005). Two different translators were used to translate the article for the two publications, so, in the latter, the word female is translated as feminine so it reads “the feminine line in the Bible” (43–44). As will be discussed in chapter 3 and 4, Ratzinger, with his concept, is referring to the line of women in the Bible and the meaning they point to and represent within salvation history. In this regard, the English word female is the appropriate word to describe the concept Ratzinger is articulating.
Ratzinger’s advocacy of a female line, understood within the context of the relational nature of his theology, offers an intriguing response to the question of women in Christianity and the role of the female in salvation. Underscoring the women of the biblical stories, Ratzinger points toward a new path that charts its course from Scripture while, at the same time, it develops and refines the Church’s tradition.

Ratzinger’s renewed articulation of the fullness of salvation history has significant implications for clarifying and illuminating the place of women, including Mary, in Scripture, tradition, and Christianity. *Lumen Gentium*, the Vatican II document promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1964, explicitly acknowledges that there are unanswered questions in relation to Mariology,² which means that the Catholic Church’s Mariology is a work in progress. Ratzinger’s female line offers an interpretative tool in which the open, unresolved issues of Mariology can be explored afresh. But it goes further than just Mariology: by integrating the female line with the male line, Christianity itself is placed in a renewed context. An investigation of the meaning and implications of a female line parallel to and integral with the male line in salvation history opens new perspectives on salvation history and Christianity as a whole. A richer, fuller evaluation and assessment is available through this articulation of God’s activity within history.

This book responds to a hope expressed in the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith’s 2004 “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration between Men and Women in the Church and the World”: “These reflections are meant as a starting point for further examination in the Church, as well as an impetus for dialogue with all men and women of good will, in a sincere search for the truth and in a common commitment to the development

of ever more authentic relationships [between men and women].”

While the Letter itself does not address the unanswered questions of Mariology, this book responds to the Letter’s call for further examination by seeking to contribute to a deeper understanding of the women of the Bible. Exploring Ratzinger’s notion of the female line in the Bible, the book contributes to the development of the Church’s understanding of salvation history through the women of the Bible; and through this renewed understanding of salvation history a renewed understanding of humanity, of `adam, the human being, may be generated. Ratzinger interprets the Hebrew word `adam as meaning the human being who represents every human being.4 By returning to the Hebrew roots of the creation accounts, Ratzinger’s understanding of `adam, the human being, is a starting point, anchored in Scripture and tradition, that offers the opportunity for a more authentic view of humanity and the relationship between “man” and “woman” that the Letter seeks to achieve.

The objective of this book is to synthesize into a coherent whole Ratzinger’s writings on the biblical women through the lens of his concept of the female line in the Bible. With this synthesis I will propose an explanation of what these women say to us about humanity’s relationship with God. Do these women tell us something that is unique to women or do they speak about both men and women? Do these women represent women or humanity? Ultimately, the core question is: How do the women who make

3. “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration between Men and Women in the Church and the World” (2004), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html. This Letter was issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith when Ratzinger was its prefect in the year before he was elected pope.

up the female line in the Bible contribute to our understanding of salvation history, to Christianity? Do they tell us something new or retell what is already known? The emphasis throughout the book will be on organizing the discussion into a new synthesis. Building upon Ratzinger’s notion of the female line in the Bible and older traditions of theological exegesis and reflection, I hope to enable a new pathway to emerge—one that provides a glimmer of how we can move toward a deeper understanding and appreciation, not only of the women of the Bible, but, through them, of salvation history and inclusive, relational anthropology.

The book consists of five chapters. In chapter 1, I explore the nature, framework, and structure of Ratzinger’s theological development and his theology in general. The aim is to situate his concept of the female line in the Bible within the overall context of his writings and theological evolution. Chapter 2 examines the development and basis of the female line. As part of that discussion I explore the hermeneutical principles that underpin Ratzinger’s work with a particular emphasis on the issue of faith in history and biblical interpretation. Chapters 3 through 5 look specifically at Ratzinger’s writings on the women of the Bible as interpreted through the lens of the “female line” concept. Throughout the exploration of Ratzinger’s theological thought I will discuss each theme in relation to other theologians seeking to address the same issue, with the aim to identify fruitful areas for further development.

The topic of “the feminine” is closely associated with the central concern of this book. It is, however, a topic that is outside this book’s scope because Ratzinger’s writings focus on the women of the Bible rather than on the concept of the feminine in general. Interestingly, the aforementioned “Letter on the Collaboration between Man and Woman” notes in this regard that:
It is appropriate however to recall that the feminine values mentioned here are above all human values: the human condition of man and woman created in the image of God is one and indivisible. It is only because women are more immediately attuned to these values that they are the reminder and the privileged sign of such values. But, in the final analysis, every human being, man and woman, is destined to be “for the other.” In this perspective, that which is called “femininity” is more than simply an attribute of the female sex. The word designates indeed the fundamental human capacity to live for the other and because of the other.5

The Letter acknowledges that “the feminine” does not directly translate into “female” or “woman” but, rather, that femininity refers to the human disposition of being and living “for the other,” which points to the fundamental essence of humanity. This book seeks to understand—through the lens of Ratzinger’s “female line”—what the women of the Bible tell us about salvation history and anthropology, so the topic of the feminine will only be touched upon where it is relevant to the discussion in connection to Ratzinger’s work.

### A Short Overview of Joseph Ratzinger’s Life

Before commencing on our task, a brief biographical note on our main subject is in order. Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, has played many roles in his life: son of a local Bavarian policeman, teenage soldier, priest, lecturer and professor, bishop, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, pope, and now pope emeritus. Yet, for a man who has had such a dominating influence on the Catholic Church for the last number of decades, relatively little is known about him personally. How can we reconcile the variegated images of the man hailed as a progressive theologian at the beginning of his ministry, but later accused of being an archconservative, a Panzerkardinal?

Ratzinger was born in Bavaria, in 1927, at a time of unprecedented tumult for the German people. Military defeat, the Versailles Treaty, and financial turmoil dominated his native nation just prior to his birth. Six years after Ratzinger’s birth Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor, and he was twelve when World War II broke out. He subsequently served in the German army as a teenage soldier and the American army held him, for a short period, as a prisoner of war. His brother, George, who also served in the German army, survived the war as did his sister and parents. The impact of the turmoil, war, and the Holocaust on Ratzinger as a person, theologian, and Church leader is difficult to judge. He and his brother entered seminary after the war and both became priests in 1951. This path does not appear to have been primarily influenced by their war experience; rather, the piety of their parents and family life appears to be the determining factor that gave rise to their vocation. Any statement on the impact of the dire political environment of his youth is complicated, not just because it is what happened during his youth, but also because of how he responded. It also risks descending into conjectural psychology without Ratzinger himself making a definitive statement on the matter. All that can really be said is that, like Plato, he experienced traumatic political events in his youth that drove his search for answers to the questions regarding ultimate reality and authentic humanity.

Although he served for a year in a parish after his ordination, Ratzinger has spent most of his priesthood working as a theologian in universities and as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. He was appointed a professor of fundamental theology at the University of Bonn in 1959 and subsequently worked at Münster, Tübingen, and Regensburg Universities. He was viewed as a progressive theologian at the start of his career but a conservative after Vatican II. The world of the 1950s was radically different from
that of post–Vatican II. The impact of the revolutionary movements of 1968 and other social changes had profound consequences not only for society, but for the relationship between society and the Church as well, which sharply affected Ratzinger’s worldview. Nonetheless, as will be seen, Ratzinger did remain an innovative and nuanced theologian throughout his career.

Ratzinger has held a high profile in the Catholic Church since Vatican II when he acted as peritus, chief theological adviser, to Cardinal Josef Frings of Cologne. He contributed to the development of major Vatican II documents and wrote commentaries on the four sessions of the Council. Subsequently, he served on the International Theological Commission from its establishment in 1969 and became president when appointed prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in 1981. In response to what he perceived as misguided theological trends post–Vatican II, he, along with Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac, and others, set up the journal Communio in 1972. Although he has published significantly and written major theological treatises, such as Eschatology, before his appointment as archbishop of Munich in 1977, much of what was published were collections of lectures, essays or talks on particular topics. These reflect his theological concerns and prefigure his work as prefect and pope. In 1981 Saint John Paul II appointed Ratzinger as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. He held this position until his own election as pope in April 2005. On February 28, 2013, Benedict resigned as pope, the first to do so since Celestine V in 1294, opening a new chapter for the Church.

Two final points of clarification are required before commencing our discussion on the female line in the Bible. First, in the book I have not sought to distinguish between Ratzinger’s theological thinking and his approach as pope. Instead, I draw on his writings as pope when I think they reflect the thinking of Ratzinger the theologian.
One text I do make use of, *Jesus of Nazareth* (2007), he himself makes clear in the foreword that it is to be considered his own personal work as a theologian rather than a papal document. Second, a point of clarification is required on Ratzinger’s use of the term *man*. When using the term *man*, Ratzinger is not just referring to the human male; instead, he uses it to refer to humanity as such. This use reflects his use of the Hebrew word `adam` to refer to the whole of humanity. But it also reflects a Germanic approach. Erich Fromm also uses the term *man* to describe humanity. In *To Have or To Be?* Fromm addresses this “point of style” that is specific to the English language and not the German. Fromm states, in relation to the generic use of “man” and “he” as the term of reference for the species *homo sapiens*, that:

The use of “man” in this context, without differentiation of sex, has a long tradition in humanist thinking, and I do not believe we can do without a word that denotes clearly the human species’ character. No such differentiation exists in the German language: one uses the word Mensch to refer to the non-sex-differentiated being. But even in English the word “man” is used in the same sex-undifferentiated way as the German Mensch, as meaning human being or the human race. I think it is advisable to restore its non-sexual meaning to the word “man” rather than substituting awkward-sounding words. In this book I have capitalised “Man” in order to clarify my non-sex-differentiated use of the term.

Although I would welcome the development of a unique word in the English language that would directly translate the meaning of the German word Mensch, here in this book, to avoid confusion and a lack of consistency, I will follow Ratzinger’s own use of the term *man* to refer to humanity when referring to his work. Now we will

commence exploring his notion of a female line in the Bible, starting with Ratzinger’s theological ideas and positions.