

The Personification of Wisdom in Proverbs 1, 8 and 9

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The personification of wisdom as a female in Proverbs 1, 8 and 9 is, perhaps, the most extraordinary hypostasis in the entire Hebrew Bible. This very positive image of femaleness as a source of truth, peace, and the Lord's favor is a breathtaking counterpoint to the usual highly censorious depiction of women encountered in the Old Testament: the filth of the daughters of Zion (Isa 4:4); the whore with many lovers (Jer 3:1); the slaughterer of the Lord's children (Ezek 16:21). Because Proverbs' Woman Wisdom is so unusually positive, the reader is compelled to ask why the writers presented wisdom as female. This paper will attempt to answer that question.

The most recurrent theme in the literature sees Woman Wisdom as originating in various Near Eastern goddesses, such as Isis, Ma'at, Ishtar and Asherah.¹ A review of ancient Near Eastern texts narrows the field to one of these as a likely source. In Canaanite mythology, Asherah is the Lady of the Sea and the Progenitress of the Gods,² but is never associated with wisdom and can, therefore, be discounted. Although Ishtar's self-praise and promise of protection to kings in Akkadian oracles³ are reminiscent of Wisdom's speech in Proverbs 8, her role as a war goddess, complete with arrows and swords, is too much of a contrast to Wisdom's peaceful paths to seriously consider Ishtar as a source. The Egyptian goddess Isis is described as a clever woman who knows everything in heaven and earth,⁴ but her deceitful treatment of Re, the creator-god, does not accord with Woman Wisdom's fear of God.

Ma'at, the Egyptian goddess who personifies "the order of the world which was established at the time of creation,"⁵ is far more probable as a source for Woman Wisdom than other goddesses. In Egyptian texts, especially those composed by viziers, or court executive officers, her hieroglyph represents justice and truth. For example, *The Instruction of the Vizier Ptah-hotep* describes Ma'at as justice:

Justice is great, and its appropriateness is lasting; it has not been disturbed since the time of him who made it, (whereas) there is punishment for him who passes over its laws. It is the (right) path before him who knows nothing. Wrongdoing has never brought its undertaking into port. (It may be that) it is fraud that gains riches, (but) the strength of justice is that it lasts, and a man may say:
"It is the property of my father."⁶

This passage contains several parallels to Proverbs 1-9. That justice is eternal and undisturbed since its creation resembles Wisdom in Prov 8:23: "Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth." The concept of Ma'at as the right path for the innocent who will inherit justice as their father's property, as opposed to disenfranchisement for wrongdoers, is found in Prov 2:20-22:

Therefore walk in the way of the good, and keep to the paths of the just. For the upright will abide in the land, and the innocent will remain in it; but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be rooted out of it.

In a hymn to Amon-Re, the creator and sustainer of the world, Ma'at equates with truth: Thy Mother is Truth, O Amon! To thee she belongs uniquely, and she came forth from thee (already) inclined to rage and burn up them that attack thee. Truth is more unique, O Amon, than anyone that exists.⁷

Her singular position as simultaneously mother, daughter and possession of the creator is very similar to Wisdom as simultaneously Yahweh's first creation who was also beside him, like a master worker at the earth's establishment (Prov 8:22-30). In the Egyptian hymn, Ma'at, as a mother, rages against those who attack Amon; while in Prov 1:29-30, Wisdom harangues those who do not fear Yahweh.

Although Woman Wisdom is far too complex a figure to have been modeled on one particular goddess, the parallels between Ma'at and Wisdom strongly suggest that the Egyptian personification of truth and justice was known and borrowed, by the composers of Proverbs 1-9. In contrast to Ma'at's separate identity in a polytheistic pantheon however, Woman Wisdom is presented as the voice of the Lord in monotheistic Yahwism: "For the Lord gives wisdom, from his mouth come knowledge and understanding"(Prov 2:6).

Another likely source for Woman Wisdom is the Aramaic proverbs of Ahiqar, a famous sage in Semitic wisdom literature.⁸ A fifth-century B.C. version of these proverbs, thought to have been composed in northern Syria in the seventh century B.C.,⁹ contains the following verse:

From heaven the peoples are favored; Wisdom is of the gods. Indeed, she is precious to the gods; Her kingdom is (eternal). She has been established by Samayn (the lord of heaven); Yea, the Holy Lord has exalted her.¹⁰

Here we find several similarities to Proverbs 8:

Wisdom is created by God and is eternal – "Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth" (Prov 8:23)

She is precious and the Lord has exalted her – "then I was beside him, like a master worker, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always" (Prov 8:30)

From heaven the peoples are favored – "rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race" (Prov 8:31).

Thus, in both texts, Wisdom is an eternal creation of the Lord, a precious gift to humanity. Additionally in both texts, Wisdom is not a goddess, but rather a conceptual entity in feminine gender. The close linguistic relationship between Aramaic and Hebrew and the contiguousness of Syria and Israel strongly suggest that the feminine personification of Wisdom was shared cross-culturally.

The Hebrew Bible, itself, may also be a source for Woman Wisdom, specifically the wise woman of Tekoa (2 Sam 14:1-20) and the wise woman of Abel (2 Sam 20:14-22).¹¹ Although the woman of Tekoa is named "wise" and she cleverly delivers a fabricated tale to David, presumably for, his own and Israel's good, the pericope is framed by Joab's putting the words she speaks into her mouth. Her sagacity is in delivery, not content. This eliminates her as a source for Woman Wisdom. In contrast, the woman of Abel manifests wisdom by convincing Joab to spare her city in return for the head of Joab's enemy. Like Woman Wisdom, she raises her voice in public, forthrightly calling out: "Listen! Listen! Tell Joab, 'Come here, I want to speak to you'" (2 Sam 20:16). Like Woman Wisdom, she extols peace and faith in Yahweh and assures deliverance to those who take her advice. Behind the courageous, decisive leadership of this particular woman may be an early, nearly lost tradition of wise Hebrew women, from which the Deuteronomist historians and wisdom writers drew.

Another source for Woman Wisdom may be the roles of actual women in the sociohistorical context of the early post-Exile,¹² the period assigned to the composition of Proverbs 1-9 by several scholars.¹³ Families faced with the critical task of reestablishing themselves economically and religiously depended far more on women than in more stable periods. The traditional role of wife/mother/homemaker probably expanded to include responsibility for teaching children Yahweh's law. Proverbs 1:8 and 6:20 are rare Biblical examples of the matriarch's voice joining that of the patriarch: "Hear my child your father's instruction, and do not reject your mother's teaching." During a transitional period focused on building a cohesive community, it is very possible that women's counsel was welcome in the public arena.¹⁴ Woman Wisdom, haranguing the simple at city gates and crossroads, could very well represent such historical women.

In conclusion, the reason why Wisdom in Proverbs 1, 8 and 9 is female is found in her composite structure. Her framework is the Egyptian and Aramaic wisdom traditions which conceptualize eternal virtues as the creator's female progeny. Onto this skeleton were appended Israelite traditions of female sages. As a final step, Proverbs' writers enlivened Wisdom with the duties performed by flesh and blood women in the early post-exilic period. Woman Wisdom is truly a remarkable figure, an amalgam of myth and reality who leads her charges to the Lord.

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² James B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 132.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 449-551.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12-13.

⁵ Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 74.

⁶ Pritchard, p. 412.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 372.

⁸ Day, p. 70.

⁹ James M. Lindenberger, *The Aramaic Proverbs of Ahiqar* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p. 19-20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68-70.

¹¹ Claudia V. Camp, "The female sage in ancient Israel and in the Biblical wisdom literature," *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), p. 187.

¹² Ibid., p. 186-187.

¹³ Leo G. Perdue, "Wisdom theology and social history in Proverbs 1-9," *Wisdom, You are My Sister*, ed. Michael L. Barre (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1997), p. 79.

R.N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs* (London: SCM Press, 1965), p. 106.

¹⁴ Camp, p. 192-193.

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