

**Wisdom and Creation**  
**An examination of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 8**  
By Allison C. Gammons

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Lady Wisdom, as presented in the *Book of Proverbs*, has the power to create kings and guide rulers. She speaks truth and those who seek her will be greatly rewarded. Proverbs 8 emphasizes the role that Lady Wisdom (and seeking wisdom) plays in the mortal realm, but also raises some intriguing theological questions. Proverbs is largely a book of practical advice on how to live a good and prosperous life, and in the midst of this we are given a telling of creation through the eyes of Lady Wisdom. Her existence at the start of creation allows her to tell another account of all creation, and also raises a variety of issues. One of the most hotly debated questions is what role, if any, did Wisdom play in creation? A number of factors are taken into account in analyzing and coming to conclusions on this matter. I believe that Wisdom stood beside God through all creation, and had influence on the process.

Identifying when *Proverbs* was written and compiled is difficult because there are no clear indicators within the text that tell of what was happening in the world at the time the book was written, and the language used does not clearly indicate any certain time of composition. Though biblical tradition attributes *Proverbs* to King Solomon, due to his reputation as being very wise, it is highly unlikely that he is actually the source of this work. One major reason for the discrediting of this claim is that it is believed that *Proverbs* was compiled long after Solomon's time. Instead, it is thought to be a collection of wisdom put together by scribes and sages.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Van Leeuwen, Raymond C. "The Book of Proverbs." *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* Vol. V. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 22.

Most scholars hold that the final editing of this book occurred in the early Persian period following the Babylonian Exile (late sixth to third centuries BCE). Some have attempted to date the work later, in the Hellenistic period, however there is a lack of language hints that would indicate this.<sup>2</sup> Though many sections of the book draw on earlier materials, some of the material may have been composed in the Persian period, especially chapters 1-9, and 31:10-31.<sup>3</sup>

*Proverbs*, as a whole, likely served as a text to assist in the training of the young (most likely men) who were destined for positions of leadership.<sup>4</sup> Most of the *Book of Proverbs* is composed of a collection of short sayings that speak to more universal “truths”, which is the conventional meaning of the term “proverb.” Proverbs 1-9 use more metaphorical language to present their point. In Proverbs 1-9, the female personification of wisdom is used in contrast to the female personification of folly (or the foreign woman), to warn of the dangers of pursuing folly, and the rewards of seeking wisdom.

Proverbs 1-9 has been divided by scholars in a variety of different ways; one fairly consistent base method of division is into “Instructions” and “Interludes.” The “Instructions” are presented as a father speaking to his children, though this is likely just a literary framing device. The “Interludes” are moments when Wisdom speaks directly to the audience. Of special interest is Proverb 8. In this chapter, Wisdom speaks of her importance in the world. She stands at the city gates and proclaims, to all who will listen,

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<sup>2</sup> Yoder, Christine Elizabeth. *Proverbs*. Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009) 4.

<sup>3</sup> This is spoken to in a variety of sources, including Yoder (xxiii) and Van Leeuwen (21).

<sup>4</sup> Yoder, xxv.

the importance of seeking *her* over wealth or power. Indeed, through seeking her, one can attain wealth and power.

There are a lot of thoughts on what could be the possible influences that helped to inform the biblical personification of Wisdom. While it is most likely that she is a compilation of a number of Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) models, taking form in the literary creation of Personified Wisdom, it is interesting to look at a few of the suggested influences.<sup>5</sup> The figures most commonly examined as potential sources for the biblical Lady Wisdom include; Ma'at (the Egyptian goddess of truth and justice), the Canaanite goddess Ishtar, the Egyptian goddess Isis, and the personification of Wisdom in the Aramaic Ahiqar. Personified Wisdom's especially resembles Isis, and it has been suggested that the biblical Wisdom is an orthodox response to a rise in Isis worship. However, Isis worship did not greatly spread outside of Egypt until the Hellenistic period, which is believed to be too late to be incorporated into Proverbs.<sup>6</sup> It is the similarities to Isis that cause some to think that the text may have been composed at a later date.

The other compelling comparison is that to the Ahiqar, the only foreign wisdom literature that also personifies Wisdom. This Wisdom is presented in a fragmentary text which attributes to her many similarities to biblical Wisdom:

From heaven the people received favor.  
 Wisdom is from the gods.  
 Also, she is precious to the gods.  
 Rulership is hers f[or eve]r.  
 She/it has been placed in heaven,  
 because the lord of the holy ones has exalted her...<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Fox, Michael V. *Proverbs 1 - 9: a New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Bible Commentary. (New York: Doubleday, 2000.) 333.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 336/337.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

Similar to this Wisdom, biblical Wisdom is a delight to God, and her role is to “delight in the human race”<sup>8</sup> and she states that “those who seek me diligently find me.”<sup>9</sup>

Another matter of much conversation is the analysis of Verses 22-31. This section is called a creation hymn by some, and clearly also serves as an origin tale. It serves to set up the authority of Wisdom and to reinforce her power within the human realm. As she has been in the world through its entire creation, and “knows the whole story,” it allows her to hold complete wisdom.<sup>10</sup> In these verses, Wisdom tells how she was the first of God’s creations: “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work.”<sup>11</sup> Verses 24-26 use negation to emphasize that wisdom comes before even the most basic pieces of creation. “When there were no depths... when there were no springs... before the mountains... before the hills... when he had not yet made earth and fields.”<sup>12</sup>

Verses 27-29 continues this emphasis. “I was there,” Wisdom states as God creates the heavens, the horizon and the earth.<sup>13</sup> Verse 30 states that Wisdom “was beside him.”<sup>14</sup> This verse is the focus of much study. What is Wisdom’s role in creation? We are told that Wisdom was beside God like *‘āmôn*. The translation of this word has been much debated. The three primary proposals, all with ancient textual support, are “artisan”, “trustworthy/constantly”, and “nursling/child”.<sup>15</sup> Support for these different translations draw from other passages within verses 22-31, and varying

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<sup>8</sup> The Bible. New Revised Standard Version. Proverbs 8:31.

<sup>9</sup> Bible, NRSV, Prov 8:17.

<sup>10</sup> Van Leeuwen, 92.

<sup>11</sup> Bible, NRSV Prov 8:22.

<sup>12</sup> Bible, NRSV Prov 8:24-26.

<sup>13</sup> Bible, NRSV Prov 8:27.

<sup>14</sup> Bible NRSV Prov 8:30.

<sup>15</sup> This is attested to in Yoder (97) as well as most other scholarly texts.

understandings and translations of these passages. The two that draw the biggest followings are “child” or “artisan.”

Trustworthy/friend, as a translation for *‘āmôn*, is found in some ancient Greek translations. This translation seems to be an attempt at getting to the etymological root of the word and is generally put aside as not making a lot of sense within the grammatical context of the passage, and as not giving much indication as to Wisdom's role in creation.<sup>16</sup>

In order to understand the two most popular translations, it's necessary to look at other relevant issues that arise in verses 22-31. *‘Āmôn* is often examined in conjunction with the celebration, or play, that Wisdom is portrayed as participating in toward the end of the passage, as well as questions that surround Wisdom's origin as portrayed at the beginning of this passage.

As previously mentioned, verses 22-31 begin with a telling of Wisdom's creation before all else. Genesis 1 tells us that “[i]n the beginning, when God created the heavens and earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.”<sup>17</sup> In the Genesis telling of creation, “the deep” (or Tehomat) is already existent. However, in Proverbs 8, Wisdom comes even before the deep. While an intriguing difference in telling, it has little bearing on the question of *how* Wisdom came into being.

The word *qúanâ* could be translated as either “to create/form” or “to acquire”. This means that Verse 22 could read “The Lord *formed* me at the beginning of his way”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Clifford, Richard J. *Proverbs: a Commentary*. The Old Testament Library. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 100.

<sup>17</sup> Bible, NRSV, Genesis 1:1-2.

<sup>18</sup> Bible, New Living Translation, Prov 8:22.

or “The Lord *acquired* me at the beginning of his way”.<sup>19</sup> Obviously, these translations give different understandings as to Wisdom’s origin. “To create” or “to form” is the translation used in the Septuagint and makes very clear that God created Wisdom.<sup>20</sup> This is the translation often used for *qúanâ* elsewhere in the *Bible* when God is the subject.<sup>21</sup> It is also associated with birthing, for example, Genesis 4:1 has Eve saying, “I have produced [*qúanâ*] a man with the help of the Lord.”<sup>22</sup>

“To acquire” as a translation, creates more ambiguity about Wisdom’s origin. The translation of *qúanâ* as meaning “to acquire” or “buy” (which is how the Vulgate translates it) is the meaning of the word “everywhere else in Proverbs, often with Wisdom as its object.”<sup>23</sup> To say that God acquired (sometimes also translated as possessed or bought) Wisdom opens the possibility that Wisdom pre-existed. This could suggest that Wisdom may be coeval to God.<sup>24</sup>

These variant translations come into play when examining what Wisdom’s role in creation was. Though the origin of Wisdom is heavily debated, scholar Michael V. Fox points out that “the question is moot”.<sup>25</sup> While the English understanding of the word “acquire” is that the object being acquired pre-exists, this is not necessarily the case.<sup>26</sup>

Fox argues that:

God acquired/created wisdom as the first of his deeds. Wisdom ‘was born’ (vv 24,25) at that time. She did not exist from eternity. Wisdom is therefore an accidental attribute of godhead, not an essential or inherent one.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Bible, NRSV, Prov 8:22.

<sup>20</sup> Fox, 279.

<sup>21</sup> Yoder, 94.

<sup>22</sup> Bible, NRSV, Gen 4:1. As noted in Yoder, 95.

<sup>23</sup> Yoder, 94.

<sup>24</sup> Fox 279. Also, Yoder 94.

<sup>25</sup> Fox, 279.

<sup>26</sup> Fox, 279.

<sup>27</sup> Fox, 279.

Another element of the debate comes in Verse 23 when it is stated “Ages ago, I was set up”. This is also translated as “formed”, “poured out”, or could be understood as “woven”. Many scholars look to these translations to show that God “crafted” Wisdom, reinforcing that she is, indeed, created. The use of the word “formed” is also thought, by some, to emphasize the concept of Wisdom being born.<sup>28</sup>

The intriguing speculation of Wisdom’s origin plays a minor role in the question of her role within all of creation. Primarily the interpretation of her being created, with language that could be associated with birthing, is used to support the vision of Wisdom as a child.

The second half of verse 30 is also often examined in relation to the different translations of *‘āmôn*. These lines have a few, slightly different, translations:

I was daily his delight,/rejoicing always before him<sup>29</sup>

I was filled with delight day after day,/rejoicing always in his presence<sup>30</sup>

A source of delight every day,/Rejoicing before Him at all times<sup>31</sup>

For some, this phrase brings to mind an image of Wisdom “frolicking” or “playing” by God’s side, the play of a joyous child. Others equate it with the joy of learning or the joy of understanding.<sup>32</sup> These understandings are important to each of the different understandings of Wisdom’s role in creation.

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<sup>28</sup> Yoder, 95.

<sup>29</sup> NRSV, King James Version, and New Living Testament all use slight variations on this translation. Prov 8:30

<sup>30</sup> New International Version. Prov 8:30

<sup>31</sup> Jewish Study Bible. Prov 8:30

<sup>32</sup> Fox, 288, 293, 294.



The translation of *‘āmôn* as meaning “child” is one that has been held throughout much of the history of biblical scholarship and is held by many today.<sup>33</sup> Supporters of this translation point to the telling of Wisdom’s creation in terms often used to speak of birthing as support for the image of Wisdom as a child through creation.<sup>34</sup> This argument especially looks at the phrase “I was brought forth,”<sup>35</sup> which others translate as “I was born.”<sup>36</sup> They see Wisdom’s delight and rejoicing as her playing while God is doing the work of creation, and don’t give Wisdom an active role within creation.

The other likely translation of *‘āmôn* draws on the idea that it is “wrongly vocalized and should be vocalized *‘ommān*.”<sup>37</sup> This is believed to be a loan word from Akkadian *ummānu*. *Ummnāu* is a title that could mean “advisor”, “scribe”, “scholar”, “officer”, “master craftsman”, “heavenly sage”, “councilor”, or “culture bringer.”<sup>38</sup> Through this interpretation, Wisdom stands beside God during creation, coming into existence before anything else, and in some way participating as the world is made. Regardless of which interpretation of *ummānu* one chooses to utilize, the analysis of the surrounding supporting text takes a fairly similar form.

An argument against this more active role in creation by Wisdom is the apparent play that Wisdom partakes in while God is creating the world. It is possible, however, that this “rejoicing” and “delight” is more of a scholarly delight, for instance “[a] councilor who gives good advice is a source of delight to the one counseled: ‘your

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<sup>33</sup> Clifford, 100.

<sup>34</sup> Yoder, 97.

<sup>35</sup> Bible, NRSV, 8:24a, 8:25b.

<sup>36</sup> Bible, New International Version, 8:24a, 8:25b.

<sup>37</sup> Clifford, 99.

<sup>38</sup> Variant translations drawn from: Clifford 101. Fox 286. Yoder 97. Von Leeuwen 94

decrees are my delight, they are my councilors' (Ps 119:24 NRSV)."<sup>39</sup> This is just one of a number of instances in the *Bible* of scholarly work bringing joy and delight.

Later biblical writing expounds on the role of Wisdom in the world and gives further insight into how Wisdom came to be viewed. Looking at these could give hints as to how the authors of Proverbs 8 may have understood Wisdom, if viewed as continuation and evolution of the theology and thought behind the original composition. These later works were often a synthesis of both biblical and other ANE traditions (especially Hellenistic and Egyptian).

The book *The Wisdom of Solomon*, likely dating to the late first century BCE or early first century CE, explores the role of Wisdom in great depth. Much of the praise of Wisdom in chapter 6 of this book clearly echoes the self-praise Wisdom shares in Proverbs 8, indicating that the author likely drew heavily on that source. *The Wisdom of Solomon* calls Wisdom "the fashioner of all things."<sup>40</sup> The author goes on to say:

For she is a reflection of eternal light,  
a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his  
goodness.  
although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining  
in herself, she renews all things.<sup>41</sup>

Additionally, "she is an initiate in the knowledge of God,/ and an associate in his works."<sup>42</sup> This paints an image of a Wisdom that could have a hand in more than just the human realm.

The *Book of Sirach* dates from the early second century BCE. In this book, Wisdom is placed as a member of a divine council:

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<sup>39</sup> Van Leeuwen, 95.

<sup>40</sup> Bible, NRSV, Wisdom of Solomon, 7:22.

<sup>41</sup> Bible, NRSV, Wis 7:26-27.

<sup>42</sup> Bible, NRSV, Wis 8:4.

in the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth,  
and in the presence of his hosts she tells of her glory:  
'I came forth from the mouth of the Most High,  
and covered the earth like a mist.'<sup>43</sup>

This calls to mind Genesis 1 where "a wind from God swept over the face of the waters."<sup>44</sup> *Sirach's* view of Wisdom could indicate some inclusion on her part in the early creation of the world.

Proverbs 8 has many other biblical connections; both *Sirach* and *Wisdom of Solomon* are believed to have drawn directly from Proverbs 8. Psalm 104 has also been noted as possibly being connected to Proverbs 8. This Psalm is a creation retelling which follows a similar structure to Wisdom's telling of creation.

O Lord, how manifold are your works!  
In wisdom you have made them all;  
the earth is full of your creatures.<sup>45</sup>

This passage could be interpreted as Wisdom being present and involved in God's creation. The idea in Proverbs 8 of Wisdom at God's side as an advisor or councilor could be reflected in this passage from Psalm 104.

Those who hold that Wisdom was a child growing up through God's time of creation point to the fact that we are not told of Wisdom physically taking part in the creation.<sup>46</sup> However, just because Wisdom is not physically shaping the earth, this does not mean that she did not have an active role as a sage, advisor, or councilor, Wisdom could provide much assistance in the creation simply through her presence. One can

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<sup>43</sup> Bible, NRSV, *Sirach*, 24:2-3

<sup>44</sup> Bible, NRSV, Gen 1:2.

<sup>45</sup> Bible, NRSV, Psalm, 104:24.

<sup>46</sup> Fox, 293.

almost envision her standing beside God, providing insight and suggestions as the world is being formed.

Though the purpose of this passage was likely to reinforce the fact that Wisdom predates all other creations, knows all history, and can speak and act on her own volition to support those who seek her, it still raises the question of what Wisdom's role was before humankind was created. Though those who claim that *'āmôn* should be translated as "child" often say that this indicates Wisdom was not involved in creation, this is not necessarily the case. While my preference is to translate *'āmôn* as a form of *ummānu* and to view Wisdom as an advisor during creation, it is still possible to also think of Wisdom as a child of God that still serves in this advisory role. Wisdom clearly states that:

When he established the heavens, I was there...  
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,  
then I was beside him.<sup>47</sup>

Wisdom is *there* throughout creation, not off frolicking elsewhere as God creates. This, along with the translation of *'āmôn* into *ummānu*, supports the role of Wisdom being active throughout creation. As Wisdom does, in many ways, fill the role of an advisor, culture bringer, and inspiration for humankind, it could be seen that part of the reason that she was present before all else was created was so that she could help in serving this role throughout creation.

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<sup>47</sup> Bible, NRSV, Prov 8:27, 29-30.

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