

Who is Woman Wisdom?

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In the Bible, wisdom is described as a skill that one acquires, a set of instructions about a way of life, and a way of pursuing knowledge. Above all, Wisdom is an attribute of God.

In the first nine chapters of Proverbs, Wisdom is personified as a woman. Personification is a figure of speech by which a writer depicts something as though it were a human being (e.g., Judges 9:8-15; Isaiah 55:12; Psalm 96:11-12). Presenting Wisdom as a woman has the effect of introducing a relational dimension to wisdom. The reader is invited imaginatively to identify with Wisdom, even to consider her a teacher, an intimate friend, or a lover.

In fact, personified Wisdom plays a variety of figurative roles in Proverbs. She can be found in the public spaces of life (1:20-21; 8:1-3). She is teacher (1:20); house builder and banquet host (9:1, 4); lover (8:17); giver of life (3:16; 8:35); tree of life (3:18); sister, intimate friend, or bride (7:4); prophet and herald (1:20-33); firstborn of all creation (8:22); and participant in God's creative activity (8:30-31). She must be sought diligently and not be forsaken (4:6; 8:17).

The quest for Wisdom, personified as a woman, is an analogy for the quest for right living (2:2-5). The book of Proverbs uses this figure of speech to highlight the fact that wisdom is not an abstract principle or life force. Wisdom is, above all, experienced in relationship with God and with others in community. In fact, wisdom does not exist apart from God, for wisdom is ultimately a gift from God (2:6).

In its ancient context, the book of Proverbs seems to be addressed primarily to young men. Wisdom is personified as a woman so as to draw an analogy with the young man's quest for a suitable partner. The analogy works this way: as the young man might pursue/seek a young woman, so he ought to pursue/seek wisdom. Personification of wisdom as a woman does not imply that she is a deity or quasi-deity. It just means that wisdom is a worthy quest.

By contrast, Proverbs also paints a picture of the dangerous or mysterious woman, and even as a personification of folly (2:16-19; 5:3-14; 6:23-25; 7:1-27; 9:13-18). It must be said that these personifications, both of Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly, are part of the imaginative world of an ancient, patriarchal culture. Young men are encouraged to not pay attention to the corrupt ways of Woman Folly. In our time, characterized by the #MeToo movement, it is appropriate to transpose that image to warn also of the dangerous or abusive man.

Ultimately, the choice being offered in Proverbs is not between two literal women, but between two paths, or ways of life: wisdom and folly, righteousness and wickedness.

Proverbs advises the young to give all their energy and attention to following the ways of Woman Wisdom.

Later writers, including writers of the New Testament, draw on the texts that personify Wisdom in order to explain the character and identity of Jesus. He, and none other, is the embodiment of Wisdom. In the apocryphal/deuterocanonical books, wisdom is personified as a woman in striking ways (see Sirach 24:1-12; 51:13-28; Wisdom of Solomon 1–9, especially chapters 7–9). New Testament writers draw on that tradition to depict Jesus as the embodied Word (John 1:1-14) and the embodied Wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24; Colossians 1:15-20). In other words, by drawing on the language of Old Testament and Apocryphal texts, Jesus is described as the incarnation of God, both as Word and Wisdom. Both Wisdom and Jesus are associated with God at creation (Proverbs 3 and 8).

But more, because wisdom is associated with God at creation (Proverbs 3 and 8), wisdom can be said to have its source in God and to have “existed” from the beginning. So the New Testament writers can speak of Jesus as being the firstborn of all creation (Colossians 1:15), drawing an analogy with wisdom in Proverbs 8. But this is similar to noticing that New Testament writers also speak of Jesus as the new Moses, the new David, the new Elijah, the temple (dwelling place of God). Wisdom is not divine on its own as a separate figure, but only as incarnated in Jesus.

The personification of wisdom as a woman in the book of Proverbs, therefore, is taken up in the New Testament, where it becomes crystal-clear that Jesus is both creator and mediator between God and humankind. New Testament writers took up the language of Proverbs and applied it to Jesus without diminishing the incarnation. No other but Jesus is the embodiment of Wisdom. Human beings are invited to immerse ourselves in him so as to acquire the wisdom of God through Jesus. Jesus, like Wisdom, pours out spirit/breath on his followers (Proverbs 1:23 CEB; John 20:22).

All of the above points speak against potential misuses of the figure of speech—Wisdom Woman—to elevate Mary (the mother of Jesus), or to diminish Jesus as merely a reflection of divine wisdom. To be more precise:

- Wisdom personified is not Mary, except insofar as any human being may become wise by attending to wisdom and learning from Wisdom.
- To say that Jesus is the wisdom of God (as do New Testament writers) does not mean that Jesus is a separate creature and therefore not divine.
- Wisdom theology can be used to promote a prosperity Gospel of long life, health, and wealth. The book of Proverbs includes enough proverbs that, taken out of their larger canonical context, can be misused. One needs to read Ecclesiastes and Job, and Jesus in the Gospels, to counter such one-sided theology.

Much of what is said about Woman Wisdom in Proverbs can only be said about God. She existed before creation itself (Proverbs 8). She is a tree of life and in her hand, she

holds life itself (3:16, 18). Through her, kings reign and rulers decree what is just (8:15). She pours out her spirit/breath on her followers (1:23; cf. John 20:22). These are all activities of God, which come to be attributed to Jesus in the New Testament.

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