Wisdom and the Goddess

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Since W. F. Albright advocated a Canaanite background to Proverbs, scholars have considered the possibility of a goddess being the inspiration for the figure of Lady Wisdom1

Introduction

It was at one time posited that before Proverbs was written there was an ancient Israelite wisdom-goddess, which formed the prototype for the use of Wisdom in Proverbs. However "there seems to be no evidence to prove there was a goddess known by the name of Wisdom".[2] The Torah and the Prophets did not acknowledge a female deity, but many of the nations around Israel had prominent goddesses. The Canaanites worshipped the goddess Astarte alongside their principal deity Baal. The history of Israel records how frequently the Israelites would adopt these gods, Baal and Astarte, instead of adhering to the worship of Yahweh.[3] In Mesopotamia the goddess Inanna was worshipped and in Egypt there was a strong cult of the goddess Isis.[4] Some of the other precursors that have been suggested include "an unnamed Assyrian or West Semitic goddess (in the Ahiqar text)" and "a Gnostic divinity before Gnosticism itself"![5] With all the suggestions the difficulty is not finding a feminine deity to act as a precursor of Wisdom but

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[1] J. M. Hadley, "Wisdom and the Goddess" in J. Day, R. P. Gordon & H. G. M. Williamson (eds.), *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 234.

[2] J. Wood, *Wisdom Literature: An Introduction* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1967), 104. Also see S. Schroer, *Wisdom has built her house: Studies on the figure of Sophia in the Bible* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 29. Wood does refer to a Canaanite goddess called *hoknoth,* which does bear some similarity to the Hebrew word for Wisdom, *hokmâ*. But, as he records, there seems to be no association between the two beyond the similarity of these two words.

[3] Judges 2:13, 10:6; I Samuel 7:3-4, 12:10; see Wood 1967:107.

[4] Hadley 1995:235.

[5] R. E. Murphy, "The Personification of Wisdom" in Day 1995:223.

rather supplying a convincing explanation as to how and why that precursor manifested itself as Wisdom.

One suggested explanation is that the Wisdom passages were written to legitimize the already established worship of a goddess. We know, for instance, that Astarte was, before the exile, worshipped by the Israelites to the exclusion of Yahweh. It is imaginable that some degree of syncretism between the opposing worship systems of Yahweh, and Baal and Astarte, could have led to the introduction of female deity alongside Yahweh. But Proverbs simply does not read like a legitimization of this kind.[1] Unlike Astarte, or other goddesses, Wisdom is not a wife and mother (if anything, she is a daughter).[2] It would certainly be odd to legitimize the worship of a goddess and yet preserve few of her defining features (not even her name).

Another suggestion is that Wisdom was created to fill the void left by the eradication of the worship of certain female deities, like Astarte.[3] J. Knox presented a similar thesis whereby Wisdom was a reaction to pressure from the Isis cult in the 3rd century BC. "The feminine features in Wisdom were a necessary element in the appeal that Judaism was making both to the faithful Jew and to the Gentile who evinced an interest in Judaism".[4] The kind of explanation is more convincing because it explains the emergence of the feminine in contemplation of the divine without requiring the Jews to have transposed a Gentile goddess into their pantheon (or rather, their monotheon).

Yet none of these explanations is required as it is equally possible to explain the origin of this character without appealing to the female deities of surrounding nations. As we shall see it is reasonable to suppose that Wisdom emerged as a literary device and a personified abstract. In fact, these latter

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[1] Hadley 1995:236.

[2] Some translators render Proverbs 8:22 to the effect that Yahweh begat Wisdom.

[3] Hence, "the gradual eradication (or assimilation into Yahweh) of legitimate goddesses such as Asherah [Astarte] has prompted a counter-reaction where the feminine needs to be expressed" (Hadley 1995:243).

[4] Wood 1967:106

explanations will be preferable as (to date) there is no evidence whatsoever of Wisdom ever being treated as a deity, having neither altars, nor images, nor cult.[1]

Wisdom as a Literary Device

The opening chapters of Proverbs are written as the instructions of a father (Solomon) to his son.[2] The aim of these instructions is to keep the son from sinners and from destruction by advocating to him the benefits of wisdom.[3] One of the principal dangers the father warns against are the wiles of the adulterous woman,[4] no doubt with the story of David and Bathsheba in mind.[5] The father urges the son establish a relationship with Wisdom so that she may protect him from the temptation of the adulterous woman:

> Say to Wisdom, 'You are my sister' and call understanding your nearest kin, that they may keep you from the immoral woman, from the seductress who flatters with her words[6]

The dichotomy between Wisdom and the adulterous woman becomes quite strong in these chapters of Proverbs and so the adulterous woman is even named "Folly".[7] Given the juxtaposition between these two – Wisdom and Folly – it is natural that Wisdom should be personified as a (chaste) woman to draw out the comparison with the seductress Folly.[8]

This use of the character of Wisdom as a literary device is quite apparent in these chapters. In any place she is discussed you will find nearby an appeal

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[1] Hence, "Perhaps the single strongest objection to considering Lady Wisdom as a divine figure in her own right is the fact that, to date, *hokmâ* is not listed in any onomastica or extra-biblical literature as a goddess" (Hadley 1995:242).
[2] Proverbs 1:8, 1:10, 2:1, etc.
[3] Proverbs 1:2-6, 2:1-5, etc.
[4] Proverbs 5:1-6, 5:15-20, 6:24-29, 7:1-27, 9:13-18.
[5] II Samuel 12.
[6] Proverbs 7:4-5 [NKJV].
[7] Proverbs 9:13 [ESV].
[8] Murphy 1995:225-6.

for the reader to get wisdom and understanding. Even the passage where Wisdom is described as being with Yahweh and participating in Creation is an advert for people to obtain understanding.[1]

The situation has not much changed in *Ecclesiasticus* where again Wisdom can be seen as a literary device, not this time as instruction, but to highlight the uniqueness of Israel and centrality of the Torah. This Wisdom is described as dwelling in Israel[2] and is identified with the Torah.[3] Murphy writes: "when we consider the centrality which the Torah came to assume in the post-exilic period, it is really not surprising that it should become the epitome of Wisdom".[4] Though in the *Wisdom of Solomon* the concept of Wisdom is developed further, probably from the influence of Greek language and philosophical systems,[5] Clarke still considers the use of Wisdom to be poetical.[6]

Perhaps the clearest argument in support of the thesis that wisdom is simply a literary device is the fact that her role and relationships with God and man are not described consistently between texts or even in the same text. Schroer writes:

> It is striking that in all these writings the relationship of (Lady) Wisdom with the God of Israel is not clearly determinable … *Sophia* is a shifting entity, not to be systematized, representing, in a variety of images and symbols, aspects of God's goodness, kindness and love for human beings[7]

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[1] Proverbs 8:32-36.
[2] *Sirach* 24:10-11.
[3] *Sirach* 24:23.
[4] Murphy 1995:227.
[5] E. G. Clarke, *The Wisdom of Solomon,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 8.
[6] Clarke 1973:121.
[7] Schroer 2000:114.

Personified Abstracts in Ancient Literature

It has at times been asserted that the ancient mind could not grapple with abstract concepts and could not have engaged with personified abstracts, such as Wisdom, other than literally, ascribing to them literal personhood. Modern scholars tend to reject this view as it is overly simplistic. Burkert writes:

> Linguistics leaves no doubt that there were abstracts not only in Indo-European, but also Semitic, and in Egyptian with explicit linguistic forms to characterize them[1]

He examines numerous examples from around the Aegean and the Middle East (including personification of Wisdom in Proverbs[2]) and concludes that the use of personification as a literary device "proves to be older than expected and more common".[3]

Stafford, who has done considerable research into personification in ancient Greece, in contrast demonstrates that many personified abstracts were treated as gods:

> That is to say they had altars, temples and cult statues, they received sacrifices and more lasting dedications, and they were involved in hymns and prayers. Such trappings of cult are the best evidence we have to indicate that anyone ever believed in the real divine power … of personification[4]

Stafford does acknowledge that the ancients also used personification as a "figure of speech with scarcely any personality at all" and that in between these two extremes there is any number of "stronger and weaker forms of

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[1] W. Burkert, "Hesiod in Context: Abstractions and Divinities in an Aegean-Eastern Koiné" in E. Stafford & J. Herrin (eds.), *Personification in the Greek World: From Antiquity to Byzantium* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers, 2005), 4.
[2] Burkert 2005:9-10.
[3] Burkert 2005:5.
[4] E. Stafford, *Worshipping Virtues: Personification and the Divine in Ancient Greece* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 2000), 2.

personification".[1] Given this situation, she notes the difficulty of determining the way in which a personification was regarded by its author. This difficulty is exacerbated by the lack of distinction in the language.

> In a language [e.g. ancient Greek] which makes no formal distinction between animate and inanimate and which has no such convention as the initial capital for a proper name, where can the line be drawn between an abstract noun and its personification?[2]

Stafford, as other scholars have before, attempts to explain how personified abstracts came to be worshipped as gods. Though we need not digress into the full discussion here, it is interesting to note that several scholars, including Stafford and Burkert, have concluded that the deification of these abstracts was "secondary".[3] The use of personification by a writer does not entail that the subject was regarded as a deity, or even a literal person. Though there are significant issues to be taken into account when interpreting the use of personification in ancient literature, it is often purely a rhetorical device. As we have seen there are some indications that make it more likely that Wisdom is used as a literary device. It is also improbable that Wisdom was regarded as deity as she does not conform to the pattern noted by Stafford of having temples, altars, etc.[4]

The Logos

Assuming that the personification of Wisdom in pre-Christian literature was purely rhetorical, the question of how John regarded the Logos can be considered against the background of Proverbs. The text of John 1 is analogous in that anthropomorphic verbs are used of (what is generally) an abstract noun, but if John's Logos is based upon Wisdom in Proverbs, then it is plausible to suppose that the Logos be interpreted as an abstract concept personified but without personhood.

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[1] Stafford 2000:2.
[2] Stafford 2000:9.
[3] Burkert 2005:14.
[4] Stafford 2000:2; see also Burkert 2005:15, and Hadley 1995:242.

However, there are significant differences. First the use of the term "Logos" (instead of "Sophia" ['Wisdom']) and second, more dramatically, John records that the Logos "became flesh".[1] These differences could be taken as sufficient reason to suppose that John regarded the Logos as a literal person.

The use of "Logos" instead of "Sophia" is not as significant as it might appear. We have already seen that Wisdom was called "Logos" in the *Wisdom of Solomon*.[2] The choice of "Logos" over "Sophia" presumably stems from John's desire to allude to the Genesis account (e.g. "In the beginning …"). It is interesting that "Logos" is used despite being a masculine noun, while Wisdom is consistently personified as a woman throughout the pre-Christian Wisdom literature. If John had taken that feminine personification literally we can expect him to have preserved the feminine gender in his own account. The use of a masculine noun in the Prologue implies did not regard Wisdom as a person.

The "incarnation" of the Logos is more problematic and is likely to have been so for John's first century audience. It is one thing to say that God's creative word is still active in the world bringing light and salvation to humanity; it is quite another to suggest that this creative word became a literal, historical, human being. Now while this does not of itself entail that the Logos was a pre-existent person, by the end of the second century this had become the standard interpretation of this passage. On the other hand, the personification of the Logos is far less blatant than the personification of Wisdom. The Logos does not "rejoice",[3] or build a house,[4] or invite people to dinner;[5] the Logos can be referred to as an 'it' without any loss of meaning. Moreover, it is significant is that John refers to the Logos without any formal introduction or explanation. John presupposes some acquaintance with the concept of the Logos in his audience. This acquaintance would, presumably, be through the Wisdom literature and this would entail that

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[1] John 1:14.
[2] *Wisdom of Solomon* 9:1-2.
[3] Proverbs 8:30.
[4] Proverbs 9:1.
[5] Proverbs 9:5.

John's audience would naturally read "the Logos" as a literary device rather than a person.

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