



## Wisdom Literature

### Wisdom and Creation

The first nine chapters of Proverbs differ from the later chapters insofar as they are long, developed, discourses. It is generally assumed that these represent a later stage of the wisdom tradition than what we find in chapters 10-31, and that they come from the postexilic period. But this is an inference from the fact that they are longer units than what we find in the other chapters. We have no firm evidence of the date.

The discourses are introduced as follows:

For learning about wisdom and instruction,  
for understanding words of insight  
For gaining instruction in wise dealing,  
Righteousness, justice and equity,  
To teach shrewdness to the simple,  
Knowledge and prudence to the young (1:1-4).

The basic assumption is that wisdom leads to justice; right understanding leads to right action. We may compare the introduction to the Egyptian Instruction of Amenemope:

Beginning of the teaching for life, the instructions for well-being,  
every rule for relations with elders, for conduct toward magistrates,  
Knowing how to answer one who speaks, to reply to one who sends a message,  
So as to direct him on the paths of life, to make him prosper on the earth.

The Egyptian instruction places more emphasis on professional training and preparation for life in the service of officials. Both texts, however, emphasize that understanding is related to moral training, and emphasize the primacy of understanding. Right action only follows from a grasp of the way things are.

### Personified Wisdom

One of the most intriguing features of Proverbs 1-9 is that Wisdom is personified as a female figure, who speaks on her own behalf.

Wisdom first appears in Prov 1:20, crying out in the street. The thrust of Wisdom's speech is that people need to submit to instruction, and it implies that such instruction is available, whether in a formal school or by individual tutorial. It is not simply a matter of changing one's behavior, although this would surely follow from right understanding. The call of the sage differs from that of the prophet in emphasizing the priority of understanding over action.

According to Prov 2:19: "The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens." Since the earth was founded with wisdom, nature is rational and admits of understanding. This is the basis for a kind of natural theology, whereby one can arrive at knowledge of the Creator by studying the order of the universe. There is no suggestion here that nature is out of joint or spoiled by sin.

The role of Wisdom in creation is developed at length in the great Wisdom poem in Proverbs 8. Wisdom is again portrayed as crying out at the crossroads and the city gate, as a teacher recruiting students. (The Greek sophists actively recruited students in Athens, possibly in the same historical period.) She urges her listeners to "take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold. For wisdom is better than jewels" (8:10-11). The promise that acquiring wisdom will lead to wealth or to something better is still part of the attraction of education in the modern world.

Wisdom also praises herself. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible only the Most High makes such grandiose claims (see especially Isaiah 40–55). This manner of speech has led many scholars to suspect that Wisdom was originally conceived as a goddess. The closest analogies to her speech are found in inscriptions in which the Egyptian goddess Isis sings her own praises. These are called *aretalogies* of Isis. Isis claims, for example, to be the eldest daughter of the sun-god Re, to be the ruler of all lands, to have set down laws for humanity, to control the rise and fall of kings, and many other accomplishments. (Compare Prov 8:15-16.) These aretalogies of Isis are known from Greek inscriptions, which are no earlier than the first century b.c.e., too late to have influenced the book of Proverbs. It may be, however, that similar praises of Isis were known in Egyptian tradition at an earlier date.

Wisdom has also been compared to another Egyptian goddess, Maat, the goddess of truth and justice. Maat was the foundation principle of Egyptian society, and her role in Egyptian religion is somewhat similar to that of Wisdom in Proverbs. But Maat never sings her own praises and is not even portrayed as speaking.

There is no real evidence that Wisdom was regarded as a goddess either in Israel or in Canaan. It is probably true, however, that the way that Wisdom is portrayed is influenced by the depictions of goddesses, especially Isis and Maat. This does not necessarily mean that Wisdom was a goddess herself. She is first of all an attribute of (some) human beings, and also of God in a higher degree. When wisdom is depicted as a female figure, this is the literary device of personification. The Egyptian goddess Maat is to some degree a personification of truth and righteousness. It has been suggested that Wisdom was also a goddess in this way, specifically that she was the patron goddess of wisdom schools.

The role of Wisdom in creation is addressed most explicitly in 8:22-31: "the Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago" (NRSV). The Hebrew word that is

translated “created” is *qanah*, which normally has the meaning “purchase” or “acquire.” It is used with reference to human beings acquiring wisdom in 1:5, 4:7, and several other places. The question then arises whether wisdom was created, or whether it existed independently and was acquired by YHWH. In Job 28 God is said to know where Wisdom can be found, but is not said to create her. The later tradition, however, is unanimous in understanding this verse to say that YHWH created Wisdom (this is how the verse is translated in the Greek). Proverbs 8:25 uses birth imagery to speak of how Wisdom was brought forth. The verb *qanah* is associated with giving birth in Gen 4:1, where Eve says, “I have acquired a man with YHWH.” Wisdom is clearly subordinate to YHWH in Proverbs 8, and is used for his purposes.

Wisdom is created, or acquired, before the creation of the world in Proverbs 8, She is then involved in the work of creation. “I was beside him as a master-worker, and I was daily his delight.” (The Hebrew word, *amon*, translated “master worker” is obscure, but is taken in the sense of a craftsman in the Greek translation and in the Wisdom of Solomon. It may be derived from an Akkadian word.) She forms a bridge between the creation and the creator. By acquiring wisdom, human beings can grasp the order of the universe and the purpose of life, but they can also share in the wisdom of God. Wisdom thus provides a rather different model for understanding the relations between God and the universe from what we find in the Torah and the Prophets, where the emphasis is on obedience. This kind of natural theology, or creation theology, is further developed in the deuterocanonical wisdom books of Ben Sira and especially in the Wisdom of Solomon, which declares that “from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their creator” (Wis 13:5).

Wisdom promises her addressees that she “gives life.” It is not implied that those who acquire wisdom will enjoy eternal life. The reference is rather to the fullness of life in this world—long life and prosperity (cf. Prov 3:16). Eventually, this promise of fullness of life would be one of the factors that contributed to the rise of a hope for immortality. Among the biblical and deuterocanonical wisdom books, however, this hope is only found in the Wisdom of Solomon.

## Wisdom and Torah

The Wisdom of Ben Sira, composed in the second century BCE, also has a long poem in which Wisdom praises herself and claims to have taken part in the creation of the world. In that case, the poem concludes surprisingly: “All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law that Moses commanded us” (Sir 24:23). Later Jewish tradition assumed that Wisdom and the Torah were one and the same, and that the Torah was created before creation. (The classical Jewish midrashic text Genesis Rabbah lists six things that were created before the world: the Torah, the throne of glory, the patriarchs, Israel, the temple and the name of the messiah.) Some scholars have claimed that Wisdom is already identified with Torah in Proverbs 1-9.

This claim arises from the fact that there are clear affinities between the language of Proverbs 1-9 and the Book of Deuteronomy. So, for example, Prov 3:1 says: “My son do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments.” Prov 6:20 refers to the commandment

of the father and the *torah* of the mother, and similar echoes of Deuteronomy can be found in the wisdom instructions in Proverbs 3 and 7. So, it is argued, the commandment of the father and the torah of the mother come close to the Torah and Commandment of God, and associate the commandments of the parents with the will of God. But we must remember that the Hebrew word “torah” means “instruction” and is not necessarily Torah with a capital T. In fact, Proverbs does not refer to the Torah of Moses, or of YHWH, but to the teaching and instruction of the parents and/or the sage. Its authority derives from human teachers. That authority may be enhanced by association with the Torah of Deuteronomy, but it does not derive from it. In Proverbs 1-9, as in chapters 10-31, we have a tradition of instruction that is not based on or derived from the Law of Moses, even though it may be quite compatible with it.

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