

Daughter Divine: Proverbs' Woman of Wisdom

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Over the past forty years, the remarkable presence of women in Prov 1–9 has drawn an equally remarkable number of studies, a gift from the rise of feminism and women in the academy. The combination of these two forces brings attention to the once invisible women in the text, figures generally overlooked or ignored as males have read and interpreted the text for other males. Now, however, the text again gives birth to these marginalized figures, providing them with bodies, eyes, ears, hands, feet, and especially, mouths for speech. Of 256 verses in Prov 1–9, 132 specifically mention or speak about women¹ and another seventeen verses either introduce these texts or draw conclusions from them;² hence fifty-eight percent of Prov 1–9. Yet, ironically, all this attention to women comes because of the writer's interest and concern for young men (1:4), with a secondary appeal to older, wise men (1:5). For the sages, it would seem that the way to a man's heart is not through food, but through women. After all, the author seems to assume, what better way to engage the attention of a young man than by speaking about or describing women?

Women and the Message of Proverbs 1–9

In Prov 1–9, five women take the stage to carry the load or speak the sage's message.

1. The young man's mother speaks alongside his father (1:8–19 and 6:20–35).
2. The writer speaks about the young man's wife (5:15–19).
3. The writer speaks about the strange or *other woman*: any woman who pursues his sexual favors, other than the young man's wife (2:16–19, 5:3–10, 20, 6:24–29, 7:6–27).
4. The writer speaks about a woman named Wisdom or Woman Wisdom (4:5–9, 9:1–6), and she speaks to the young man (1:20–33, 3:13–20, 7:4–5, 8:1–36).
5. A woman named Folly or Woman Folly appears in contrast to Woman Wisdom (2:16–19, 9:13–18).

Together, these women carry the primary themes that run through these nine introductory chapters, interwoven strands that create an enormous appeal for choosing wisdom. First, chs. 1–9 describe and emphasize the importance of wisdom, a theme so prominent that the words “wise” or “wisdom” (*hokmah*) occur over thirty times in these chapters. The sages consistently urge the son to acquire and keep wisdom (e.g., 1:20–21, 2:2, 21, 4:5, 7), motivating this action by describing the benefits of wisdom or a wise life-style (e.g., 4:6, 8–10, 22b, 26). They claim that wisdom offers the way to genuine life—a life that is good, as opposed to a zombie-like life that merely goes through the motions of being alive. This living death is what many wrongly call “the good life.”

The second thematic element in these chapters asserts wisdom to be a path, trail, or journey. Wisdom is a practice or way of life, not a possession or destination to which we arrive. The sages encourage the son(s) to walk this trail with resolve (2:20, 4:25–27) and obedience (4:20), refusing to be sidetracked onto the path of

evil (1:15). They also assure those on the path of wisdom that they will discover many benefits for their decision and determination (e.g., 2:8–9, 12, 3:6, 17, 21, 23, 4:12, 22, 8:20–21, 32).

The third thread weaving its way through chs. 1–9 is the necessity for the son to decide to obey the father and opt for wisdom—and to *make this decision now*. This theme begins with a simple, yet overwhelming call to listen, remember, and act with wisdom (e.g., 1:8, 2:1, 3:1, 11, 21, 4:1, 2, 4, 5, 10, 13, 20–21). On one hand, listening, paying attention, and remembering are major issues for the sages because sinful men are also speaking to the son and offering another way or path that sounds exciting, easy, and fun (1:10–14). On the other hand, the sages are also aware of women on the prowl for young victims, women with persuasive voices (2:16, 3:5, 5:3, 6:24, 7:21) that seduce unsuspecting, naïve youth with promises of “the good life” that, in fact, leads to living death. So not only do the sages realize that they are not the only ones speaking to the son, they know the other voices can be intensely persuasive, especially to those who still lack the wisdom to recognize the danger of the other path. But the sages see the risk and they know *the son's life depends on persuading him to listen to their voice*.

These three themes constitute the message of Prov 1–9: the importance of wisdom (it is life over death), the nature of wisdom as a path to walk rather than a destination at which we arrive, and an emphatic appeal to make a decision for wisdom and decide now to listen to the voice of the sages rather than the voices promising “the good life.” In this battle of words and ideas, a battle of how we view the world and how we live, the son must make a clear choice. He must decide, because anything less is, by default, falling to the alternative voice: the deadly path of folly. Wisdom demands a decision and commitment because it is the more difficult, strenuous way of life. And without this commitment, the son will slide into the arms of “the good life” and death. Finally, with this call and response for wisdom complete, the son is ready to receive the content of wisdom provided by the rest of the book, Prov 10–31.

Gender Bias and Irony in Proverbs

It is, to say the least, ironic that Prov 1–9 uses female figures to pursue its agenda while, at the same time, these chapters (as well as chs. 10–31) show no concern for women's interests. A gender bias exists in Proverbs, confessed in the prologue (1:1–7) and systematically followed throughout the book. Proverbs draws its target around men (1:4), especially “simple” or “naïve” young men, while silently leaving out women. Consequently, the sages consistently speak to men about their lives (as men) and about women *only as they relate to men's lives and interests*. Proverbs does not speak directly to women about their lives, about the men who threaten their well-being, or about the danger of marriage to a bad man. Four exceptions to this gender bias may exist, depending on how we interpret four texts or types of texts.

- Women are specifically mentioned in several parallel statements that include both the father and *mother* (1:8, 6:20, 10:1).³ These texts recognize the son's mother, but to what extent she functions independently apart from the idea of "parents" is unclear and unlikely (see also 17:6).
- Some texts mention "his father" or "their fathers (masculine plural)" (e.g., KJV, ESV, CSB). In the social context of Israel these texts most likely refer exclusively to the father and exclude the mother. Some English translations, however, use the term "parent" in these texts: "A fool spurns a parent's discipline" (15:5 NIV, CEV, NRSV, NLT; see also 28:7 and 29:3).
- In a similar way, individual proverbs often use Hebrew masculine pronouns, as in 13:24 ("He who withholds his rod hates his son, But he who loves him disciplines him diligently." [NASB]). Some English translations of this and other verses, however, change the pronouns to be more inclusive of both parents: "those who" (NRSV, NLT), "whoever" (NIV, ESV), and "you" (CEV).
- The longest text that may speak to women ("The Ode to the Worthy Woman," 31:10–31) either stands as an awkward exception at the end of the book or is not an exception at all, but a fitting finale for a book about men and their interests.

As much as I wish I could reach a different verdict, I cannot. Gender bias is tightly woven into the fabric of Proverbs. It is a book by men for men, a book that uses women to accomplish its purposes.

It is easy for me, as a man, to say, *I don't like the bias I find in Proverbs. But as Scripture, we need to accept its witness and realize that much of Proverbs equally applies to women.*⁴ To say this, however, is to misdiagnose the depth of the problem and the irony of the text. As for the problem, women are not only left out of the man's world, the sages frequently blame women for what men do wrong. It is the beauty and eyes of the *other woman* (6:25), her dress and her stance in the street (7:10–12), her kiss (7:13), and most of all her seductive speech (e.g., 5:3, 6:24, 7:14–21) that lures and traps a young man so that he follows her "like an ox to the slaughter, like a deer leaping into a trap" (7:22–23).⁵ Blame does not entirely escape the foolish young man who does not recognize, stay away from, and consequently falls to such a woman (2:17–22, 5:11–13, 20–23, 6:27–33). Yet the sages do not hesitate to tag the woman as the problem. She is the one who "has caused many corpses to fall; she has killed many people. Her house is a path to the grave, going down to the chambers of death" (7:27–28). Some interpreters suggest that this woman may be a cipher for other gods or a path of life other than wisdom—anything other than an actual woman. And yet, whatever "it" may be, the sages still portray "it" as an evil woman.

The further irony, however, is delightful. While the sages use women for their purposes, portray the female in negative, stereotypical terms, and blame women for a man's failures—at the same time, the female refuses to stay within those boundaries. She breaks free of male constraints, and not just a little. When

she defies limitations, she shoots for the stars and beyond, so far beyond that we may also describe the writer of Proverbs as possessing feminist tendencies.

Of the five women in Prov 1–9, the woman named Wisdom brings together both features of the book, gender bias and feminism. She is also the most provocative and overlooked figure in the OT. Five texts in Proverbs feature this woman (1:20–32, 3:13–20, 8:1–36, 9:1–6, and 31:10–31), with passing references elsewhere (e.g., 4:5–9, 7:4). We treat these texts in order here, allowing themes to develop as the sages have presented them.⁶

Proverbs 1:20–32

The book of Proverbs wastes little time before introducing the figure of Wisdom (1:20–32). Wisdom not only comes to life, but takes the shape of a woman (not a man): *she* raises her voice (20b), *she* cries out (21a), and *she* speaks (21b). And with a little imagination and a mental map we can follow her movements, for she speaks everywhere: in the street, in the squares (1:20), at the busiest corner, and the city gate (1:21). In other words, Wisdom is available everywhere—the young men must only recognize her voice.

As we overhear her words it is difficult not to notice an accent thick with favorite words and phrases: she cries out (1:20a, 21a), she raises her voice (1:20b), and she asks, "How long?" (1:22a, 23b). Her accent gives her away: she comes from among the prophets who also cry out, raise their voices, and ask, "How long?"⁷ In other words, not only is Wisdom depicted as a woman, *she is also cast as a powerful prophet.*

In fact, Woman Wisdom is *an exasperated prophet.* She has spoken to young men (1:22) and done everything possible to get their attention so that they would listen to her (1:22–23). But they have refused to respond, to accept any of her counsel or correction (1:22–25). So in a bold move she tells the young men that when disaster hits them (and it is coming) she will laugh and mock them, apparently just as they have responded to her (1:26–27).

A slight but significant shift in pronouns occurs between 1:27 and 1:28. Prior to 1:28 Wisdom refers to the young men with second person plural pronouns ("you"). But in 1:28 and afterward, she refers to the young men with third person plural pronouns ("they"). This clue denotes that her audience has changed between v. 27 and v. 28. She no longer speaks to the young men, but explains and defends her behavior to another audience; the young men become an object lesson. She tells the new audience that she will ignore the young men when they call to her in crisis (1:28) because they hate knowledge and have not chosen "the fear of the LORD"—a proper relationship of fear, respect, and intimacy with God (1:29). They have rejected everything she has tried to teach them (1:30). Therefore, they now get what they wanted: their "waywardness" and "complacency" will destroy them (1:31). But Wisdom assures this second audience that those who listen to her voice will be secure and will have no reason to fear disaster (1:32).

Proverbs 3:13–20

This second text featuring Woman Wisdom is a bold contrast to her first appearance. To begin, the writer speaks *about* Woman

Wisdom; she herself does not speak. The ominous threatening tone of the first speech is also replaced with an encomium (a text of high praise) of Wisdom. She is more than or better than wealth (3:14) and jewels (3:15a), and incomparable to any other desire (3:15b). She holds long life in one hand (genuine life that is good, 3:16a). And in her other hand she holds wealth and honor (3:16b). The paths she travels (and implicitly invites the reader to walk with her) are pleasant and peaceful (3:15). Then comes a surprise: she is also “a tree of life” (3:18a), which sends our thoughts racing back to the “tree of life” forever lost to humans (or so we thought) in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:22–24). Wisdom, however, is the tree that provides the life God has always intended for humanity. The catch? Young men must “find wisdom and get understanding” (3:12). They must “lay hold of her” and never let her go (3:18), an idea that later leads to a special proposal.

Say to wisdom, “You are my sister,”
and call insight your intimate friend. (7:4)

The phrase “You are my sister” is unlikely to strike modern readers as intimate or romantic. To us it sounds as if the father expects the son to treat Wisdom like his sister. The Song of Songs, however, corrects our misunderstanding by its use of the same phrase:

You have captured my heart, my sister, my bride! (Song 4:9a CEB)

How beautiful is your loving, my sister, my bride! (Song 4:10a CEB)

The phrase “my sister” parallels “my bride” in both texts, indicating that both are expressions of intimacy—love language between a husband and his wife. Consequently, when the sages urge young men to say to Wisdom, “You are my sister,” they not only encourage them toward an intimate relationship with this woman, they call for the young men to marry Woman Wisdom, to make her their bride. Only marriage to this woman will keep the son safe from involvement with evil women.

Proverbs 8

After Wisdom calls to readers for attention (8:1–3), she claims the trustworthy nature of her teaching; she speaks truth and righteousness in straightforward words (8:4–9). Woman Wisdom continues to bolster confidence in her words by explaining that she is the force that enables kings to rule, princes to order righteous decrees, rulers to govern, and judges to make right decisions (8:12–16). She loves those who love her and provides them with wealth, honor, and righteousness (8:17–18). In fact, what she gives is better than gold or silver (8:19). Woman Wisdom walks on the paths of justice and righteousness and provides for those who love and walk with her (8:20–21). What Woman Wisdom does overlaps with the primary purposes for Proverbs (1:3, “for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity”).

Next, Woman Wisdom reaches back to a memory before the beginning of time to describe her relationship to the LORD:

The LORD created (*qanah*) me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.

Ages ago I was set up (*nasak*),
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth (*hyl*),
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth (*hyl*). (8:22–25)

Wisdom describes her relationship to the LORD with three remarkable Hebrew verbs. The first, *qanah*, appears in v. 22a. It has overtones of pregnancy or formation in the womb, similar to the meaning of *qanah* in Gen 4 and Ps 139:

I [Eve] have produced (*qanah*) a man with the help of the LORD. (Gen 4:1)

For it was you who formed (*qanah*) my inward parts,
you knit me together in my mother’s womb. (Ps 139:13)⁸

The second term, *nasak* (8:23a), most likely means to “install” or “appoint” to an official position as in Ps 2:6 when the LORD says, “I have set (*nasak*) my king on Zion, my holy hill.” Consequently, the related noun, *nasik*, is often translated “ruler” or “prince” (see Josh 13:21; Ps 83:11; Ezek 32:30; Mic 5:5).⁹

The third term, from the verb root *hyl* (8:24a, 25b), has some connection to the pain of childbirth or childbirth itself (Deut 32:18; Job 39:1; Isa 26:17). Thus, English translations express the idea in Prov 8 by the phrase, “I was brought forth” (ASV, CEB, KJV, NASB, NRSV, RSV), or with more specific language, “when I was born . . . my birth” (CEV, ERV 2006, NIV, HCSB).

Together these verbs express a unique relationship between the LORD and Woman Wisdom. Far before the creation of the world, the LORD created, brought forth or gave birth to, and appointed Woman Wisdom.¹⁰ On one hand, the imagery is staggering: Wisdom claims some form of descent from the LORD. On the other hand, before our imaginations run away from us, we must remember that the sages are personifying Wisdom as a woman—or here as a female child of the LORD, just as they personified Wisdom as a mighty prophet in Prov 1. Yes, the sages claim some sense of divine birth for Wisdom, but only as a vivid literary way of expressing the close relationship between wisdom and the LORD. Just as God “founded the earth” by Wisdom, Wisdom is intimately related to the LORD, a divine attribute. Thus Woman Wisdom implies that she is a child or daughter of the LORD—a way to say that wisdom originates from God.

Second, the sages continue this personification of wisdom in Prov 8 with reference to creation in vv. 30–31. Woman Wisdom precedes and plays a role at creation. Exactly what role she plays, however, is one of the greatest puzzles in the book of Proverbs: the translation of a single word, *amon*.

. . . then I was beside him, like *amon* . . . (8:30a)

Scholars continue to debate the origin and meaning of this term, typically coming to one of two conclusions. 1) The term *amon* derives from the Akkadian loan word *ummanu* (via Aramaic) and most likely means “artisan” or “master craftsman” (see Jer 52:15):

I was beside him as a master of crafts. (Prov 8:30 CEB)
I was beside him, like a master worker. (Prov 8:30 NRSV)

2) The word *amon* derives from a Hebrew root with the same three consonants as *amon* which has the idea of nurturing, bringing up, or growing a child (similar to Esth 2:20):

I grew up as a child by his side . . . (Prov 8:30 ERV 2006)
I was like a child by his side. (Prov 8:30 NCV)

A full discussion of the arguments for each meaning is beyond the scope of this study; a few observations and references must suffice.¹¹ The first option has held the field for many years. The second has been recently bolstered by the work of Michael Fox, a leading scholar in Proverbs and ancient Near Eastern Wisdom.¹² In my opinion, the context, the lines before and following *amon*, tilts the scales in favor of “child,” “infant,” or “growing up,” the position held by Fox. Verses 30b–31 read:

and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race. (NRSV)

or

and I was his delight day by day,
frolicking before him at all times,
frolicking in his inhabitable world.
And my delight is in mankind. (Fox)¹³

In either translation, the description of Woman Wisdom is not what I would expect of an architect or master craftsman. Notice the repetition of two key terms: “his delight” or “delighting” (30a, 31b) and “rejoicing” or “frolicking” (30b, 31a). The first term is not typically used to describe someone doing serious work. Wisdom frolics, plays, or enjoys herself (see 1 Sam 18:7; Judg 16:25; Ps 104:26). The second term, “delight” or “delighting,” in the form it takes here in Prov 8, may denote the action of an adult (as in Ps 119:24, 77, 92, 143, 174; Isa 5:7) or a parent’s delight in a child: “Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in?” (Jer 31:20). As a whole the evidence is not clear-cut or overwhelming, but, in my opinion, it is more suggestive of a young child than a master craftsman.

Accepting *amon* as a child allows a vivid personification of the LORD and wisdom to come into focus. Before creation, the sages lead our imagination, the LORD created, brought forth, or gave birth to Wisdom and appointed her to her present position. Then, at creation, Wisdom was at the LORD’s side frolicking, playing, or rejoicing. The LORD took pleasure in Wisdom, and Wisdom took pleasure or delight in the human race. The picture implies something like the LORD participating in a cosmic “take your daughter to work” program.

Again, the sages are employing vivid personification in order to capture the reader’s imagination. Then they spring their literary trap. However one may translate the terms in vv. 22–25 or 30–31, at issue is Woman Wisdom’s presence at creation and her delight in humanity. Now she shares with those who will listen what she saw at creation and therefore knows about how this world works (8:32–33). Whoever will listen to her will find life—the life that is good, true life (8:34–36).

To say the least, this text describes a unique relationship between the LORD and Wisdom. Far before the task of creation,

the LORD created, gave birth to, and appointed Woman Wisdom—not an idea or set of rules, but a living figure and divine being: God’s daughter (8:22–25). *Startling to say the least—and troubling that we hear so little about this daughter divine in contemporary preaching and teaching.* She is a royal figure who empowers others to rule with justice and righteousness (8:14–16). She walks in the way of righteousness and justice (8:20), rewarding all those who love and follow her with riches, honor, and wealth beyond the best gold or silver (8:18–21). We might be tempted to dismiss this text and its claims, if not for its clarity: Woman Wisdom clearly asserts nothing less than divine birth. The LORD “brought forth” or gave birth to a daughter named for who she would become: Woman Wisdom. Or to reverse the figures, Woman Wisdom claims that *her mother is the LORD*.

That much is clear. What is unclear is what we are to make of Wisdom’s claims: how we are to read and understand Prov 8? Should we understand Woman Wisdom as a vivid extended literary metaphor—and no more than a literary creation to persuade young male readers? Or is Woman Wisdom the result of hypostatization—making an abstract quality of God concrete (more extreme than a metaphor or simile)? Or why not take Woman Wisdom’s claim of divine birth literally, as evidence of a divine female—a fourth member of the “trinity” or a “quadrinity?”¹⁴ Is it possible, as a few have argued, that Woman Wisdom is the literary remains of an ancient goddess that once existed in Israel, a female consort to the male Yahweh? We should not take the sages’ extended literary metaphor to such extremes. Nonetheless, here I want to suggest a few points of guidance.

To begin, let us not be in a hurry to run away from the vivid figure in the text, the portrait of the divine feminine. The text speaks of a daughter “brought forth” or born (presumably) of God. Just as a child comes from her mother, Woman Wisdom came from God. Perhaps this concept startled ancient readers, but I doubt it. Ancient Israel lived in a world filled with gods and goddesses. And despite the patriarchy that existed, it is obvious that Israel also recognized and accepted diverse leadership roles filled by women: prophets (e.g., Deborah and Huldah), court judges (Deborah), and political leaders (Miriam, see Micah 6:4; and the Queen Mother or “king’s mother”—a position which Athaliah was able to leverage into becoming the Queen of Judah, see 2 Kgs 8:26, 11:1–3). I suspect that the harsh patriarchy we often see in the OT is more the result of reading our situation or preferences into the testimony of the text itself. The sages of Proverbs deliberately choose to present Wisdom as the divine child of God in order to advance their message. May we accept their image with awe, rather than running from it in fear.

Woman Wisdom is no ordinary woman. She is a prophet who speaks with authority and provides life-giving instruction (1:20–33). She is the source of blessing, wealth, honor, and life itself—genuine life, the tree of life rediscovered (3:13–20). And Woman Wisdom is the divine daughter, present at creation, who uniquely knows about human life and possesses unique authority to speak for God (8:1–35). Once the son’s relationship to Wisdom is secured (by marriage, 7:4) and he is ready to listen to the words of Woman Wisdom, the task of chs. 1–9 is nearly complete.

Proverbs 9:1–6

The final chapter of Prov 1–9 permits Woman Wisdom and her nemesis, Woman Folly, to make their final appeals to the son and the reader. Here, the feminist tendencies of the sages and their patriarchal bias stand in bold contrast: the Wise Woman offers life while the Foolish Woman takes life.

Wisdom presents her case first: an invitation to a marvelous feast. She has made all her preparations (9:1–2) and has sent her servants to invite young men to participate in the life she provides:

“You that are simple, turn in here!”

To those without sense she says,

“Come, eat of my bread

and drink of the wine I have mixed.

Lay aside immaturity, and live,

and walk in the way of insight.” (9:4–6)

The sages then give Woman Folly an opportunity to make her claims. Unlike Wisdom, Folly is loud, a trait born of her ignorance (9:13). She sits outside the door of her house or perches at the highest places in town (9:14). Folly calls to those who pass by: “You that are simple, turn in here!” (9:16), inviting them to her illicit feast of stolen water and secret bread (9:17, see the same sexual innuendo in 5:14–18).

Woman Folly’s opening words of invitation should sound familiar: they are identical to those spoken by Woman Wisdom (9:16, cf. 9:4). A similarity that warns the son and reader: it is not always easy to know whom to listen to, to discern who offers life and who offers death. Initial words and appearances are not always trustworthy. The son must learn to listen and watch carefully—to look for authenticity and truth. If he fails, he will fall to Woman Folly and join her prior guests in the grave (9:18).

With these final invitations the purpose of chs. 1–9 is complete. The son has been made aware of the incredible importance of wisdom, taught the nature of wisdom as a path or life-long journey, and is now presented with a point of decision. He must accept one invitation or the other, and to procrastinate is, in fact, a decision to follow the path of folly. Now the youth and the reader are ready to receive the content of wisdom, available in the proverbs that fill the multiple sub-collections in Prov 10:1–31:9.

Proverbs 31:10–31

The fifth text featuring Woman Wisdom is the ode to “the capable wife” (NRSV) or “wife of noble character” (NIV), an apt conclusion for a book that begins with Woman Wisdom. The ode itself is an alphabetic acrostic consisting of twenty-two lines in which each line begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It is a beautiful literary technique for asserting everything about this woman, everything from *Aleph* to *Tav* (in Hebrew) has been said—or as we might say, everything from A to Z.

Like other texts in Proverbs, the ode to the worthy woman was most likely adopted by the sages and brought into the book of Proverbs as a whole. In other words, it was not originally composed explicitly to be the final chapter. In its original setting, I expect that the poet spoke in praise of wives who guided their homes and businesses with great skill or excellence (recall the first or primary meaning of wisdom, see ch. 1). It is

not difficult to see or read the poem with this meaning. The sages, however, appear to take this poem and place it at the end of their collection for a different purpose: to summon Woman Wisdom to a final appearance, a curtain call of sorts.¹⁵ Three clues lead me to this conclusion.

To begin, it seems unlikely that a book that has not directly spoken to women for over thirty chapters would suddenly speak to women and give them an example to follow. Stranger things do happen, but the traditional proposal (that Prov 31 is a human wife) forces me to look back through Proverbs in search of any hint that instruction to, or an example for women was coming. The sages have spoken about women or wives that make a husband’s life miserable (12:4b, 19:13b, 21:9, 19, 27:15–16) and women who bless their husbands and families (12:4a, 14:19, 18:22, 19:14). So it is possible the sages would want to provide another example of an excellent wife, but the imbalance created (twenty-two sustained verses for the excellent wife as opposed to a few scattered verses about wives elsewhere) and the placement of this poem at the end of the book make me suspicious that something else is going on.

The more closely we examine what this woman does, the less likely she appears to be normal or human, especially if we read this poem literally, as if one person is doing all these things. It is not that a human woman is unable to invest money in a field, plant a vineyard (v. 16), or produce material goods to supply merchants (v. 24). These tasks are not beyond women in ancient Israel. In fact, all of her activities are recognizable tasks or common activities for women of her socio-economic class. It is not each individual accomplishment that creates the problem. Rather, it is the overwhelming combination of tasks that leads us away from identifying her as a human.

She works with wool and flax (v. 13).

She imports food for her household (v. 14).

She rises during the night to prepare food (v. 15a).

Before dawn, she lays out daily tasks for her servants
(v. 15b).

She examines property and buys it (v. 16a).

She plants a vineyard in the new property; most likely
directing workers to accomplish this task (v. 16b).

She is a strong woman (v. 17).

She produces valuable merchandise (v. 18a).

She is too busy to go to bed or sleep (v. 18b).

She spins wool (v. 19).

She looks after the poor (v. 20).

She has warm clothes for her household (v. 21a).

She acquires expensive clothes for her family (v. 21b).

She dresses in beautiful and expensive clothing (v. 22).

She makes (or oversees production of) clothing and sells it:
linen garments and sashes (v. 24).

She looks to the future with optimism and laughter (v. 25).

She is wise and teaches wisdom with kind words (v. 26).

She oversees household needs (v. 27a).

She is never idle or lazy (v. 27b).

She fears the LORD (v. 30).

Forgive me, but I cannot help but think of the words: “It’s a bird. No, it’s a plane. No, it’s Superman!” or in this case: “It’s Superwoman!”

She is more than amazing, and too good to be true: she never stops, never appears to sleep or get tired, she is here, there, and everywhere. Her husband has it rough; he enjoys all the good she gives him, how well she takes care of the household while he lingers at the city gate with other city leaders (vv. 11, 23). To be blunt: what man would not want to be in his sandals? And while we are being blunt: what woman could possibly live up to all these expectations? Our answer to this question provides an important clue to the woman's identity: no human woman (or man) could possibly do all these things.¹⁶

The third clue leading me away from identifying this woman as a human is the context of the passage in the book of Proverbs. Not only does the book not speak explicitly to women, in the opening nine chapters the sages feature Woman Wisdom. This is the woman the father encouraged the son to love, hold onto, prize, honor (4:5–9), and marry (7:4). And as we remind ourselves of this woman, reading Prov 31 within the context of the book of Proverbs, we begin to recognize a close correlation between what the father said Woman Wisdom would do if the son accepted her (Prov 1–9) and the description of the valiant woman, the wife who is blessing the man's life, in Prov 31. In other words, the woman in Prov 31 is none other than Woman Wisdom.

Notice the similarities between Woman Wisdom in Prov 1–9 and the Valiant Woman in Prov 31 in Table 1.

The parallels between Woman Wisdom in chs. 1–9 and the worthy woman in ch. 31 are striking. At points the similarity is uncanny (e.g., #3), and in other points the similarity bears a family-like resemblance (e.g., #2). This mirror image is no accident or happenstance, but the very reason the sages employ this poem to conclude the book: to make one final appeal for accepting Woman Wisdom because of what she will do for our lives.

Just as earlier collections have occasionally included identical proverbs, so the final poem retains the shadow of its original (pre-Proverbs) function (including aspects that may not precisely fit the earlier description of Woman Wisdom, e.g., the presence of children in 31:28) and thus may still be read as an ode to a worthy woman/wife (not to Woman Wisdom).¹⁷ In fact, this shadow from the poem's original purpose provides insights into the extent of the various types of women's activities in ancient Israel:

- organizing and supervising household business (31:13–15, 19, 21)
- purchasing and developing real estate (31:16)
- running a profitable business (31:18, 24)

TABLE 1		
	STATEMENTS OR PROMISES IN PROVERBS 1–9	OUTCOMES OF MARRYING WOMAN WISDOM IN PROVERBS 31
#1	Wisdom is the woman the young man should love and embrace (4:6, 8), lay hold of and never let go (3:18), and say to her, "You are my sister" (7:4a, he should marry her). She invites him into her home (9:4–6).	"A capable wife who can find?" (31:10a), but he has clearly found her, married her, and now enjoys a lifetime of benefits from living with Woman Wisdom.
#2	Wisdom promises riches and honor (3:16b, 8:18) and endows with wealth (8:21).	She brings wealth and honor to her family through her accomplishments. She is a hardworking, successful businesswoman (31:16, 18a, 24) who also works with her own hands (31:13, 17, 19), never stopping to rest (31:15a, 18b, 27b). She clothes herself and the family with luxurious, expensive clothing (31:21–22) and because of her he has no lack of gain or wealth (31:11b).
#3	Wisdom is more precious than jewels (3:15, 8:11).	She is more precious than jewels (31:10b).
#4	Wisdom cries out in the streets and city squares to teach others (1:20–21, 8:1–3, 6–7a, 8–9, 14, 9:4–6).	She opens her mouth with wisdom (31:26).
#5	Her paths are ways of pleasantness and peace (3:17).	She does him good, not harm (31:12).
#6	She is trustworthy: she gives good advice, sound wisdom, insight, and strength (8:14).	Her husband trusts in her and lacks nothing (31:11a). She is clothed with dignity (31:25a).
#7	Those who trust Woman Wisdom will be secure with no dread of disaster (1:33).	She is not afraid of the future for her household (31:21a) and "laughs at the time to come" (31:25b).
#8	Wisdom has prepared luxurious food (meat) and wine (9:2).	She provides food for her household (31:15b) and brings food from far away (31:14).
#9	Wisdom has built her house (9:1) and gives house servants ("serving girls") their tasks (9:3).	She supervises the home—directing servants (31:15c) and managing household affairs (31:27a).
#10	The foundation and essence of wisdom is the fear of the LORD (1:7, 9:10).	She fears the LORD (31:30).
#11	By her, kings reign, rulers decree what is just, nobles govern rightly (8:15–16); she walks in the paths of righteousness and justice (8:20).	Because of her (presumably), he sits in the city gate—where court cases are heard and justice dispensed (31:23).
#12	She is incomparable (3:15b, 8:11b); her income is better than silver and gold (3:14, 8:19).	Her husband praises her (31:28b) and says she surpasses all women (31:29). He calls for her work to publicly praise her (31:31).
#13	The one who finds her finds life and favor from the LORD (8:35).	This man/husband has definitely found life with her (throughout 31:10–31).
#14	Those who find wisdom are happy (3:13a); those who listen to Woman Wisdom and her ways are happy (8:32, 34).	If the man married to this woman is not happy, he will never be happy—nothing could make him happy.

- looking after the poor (31:20)
- teaching others wisdom (31:26)

And for all these activities her husband and children are to praise her (31:28–29).

This leaves us with two interpretive possibilities for the ode to the worthy woman.

- To read this poem in praise of wonderful wives and mothers, and with this reading to provide an extended example for women to follow.
- To read this poem within the context of the book of Proverbs as a final appearance of Woman Wisdom, a familiar friend, guide, and spouse reaffirming the benefits promised to those who pursue a relationship with her.

Woman Wisdom in Proverbs: A Tentative Conclusion

The sages of Proverbs use female figures in positive ways: presenting the authoritative voice of the son's mother and the remarkable presence and role of Woman Wisdom. These feminist tendencies, however, are held in check by negative uses of female figures: the presence of the "other" woman (seductive and dangerous because of her speech, see 5:3–4, 6:24, 7:14–21) and of Woman Folly (also a danger because of her duplicitous speech)—not to mention viewing or speaking of the son's wife in purely sexual terms, as an object of sexual desire. At the same time, the sages put all of these images to use in order to communicate first and foremost to young men (not young women).

Despite what we may view as shortcomings born of the sages' time and place, it is difficult not to be impressed by their figure of Woman Wisdom. In Proverbs, she is a mighty prophet, the "wisdom" by which God created the earth (3:19–20), and a woman more precious than jewels, silver, or gold. She is "a tree of life" for those who find and hold onto her, the woman young men should marry, and the divine daughter of God present at creation and available now for all who sit at her door, eagerly seeking her guidance. For the literature to work, to persuade, the sages' rhetoric had to be accessible—believable. The audience had to be able to enter their world and not be thrown off course by unbelievable images of women, including the image of Woman Wisdom. Here we encounter yet another irony: despite how far we have come, we may well be the ones who are the most uncomfortable or unaccepting of the daughter divine—not the ancient patriarchal world of Israel. After all, the sages speak about her at length in Proverbs; when is the last time we have heard public honor for the daughter divine who enriches our lives?

Notes

- 1:8, 20–33, 2:16–19, 3:13–18, 4:5–9, 5:3–20, 6:24–35, 7:4–27, 8:1–36, 9:1–6, 9:13–18.
- 2:20–22, 3:19–20, 4:1–4, 5:1–2, 21–23, 7:1–3.
- See also 15:20, 17:21, 25, 20:20, 23:22, 23:24–25, 28:24, 30:11, 17.
- For example, I have challenged classes to rewrite the speeches to young men in Prov 1–9 as speeches to young women, warning them about the dangers they face as they grow independent (including the danger of "other" men).
- Unless otherwise indicated, English translations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

6. Further development of all these figures may be found in my forthcoming study of Proverbs, *A Life That is Good: The Message of Proverbs in a World Wanting Wisdom* (Eerdmans: August, 2018). I am grateful to *Priscilla Papers* for permitting me to incorporate this study of Woman Wisdom into the larger, forthcoming work.

7. Moses (Exod 10:3), Elijah (1 Kgs 18:21), Isaiah (6:11), Hosea (8:5), Habakkuk (1:2, 2:6), Zechariah (11:12), and especially Jeremiah (4:14, 21, 12:4, 13:27, 23:26, 31:22, 47:5, 6).

8. See God described as the one who "brought forth" or "gave birth" in Deut 32:6; Job 15:7; Ps 90:2. Other meanings of *qanah* include to purchase or acquire goods (Prov 4:5), and what is won or acquired through battle (Ps 78:54).

9. *Nasak* sometimes means to weave or woven cloth (Isa 25:7), or to make an image or idol by pouring liquefied metal into a form (Isa 44:10). The noun (*nasek*) denotes an idol made by this process (Dan 11:8).

10. In Greek mythology, Athena (goddess of reason, arts, and literature) was "born" fully mature from Zeus's forehead; she did not have a mother.

11. See Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 285–89; Ernest Lucas, *Proverbs*, Two Horizons (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 82–85.

12. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 285–89.

13. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 264.

14. Readers have often noticed a similarity between the description of Jesus in John 1 and Woman Wisdom and have proposed that Wisdom might be Jesus. A proposition that stumbles over the difference in gender: Wisdom (female), Jesus (male). Some have also proposed that Woman Wisdom is the Holy Spirit. Both proposals attempt to read the OT text through the lens of the NT.

15. See the more nuanced studies of Thomas McCreesh, "Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10–31," *RB* 92 (1985): 25–46; Claudia Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: Almond, 1985), 186–208; Richard Clifford, *Proverbs*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 274; Silvia Schroer, *Wisdom has Built Her House: Studies of the Figure of Sophia in the Bible*, trans. L. M. Maloney and W. McDonough (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2000), 15–51; Christine Roy Yoder, "The Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 31:10–31," *JBL* 122 (2003): 427–47. See also the review of interpretations by Michael Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, AB (New Haven: Yale University, 2009), 905–17.

16. It is impossible to know how this text functioned in its original context (before coming to the book of Proverbs) because we do not possess the text from which this poem derived. Here at the end of Proverbs, there is no indication (to me) that we should read the text as an encomium or text of high praise for *the various things* she might do. Instead, it sounds like a sustained list of all the things this one wife actually does.

17. We find the same usage of poems elsewhere, where writers have incorporated a poem that works in its new context but does not fit in all its precise details. See the prayer of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1–10): especially notice statements in v. 5b ("the barren has borne seven") and v. 10b ("he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed") that do not correlate to her present circumstances.

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