LADY-WISDOM: THE PERSONIFICATION OF GOD’S WISDOM AS A WOMAN

"Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights along the way, where the paths meet, she takes her stand; beside the gates leading into the city, at the entrances, she cries aloud..." Proverbs 8:1-3

Tina J. Ostrander

In the Old Testament book of Proverbs, God’s infinite wisdom is personified as a woman. The association of divine wisdom with the feminine is not accidental. Social relationships in Israel reflected spiritual relationships between Israel and Yahweh. As a result of this basic analogy between the earthly realm and the heavenly realm, one can look to the feminine images of Hebrew scriptures to better understand personified wisdom. The Law and the Prophets provided the writer(s) of Proverbs with many feminine images (including homemaker, counselor and wise woman, and lover) that influenced their use of female imagery for divine wisdom. By better understanding the images of women portrayed in the Old Testament, one can gain insight into the nature of God’s wisdom.

Proverbs was written to teach young male students how to function in society and find meaning and order in the world. The proverbs are truths, inspired by and rooted in the Hebrew faith, that provide practical guidance for right living. In light of the fact that these proverbs were written for a male audience, it is ironic that, as a whole, Proverbs is united by recurrent female imagery and the personification of God’s wisdom as a woman. Chapters 1-9 and 31, which form the introduction and conclusion to the book of Proverbs, are especially pregnant with feminine imagery.

Personification is a literary device which is used to personalize an impersonal concept. A personification is capable of expressing a whole spectrum of meanings. The woman in Proverbs personifies God’s creative counsel and purpose, as well as God’s presence and active involvement in the world. She personifies the gift of wisdom given to humanity by God for guidance, enabling us to obey God’s commands and respond to God’s calling. She also personifies the order and meaning which God has implanted in creation, God’s general revelation. Lady-Wisdom, then, represents wisdom itself, in all its forms and manifestations. However, wisdom was neither understood nor worshipped as a goddess or a divine being independent of the one and only God. Neither is "Wisdom" ever used in Scripture as a substitute or alternative name for God.

HOMEMAKER

The Old Testament image of homemaker is one which can shed light on Lady-Wisdom. Women enjoyed a "high status in the domestic realm where they could exercise both power and authority." The bride and wife of Proverbs 4:5-9, the lifelong companion of 6:22 and 7:4, and the hostess of 9:1 are images of the Israelite woman who managed her household and gave it identity. Similar images of the woman as homemaker are found in Rebekah and Naomi, and in Esther whose concern was with the house of Israel. Lady-Wisdom, too, builds and manages her house and establishes a proper family life. She insures its security by protecting her disciples.

The Israelite homemaker was the preparer of meals. The traditional female activity of meal preparation was essential to the identity and bonding of the community. The meal was a "practical but creative, indirect but effective, self-initiated but divinely-willed...setting for persuasion and decision for (or against) new or renewed life." Lady-Wisdom and Folly, as meal-preparers, both persuade their listeners and require them to make a decision. One must discern between the good meal and the evil meal, symbols of good and evil life.

Folly, personified in Proverbs 9:13-18, represents the attractions and dangers of adultery and unfaithfulness. Like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, Folly convinces her listeners not that evil is good, but that evil consequences will not necessarily follow an evil act. She represents chaos, destruction and death.

COUNSELOR

A second image of women prevalent in the Hebrew Scriptures is that of the "counselor" or "wise woman." A wife and mother in Israel was responsible for handing

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wisdom down to her children and had the ability to influence her husband. The cultural image of the "behind-the-scenes advisor" in Israel was defined as female. In Proverbs, both Lady-Wisdom and Folly offer counsel. Lady-Wisdom's good counsel bestows honor on her follower as the counsel of the good wife bestows honor on her husband (Pr 31). Folly's counsel, on the other hand, leads her followers astray, "down to the chambers of death (Pr 7:27)." Lady-Wisdom's counsel protects her followers from Folly's deceptiveness in the same way that the counsel of the good wife protects her husband from the dangerous woman.

The values of the wise woman are covenant values: justice, well-being, and life. These are also Lady-Wisdom's values. Lady-Wisdom uses the same tools as the wise woman: patience and a soft tongue (Pr 25:15), authority (24:5-6), and persuasion rather than coercion. Like the wise woman who calls out and pleads with the attackers of her city in 2 Samuel 20, Lady-Wisdom cries out and pleads on the streets and at the gates of the city (Pr 1:21).

In Proverbs 8:2, Lady-Wisdom appears "on top of the heights beside the way." Scripture reveals that the temple or sacred place was usually located "on the height," the holy point of contact between heaven and earth. "The Way" represents God's path of holiness. This is contrasted with the ways of Folly which lead to Sheol. Personified wisdom, then, is the metaphorical intermediary between God and humanity, the revelation of God's will to humanity. As a counselor and wise woman, Lady-Wisdom gives her followers the choice of life or death: She offers them salvation.

LOVER

A third female image that may be used to understand Lady-Wisdom is the "lover." Personified wisdom is a metaphor for the intimacy that exists between a man and woman in a love relationship. Themes of seeking and finding one's lover are prevalent both in the Proverbs and in the Song of Solomon. God's wisdom in Proverbs is poetically portrayed as a woman who loves and is beloved by any who will receive her offer. The love language of Proverbs 8 includes ideas of faithfulness and truth (8:7), righteousness and justice (8:20), and life (8:35), themes all related to the marriage covenant.

The relationship of God's wisdom to humans is rooted in the idea of covenant love between a woman and a man. Like the love of the Song of Solomon, the love of wisdom is "a dynamic and vital force, a creative, divine power which unites a man and woman in an exclusive and lasting relationship." An understanding of the proper relationship between a human person and divine wisdom must draw upon our personal experiences of human love, as well as our experiences of God's love. Love language points to the relationship between divine and human that God's wisdom provides.

Sexual fidelity is a metaphor for covenant faithfulness (Pr 5:15-20). Adultery symbolizes a violation of the covenant, infidelity towards Yahweh, the husband. Faithfulness to the covenant relationship between Israel and Yahweh is expressed in Proverbs through the condemnation of adultery. Adultery was absolutely intolerable in Israelite society because it threatened the social structure and violated the laws of God.

In Hosea, this theme of sexual fidelity is apparent: God, like Lady-Wisdom, seeks to find his lover (Pr 2:14). He invites but does not command love. Also like Lady-Wisdom, God refuses to take back the unfaithful spouse. In Hosea, God becomes "human-like" through poetic love language. In the same way, God's wisdom, which has power and authority over humans, is made accessible through personification and love language.

SUMMARY

While women's roles were generally limited to the domestic sphere in traditional Israelite society, it is important not to underestimate the power and authority which women held within that domain. As the primary homemakers and caretakers, women were naturally viewed as the "arbiters of morality." Women were obviously valued and esteemed by the writer of Proverbs, who "sees the most humanly attractive element in the divinity to be analogous to the feminine in humanity" and so uses the noblest concepts of womanhood in Israel to call students to the path of life. That God's wisdom should be characterized in feminine language indicates a real affirmation of and respect for women.

Lady-Wisdom, like the Israelite woman, provides identity and security for her "family," protecting them from harm and evil. She brings honor to those who listen to her advice and heed her counsel. She invites her followers to a life of union. In light of these parallels, it is not surprising that in Proverbs God's wisdom should be personified as a woman. Lady-Wisdom is uniquely able to teach us about a right relationship with the ultimate source of our knowledge, a relationship characterized by love, commitment and intimacy. She asserts
God’s nearness, involvement with the world, and commitment to humanity. She is portrayed as a bridge between humanity and a transcendent God, between things secular and things divine. One finds God by finding wisdom, because wisdom ultimately comes from and belongs to God.

End Notes
1. Wisdom is also personified as a woman in Job 28 and in the Apocrypha (Sirach 24, Wisdom 6-9, Ben Sira 3-4, 1 Enoch 42 and 2 Enoch 30).
2. For other personifications in the Old Testament, see Psalms 45:4; 85:10; 107:42; Isaiah 51:9; Job 11:14.
4. Genesis 30:1, 6, 8, 11, 13, 18, 20, 28; 1 Samuel 1:11; 22-28; Proverbs 31.
5. Proverbs 14:1; 24:3-4; 31; 5:15-29.
9. 2 Samuel 14 and 20, 2 Kings 4:8-10; 8:1-6.
11. Jeremiah 17:12; 31:12; Ezekiel 17:23.
18. Dermot Cox, PROVERBS: WITH AN INTRODUCTION TO SAPIENTIAL BOOKS (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1982), 76.
20. Sirach 14, 15, 51; Wisdom 6, 8.

THE BUTTERFLY QUILT

Doris Kramer

John Hess, husband of Ruth and former chaplain to women prisoners, suggested that it would be nice if some of the quilters could meet the inmates who had made the blocks.

On November 12, 1995, several carloads of men and women from the congregation took the 175-mile trip to Kingston. Those who went into the prison had to be cleared with the authorities two weeks prior to going.

Ruth met 10 of us, including one young man among all these women. We were ushered through two locked doors and up two flights of stairs to the room used by the quilt and craft makers. We were filled with excitement, not knowing what to expect.

Our way had been well prepared by Ruth's prayers. She did not know how the women inmates would act socially with these "good" Mennonite women.

What happened next is hard to explain. Our usually reserved WMSC women graciously shook hands and greeted the inmates. The women prisoners greeted us warmly. I felt an unusual kinship between us.

Ruth had prepared a snack for our visit. The completed butterfly quilt was on display. Making this quilt carried much symbolism for us all. These imprisoned women, bound in their cocoons, were released in a measure to become beautiful butterflies by someone taking an interest in them, helping them develop some skills and a sense of self-worth. To Ruth Hess, the butterfly symbolizes freedom: "women in prison expressing their longing for it, and women from St. Jacobs leaving the familiar to step into the world of women in prison."

The women had prepared a thank-you card signed by each of them. An elderly woman, a so-called lifer who is said to have murdered her husband, presented the card to Lovina Weber, our new WMSC president. They spontaneously embraced and kissed each other.

The women had brought from their cells some of the crafts they had been working on. Two had made full quilts; others showed pillow tops and other items. The interchange between these two sets of women seemed natural and comfortable. The time passed far too quickly.

We left, going out into the world free; the other women stayed behind, confined to their cells.

We cannot know everything that happened that day. Ruth told us how apprehensive she had been. What if none of the prisoners showed up?

How would the church women accept women who had committed crimes?

The meeting surpassed all her expectations, and she wanted to steal away for a few minutes with John to pray and thank God for all that had happened. John remarked that what our group had done that day was indescribable. He felt our acceptance of these women had raised their self-esteem and put them on a "high" that will last for many days.

Something happened to us St. Jacobs women, too. We were humbled to realize that because of our Christian upbringing, we have been spared the pain experienced by many women. We were moved by the loving response of these women to us. We felt compassion, not judgment. How we were changed is still to be seen.

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