

Southwestern Assemblies of God University
School of Distance Education

Research Literature and Technology
THE 5113-92

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Research Paper
The Use of Feminine Imagery in the Book of Proverbs

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Fall 2008
December 16, 2008

The Use of Feminine Imagery in the Book of Proverbs

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As the typical boy approaches adolescence, a father will begin to think about how to broach the subject of “the facts of life.” However, he realizes that he must deal skillfully with so delicate a subject, for it will have ramifications for years to come. He will help to shape the way his son views women, relationships and intimacy. Since young people face many pressures in areas of sexuality, the Christian father recognizes his responsibility to give instruction regarding sex from a Biblical perspective.

At the same time of life, his son also begins to form opinions and feelings regarding a variety of other matters as he prepares to assert his independence. Because Dad has already traveled that road, he would normally look to dispense some fatherly wisdom and guidance. After all, he has a wealth of personal experiences from which to draw. Couple these with a desire to see his son avoid some of the mistakes that he made in his youth, and you have a “fountain of wisdom” readily available for Junior. However, times change, and somehow Dad’s experiences seem irrelevant. How can he communicate with his son in a way that shows an acute sense of understanding and identification with his son’s world? After all, what boy wants to hear a lecture that begins, “When I was your age...”?

Yes, times may change, yet people remain the same. No doubt this holds true even for fathers who wish to communicate with their sons regarding issues that a young man will soon face, including the facts of life. This provides the setting for the Old Testament book of Proverbs. However, the author has more on his mind than a talk about “the birds and the bees.” He seeks to communicate his most deeply cherished values about life’s critical issues in a practical way that will capture his son’s imagination and hold his attention long enough to consider lessons that will, not only guide him through this life, but have eternal significance. The author seeks to do more than offer a heroic caricature of how he “walked to and from school five

miles through a foot of snow uphill both ways.” He speaks from his heart to his son about that which he holds most dear, in the hope that he will embrace the same values and live accordingly. And he endeavors to do so in such a way that will surely get his son’s attention. He will frame his lesson in a discussion about a topic that grows near and dear to his son’s heart—girls!

This paper will explore the use of feminine imagery in the book of Proverbs in order to propose the possibility that the author, presumably Solomon, used this imagery to relate truth in a fashion relevant to his intended audience—adolescent boys. His creative use of this imagery gives him the opportunity to speak about human sexuality, relationships, practical matters, and eternal values, in a way that will capture the attention of his sons.

The book of Proverbs belongs to a genre of writing known as “wisdom literature.” In style and structure it mirrors much of the wisdom literature of Egypt, Mesopotamia and elsewhere in the ancient Near East.¹ International interaction through commercial and diplomatic relations would certainly result in some cultural exchange, especially because of Israel’s strategic placement between Egypt and Mesopotamia, two leading centers of commerce and culture.² Furthermore, beginning with the time of Solomon (who reigned from c971-931 B.C.³), Israel experienced a sharp rise in international involvement,⁴ and Israel experienced great economic prosperity during Solomon’s time, which would further promote intellectual and cultural pursuits.⁵

¹ Daniel J. Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1-9* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997).

² Robert D. Branson, Jim Edlin and Tim M. Green, *Discovering the Old Testament: Story and Faith*, ed. Alex Varughese (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2003).

³ *ESV Study Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008).

⁴ Estes 1997, 20

⁵ *ESV Study Bible, English Standard Version* 2008

Though some scholars attribute the date of Proverbs in its current form to the postexilic period, some time after the early 6th century B.C., sufficient evidence points to an earlier date. For one thing, wisdom texts much like Proverbs appear long before the time of Solomon.⁶ For example, The Instruction of Ptah-Hotep dates back to between 2575-2134 B.C., The teachings of Khety appear 2040-1640 B.C. and the teachings of Amen-em-ope goes back to between 1250 and 1000 B.C.⁷ Also, as noted before, Solomon's era enjoyed unparalleled prosperity, which usually gives rise to an increase in literary and other works. Finally, Jewish wisdom literature during the postexilic period (Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon, for example) differs greatly in stylistic and thematic elements.⁸

As to authorship of the book, though some scholars question Solomon's contributions to Proverbs,⁹ substantial support for his authorship of those parts attributed to him remains strong. Though the book itself begins with this introduction: "The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel," (Proverbs 1:1, NASB95) other in-text characteristics also weigh in favor of his authorship. Steinmann conducted a thorough analysis of Proverbs based on a comparison of the vocabulary, thought and modes of expression in the book. On this basis he makes a strong case that Solomon authored the portions of Proverbs commonly attributed to him. He writes,

On every level examined in this study—vocabulary, thought, and mode of expression—Proverbs 1-9 indicates that it comes from the same author as 10:1-22:16 and 25-29, exactly as the book itself indicates....The probabilities of 1-9 coming from someone other than Solomon, therefore, are extremely low. Moreover, the vocabulary usage shared by 1-9, 10:1-22:16, and 25-29 argues for a common author, because it would have been

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, 2nd ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1997).

⁸ ESV Study Bible, English Standard Version 2008

⁹ Andrew E. Steinmann, "Proverbs 1-9 as a Solomonic Composition," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43, no. 4 (December 2000): 659-674.

unthinkably difficult for a different author to have produced such a similar pattern of word usage.¹⁰

The Bible also speaks of Solomon's unsurpassed wisdom and prolific literary accomplishments. The Scriptures credit him with a great many works, including the composition of proverbs:

And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol, and his fame was in all the surrounding nations. He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. (1 Kings 4:29-32, ESV)

This passage also acknowledges Solomon's reputation as a teacher, even eclipsing other scholars of his day. If Solomon's wisdom surpassed that of his contemporaries, then why not consider that he could have made further contributions to the wisdom literature genre? He could have set new trends among his peers. In fact, Proverbs does add another dimension to wisdom teaching when compared to other wisdom texts. According to Estes,

Many scholars have noted the similarities between biblical proverbs and the wisdom literature of ancient Egypt. The parallels are so detailed that it seems scarcely beyond doubt that some form of literary borrowing has taken place. What is not so frequently noted, however, is that though there is significant similarity at the surface level of the language, there is remarkable divergence at the deeper level of values.¹¹

Estes goes on further to point out that wisdom literature found in the Bible may have stylistic similarities with other ancient wisdom literature, but it adapted the style to communicate an ethical perspective in keeping with its religious values.¹² He writes, "By contrast, Israel's worldview produced values that brought moral questions to the forefront across the full range of behavior. For example, whereas in Egypt sexual restraint might be advisable because it would

¹⁰ Steinmann 2000

¹¹ Estes 1997, 42

¹² Ibid., 21

assist a person in keeping his government career on track, in Israel sexual purity is evidence of reverence for Yahweh.”¹³

Some would argue the case that the school provided the setting for this kind of instruction, especially because this would find a parallel in the Egyptian context.¹⁴ In fact, in a school setting the teacher would function much like a father figure and would frequently refer to his students as his “sons.”¹⁵ During the development of the monarchy in Israel, this kind of instruction, based on the Egyptian model, enabled the education of students in preparation for government service. Solomon’s era presents a probable time of development for this kind of school.¹⁶

While Dell supports the school as one social context for Proverbs, she still holds open the possibility of a family context when she notes that the text itself refers to the teaching of both father and mother.¹⁷ For example, “Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck.” (Proverbs 1:8-9, ESV) Fox, on the other hand, ultimately disagrees with the idea of two distinct social contexts for Proverbs (home and school). He states, “These contexts do seem to form likely backgrounds for proverb making, but it must be noted that Proverbs shows no interest in any kin group beyond the family.”¹⁸ McCreesh also disagrees with the school setting in favor of

¹³ Estes 1997, 42

¹⁴ Katharine J. Dell, *The Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁵ Walvoord, John F., Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, Vol. 1, 2 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985).

¹⁶ K. T. Aitkens, *Proverbs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1986).

¹⁷ Dell 2006, 30

¹⁸ Michael V. Fox, "The Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (2008): 109-110.

a home context, noting a lack of conclusive evidence for schools in ancient Israel and the emphasis on teaching that promotes a religious lifestyle.¹⁹ Fox likewise argues as follows:

The dramatic situation in the lectures is of a father instructing his son. As in almost all instructional wisdom, the father is the speaker. There is no justification for the common assumption that the speaker is a schoolteacher. Even if these chapters were used in schools (which is merely a conjecture), the persona is a father. He identifies his teaching (in essence, if not in wording) with that of his wife, who is certainly not a schoolmistress (Proverbs 1:8; 4:3; 6:20; and compare 3:26).²⁰

This kind of teaching and its associated values would begin in the home, the most basic social unit. In ancient Israel, a society rich in oral tradition, parents would pass on their faith, values, teaching and community standards, often in the form of sayings. Elders in the family and community would teach and preserve wisdom in this manner.²¹ Waltke puts it this way: "I prefer to think of the sage as a parent-teacher at home with his own children and other offspring, and as an elder at the gate."²² The home, with its personal warmth and practical instruction, provides a suitable setting to develop character and inculcate children with proper values in the fear of God.²³

Clearly, the author directs his instruction to his child, specifically to his son (or sons). He intends to pass on valuable information to a young man at a rather vulnerable time of life. He will soon take on adulthood, with all of its privileges and responsibilities, yet he still retains

¹⁹ Thomas P. McCreesh, "The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (April 2008): 352-354.

²⁰ Michael V. Fox, "Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116, no. 4 (1997): 613-633.

²¹ Branson, Edlin and Green 2003, 241

²² Bruce K. Waltke, "Lady Wisdom as Mediatrix: An Exposition of Proverbs 1:20-33," *Presbyterion* 14, no. 1 (1988): 1-15.

²³ Fox 1997

some youthful naivety.²⁴ The father wishes to equip him to make wise decisions based on sound judgment and right moral principles. Fox describes this dynamic as follows:

The author knows that young men (represented by the “son” or “sons” within the text) are terribly vulnerable to peer pressure and their own raging libido, and he is aware that the longings for camaraderie and sexual relief tug at them with fearsome power and can easily overwhelm their still-precarious powers of reason. The lectures seek to help young men withstand these drives and channel them to proper uses, namely, concern for a good reputation and marital sex.²⁵

Though the father offers many lessons in wise living and moral comportment, his instruction regarding proper sexual attitudes and behavior comes to the fore. Longman sees this as a key to understanding the instruction that the father gives and the imagery that he uses to make his point.²⁶ In his desire to impart wisdom and understanding to his son, the father endeavors to communicate his most deeply held moral values, which have their foundation in the faith and teachings of the God of Israel and his law. He does this by couching his teaching in imagery that will grab the attention of his student, speak to an area of extreme relevance (a growing interest in the opposite sex) and point that interest in the right direction. To take this a step further, he uses the interest that his son already has to shape its formation. More than merely discouraging immoral sexual involvement and designing women, he offers an attractive alternative, one that will create a positive association for a relational paradigm that has its foundation in the law of God.

This sets the stage for an introduction to a most striking and intriguing figure—that of Woman Wisdom. She represents a personification of the very quality that will help him to embrace and internalize his father’s teaching and underlying value system, which has the fear of

²⁴ Fox 1997

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Proverbs* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

the Lord as its foundation. The father uses her as the embodiment of wisdom (in the fear of God). Like any father, he wants his son to develop a wise, discerning heart and sound judgment in all matters, but especially in matters related to human sexuality. Rather than just give him the dry essentials having to do with wisdom, he tells him about an “attractive woman” who can help him learn this lesson. According to Longman, “The path of life brings us into contact with many different people and decisions. None, however, is as profound as the encounter with Woman Wisdom. The metaphor of her desire to enter into an intimate relationship with the reader will have its strongest impact if we keep in mind—as already mentioned—that the implied reader of the book is male.”²⁷

Scholars find a partial parallel for Woman Wisdom in Isis, Ma’at, Ishtar and Asherah, which are goddess figures of various ancient Near Eastern cultures. Johnson proposes that she represents a composite of the following: (1) elements derived from the aforementioned figures; (2) parallels from the proverbs of Ahiqar (a body of Semitic wisdom literature); (3) women from the Hebrew Bible (the wise woman of Tekoa found in 2 Sam 14:1-20 and the wise woman of Abel, who appears in 2 Sam 20:14-22); and (4) postexilic Hebrew women in general.²⁸ However, she bases this assumption on a much later date of authorship than discussed earlier in this paper. Rather than consider Wisdom as a goddess, Johnson makes the point that other cultures shared this personification.²⁹

²⁷ Longman 2002, 28

²⁸ Brenda M. Johnson, "The Personification of Wisdom," *Mount Saint Agnes Theological Center for Women*, 2000, http://www.mountsaintagnes.org/uploadedFiles/Resources/Research_Papers/The%20Personification%20of%20Wisdom%20in%20Proverbs%201,%208%20and%209.pdf (accessed November 13, 2008).

²⁹ Johnson 2000

However, partial similarities to goddess figures notwithstanding, this raises some theological concerns. Camp addresses an example of this concern as follows: “The interpretation of personified Wisdom as a substitute for Ishtar presents theological problems as well. What is the relationship of a female figure, presented as a goddess, to Yahweh? ... Personified Wisdom is set in opposition to a goddess through the use of goddess-language and yet is not a goddess as such.”³⁰ In Proverbs 8, Woman Wisdom claims a place with God at creation. “The LORD possessed me at the beginning of His way, Before His works of old... Then I was beside Him, as a master workman; And I was daily His delight, Rejoicing always before Him.” (Proverbs 8:22, 30 NAS95S) Even so, Weeks sees no reason to view Wisdom as anything other than a “a personification of an abstract concept.” He observes, “there is no reading of 8:30, or of the chapter as a whole, that really requires us to take Wisdom as a transcendent universal, let alone godlike.”³¹

Others view Wisdom’s discourse in Proverbs 8 as a personal identification with the Creator, indicating the revelation of divine feminine aspect of God. This view portrays Woman Wisdom as a so-called “Christ figure,” even linking her with Jesus himself. This “Sophia Christology,” which associates perceived feminine attributes of Christ (compassion, caring and nurturing, for example) to Woman Wisdom (or Sophia), stipulates that these attributes as seen in the ministry of Jesus show him to be an embodiment or even incarnation of Sophia, thereby making Christ an inclusive figure that transcends gender.³² Whybray sees this as an inevitable

³⁰ Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Decatur, GA: Almond Press, 1985).

³¹ Stuart Weeks, *Instruction and Imagery in Proverbs 1-9* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

³² Grace Ji-Sun Kim, "Revisioning Christ," *Feminist Theology: The Journal of Britain and Ireland School of Feminist Theology*, 2001: 82-92.

development that gave this figure distinctiveness apart from God.³³ However, this reads far too much into a literary device used to illustrate a truth. Longman forcefully refutes this by stating the following:

“Proverbs 8 associates the Lord with a woman named Wisdom. As we have seen, this metaphor teaches us many rich things about who God is and our relationship with him. But God is not Woman Wisdom. We may not use this metaphor to teach that the Lord is female any more than we may use the image of God as king, father or warrior to argue that God is male. We may not use Proverbs 8 to suggest, against the biblical teaching that God is one, that there is a separate deity created at the beginning of time.

“We must remember all this when we see that Jesus associates himself with Wisdom in the New Testament. Woman Wisdom is not a pre-incarnate form of the second person of the Trinity. Jesus is not to be identified with Wisdom. The language about Jesus being the “firstborn of creation” is not to be pressed literally as if Jesus were a created being. But—and this is crucial—the association between Jesus and Woman Wisdom in the New Testament is a powerful way of saying that Jesus is the embodiment of God’s Wisdom.³⁴

According to Camp, “No biblical scholar, however, has offered a full discussion of the function of personification as an element of style, and thus the semantic gain resulting from its use in the book of Proverbs has gone unrecognized.”³⁵ Nevertheless, Woman Wisdom does indeed come across as a vibrant, vivid figure, and this testifies to the exquisite use of this literary device, one that dates back to the earliest literary endeavors.³⁶ She essentially makes wisdom “come alive,” the very thing the author intended to accomplish, and in this lies the power of personification. The author breathes life into an abstract, impersonal concept and thereby makes it appear as a “flesh and blood” entity.³⁷ She has all of the passion and purpose that propels her pursuit of the simple (Proverbs 1:20-23) as well as the flash and fire of feminine fury when rejected (Proverbs 1:24-31). This gives Woman Wisdom powerful impact as an illustrative

³³ R. N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9* (London: SCM Press, 1965).

³⁴ Longman 2002, 109-110

³⁵ Camp 1985, 210

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 213

³⁷ *Ibid.*

device that has sex appeal. The author realizes that this will give Woman Wisdom a competitive advantage for the affections of his son, especially since she has a formidable rival.

Along the pathway of life, the young man will meet another woman, one who also has a powerful appeal. However, she has an allure of a different sort. Woman Folly (who finds her counterpart in the forbidden woman, foreigner and adulteress found in Proverbs 2:16-19; Proverbs 5:2-6, 5:20-23; 6:24-35 and 7) has an irresistible, magnetic appeal. The author portrays her as the siren, the steamy, sensual seductress who could make the unsuspecting youth think with his loins instead of his brains. She represents the antithesis of wisdom. She offers easy pleasure, rewards without responsibility, immoderate immorality, and sinful self-indulgence...all at a price.³⁸ How could someone who looks so good be so bad? How could something that feels so right be so wrong?

Woman Folly presents temptation, not only a pulling away from wise behavior and values grounded in the fear of God, but also literal sexual temptation. According to Estes, “For young men, illicit sex is an alluring temptation to be avoided, and the explicit language by which the strange woman invites him should not be discounted. It is likely that a literal warning against sexual seduction is in view in these passages.”³⁹ And this represents the crossroads for the young man. Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly compete for his attention. Both desire an intimate relationship and present their appeals in similar terms in Proverbs 9. Likewise, both prepare a meal, further communicating the desire to draw the young man into a union. According to Longman, “In the ancient Near Eastern culture, to eat with someone is to form an intimate

³⁸ Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Liminality and worldview in Proverbs 1-9," *Semeia*, 1990: 111-144.

³⁹ Estes 1997, 54-55

relationship with that person. These women want a relationship; because it is not possible to be united to both of them, they compete for attention.”⁴⁰

The father knows that his son will someday face this moral choice, and he has a very definite opinion in the matter. Two very attractive women compete for the affections of his son, but they have a very different appeal. Yee puts it this way: “From the mouth of Lady Wisdom and the mouth of the foreign woman come similar but competing claims. Two female personifications propose the same thing to the simple and inexperienced, but one wishes their good, the other evil.”⁴¹ Even so, the father presents his plea to his son, knowing that Woman Wisdom has a strong appeal all her own. In fact, Murphy underscores this point by suggesting an association between Wisdom and Eros and observes, “Lady Wisdom is presented in erotic language.”⁴² Thus he says that the pursuit of Woman Wisdom has its own erotic element. In other words, Woman Wisdom has sexual potency that can compete with Woman Folly.

Keep in mind that the Father does not discourage sex and relationships but rather promotes these in keeping with his worldview, all while encouraging a lifestyle of wisdom, moderation and self-restraint. In describing the conflict between Wisdom and Folly in Proverbs 1-9, VanLeeuwen summarizes the essential struggle that the human soul experiences at this point of convergence:

These chapters depict the world as the arena of human existence. This world possesses two fundamental characteristics. First is its structure of boundaries or limits. Second is the bi-polar human eros for the beauty of Wisdom, who prescribes life within limits, or for the seeming beauty of Folly, who offers bogus delights in defiance of created limits. Love of Wisdom means staying within her prescribed cosmic-social boundaries; love of

⁴⁰ Longman 2002, 32

⁴¹ Gale A. Yee, "I Have Perfumed My Bed with Myrrh: The Foreign Woman ('issâ zārâ) in Proverbs 1-9," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 1989 February: 53-68.

⁴² Roland E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Eros in Proverbs 1-9," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (October 1988): 600-603.

Folly, like love of another's wife, means simply the deadly pursuit of things out of bounds.⁴³

Woman Folly, the slinky, sinful seductress, a figure of men's fantasies, stands in stark contrast to Woman wisdom, whom he portrays as the pretty, industrious, respectable "girl next door," who will remain faithful to his son always. She finds her counterpart in the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31:10-31. "He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord." (Proverbs 18:22 ESV) The same way that sexual gratification finds its highest satisfaction and best fulfillment in marriage to the right person, so a union with Wisdom will bring about a life of blessing and contentment. As Solomon puts it, "The blessing of the Lord makes rich, and he adds no sorrow with it." (Proverbs 10:22 ESV)

Though opinions vary regarding many elements associated with Proverbs (authorship, setting, imagery, and other literary and theological issues) this paper's proposition remains plausible. Proverbs presents a father's effort to communicate to his son his personal, deeply held beliefs. He makes an impassioned plea for his son to embrace wise living, self-discipline and the fear of the Lord while resisting the follies of youth. In order to make this case, he enlists the help of a most promising personality—Woman Wisdom. This personification of an abstract concept will equip Solomon with a means of taking dry, philosophical teaching and making it come to life in a most enchanting and appealing form. Rather than lecture his son with pious platitudes, he infuses excitement and passion into his lessons by bringing them to life in the form of Woman Wisdom. Make no mistake, Solomon, in cahoots with Woman Wisdom, endeavors to win the heart of his son in order to keep him on the path of life. She presents him with a valuable ally in the struggle for his soul against the temptations of youth and the wiles of Woman Folly. This

⁴³ Van Leeuwen 1990

raises a valid question, “Will it work?” Will framing the issue in terms of sex capture this young man’s attention?

Rev. Ed Young, pastor of Fellowship Church in Dallas, Texas, recently attracted nationwide attention by challenging married couples to have sex every night for seven days.⁴⁴ In a sermon series entitled “Leaving Lust Vegas,” Young made the claim that having sex will help people to feel better about the troubling news surrounding the economy. He urges people to turn their “whining” into “whoopie.” Hmm...maybe Solomon and Ed Young are onto something!

⁴⁴ Roy Appleton, "Dallas-area Pastor Issues Sex Challenge," *dallasnews.com*, November 12, 2008, http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/city/collin/plano/stories/DN-sexweek_12met.ART0.State.Edition1.4a9d7c4.html (accessed November 25, 2008).

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