Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Studies

Edited by
Friedrich V. Reiterer, Beate Ego and Tobias Nicklas

Volume 28

Religion and Female Body in Ancient Judaism and Its Environments

Edited by
Géza G. Xeravits

DE GRUYTER
Matthew Goff
The Personification of Wisdom and Folly as Women in Ancient Judaism

Abstract: This article traces the personification of wisdom and folly as women in ancient Judaism. Wisdom was an important but enigmatic concept. Authors steeped in the sapiential tradition helped make wisdom more understandable by describing it as a woman. Male teachers used this trope to make wisdom more desirable for their male students. The trope of personifying wisdom and folly as women is also associated with sexual ethics, in the pedagogical context of men being given advice about women, particularly kinds of women that would make good wives and those whom men should avoid. These tropes are central in the book of Proverbs, which are then appropriated in various ways by texts such as Ben Sira, the Wisdom of Solomon and various writings from the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Keywords: Personification of Wisdom; Wisdom Literature; Proverbs

Introduction

Wisdom is an important but vague concept in ancient Judaism. In Proverbs חכמה ("wisdom") signifies not only one's comprehension of the world but also the desire to attain such knowledge (e.g., 4:5-6). While education typically took place informally within the family in ancient Israel, instruction also occurred as a professional endeavor, involving teachers and students in the royal court and the elite classes. While much remains unknown about such pedagogical practices, it is reasonable to understand them as an overwhelmingly male enterprise—male teachers instructing male students. This is suggested not only by the patriarchal nature of ancient Israel and the ancient Near East in general. This gender context for instruction is also suggested by one of the overarching themes of the book of Proverbs—the portrayal of wisdom as a woman. Pedagogical traditions developed in which teachers sought to instill in their students an urge to desire wisdom by metaphorically imagining it as a woman. Von Rad referred to this trope as "der geistige Eros." The sexual desire of men, presumably young, was exploited in the wisdom literature of ancient Judaism. The depiction of wisdom as a female was also used to signify the inherent order of the cosmos. The conceptualization of divine order as somehow feminine or linked to a goddess is a trope found broadly in other religious traditions, as with, for example, the goddesses Maat and Isis in Egyptian religion and the Devi-Mahatmya in Hinduism. Interestingly, traditions also developed in ancient Israel in which the wrong path, folly, was imagined as a woman—Woman (or Dame) Folly (Prov 9:13-18).

A review of the relevant texts, which includes Proverbs, Baruch, Ben Sira, the Wisdom of Solomon, 1 Enoch 42 and several texts from Qumran, indicates that the personification of wisdom as a woman is a recurrent and important element of ancient Judaism. The popularity of this trope can be explained by the fact that it makes an abstract and difficult concept not only tangible but also desirable. This article will also illustrate that Early Jewish texts attest a debate, perhaps triggered by Job 28, about the location of wisdom on earth and its accessibility. Also, while personified wisdom is extensively engaged by texts such as Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon, in the Second Temple period there is much less reception of personified folly.

Personified Wisdom and Folly in the Book of Proverbs

Wisdom and Folly, personified as women, comprise one of the major structural elements of the book of Proverbs, our central text for understanding the wisdom tradition of ancient Israel. There are four major women in Proverbs, two positive and two negative—the Strange Woman ( Parenthood), Woman Wisdom, Woman

---

1 CRENSHAW, Education.


3 ESTES, What Makes the Strange Woman of Proverbs, 161; ANGEL, From Wild Men to Wise and Wicked Women, 147; CRENSHAW, Education, 118.

4 A connection between Maat and the figure of wisdom in Proverbs was argued by BAUER.

5 STUDEN, Isis is discussed below, as is its relevance for the Wisdom of Solomon. As for the Devi-Mahatmya (probably written around fifth century CE), see CORWIN, Encountering the Goddess.
Folly (תועשה רשמה), and the Woman of Substance (👩‍👩‍👧‍👦 רשמה). None of the four women is found explicitly in any other book of the Hebrew Bible, although Woman Wisdom probably plays a role in Job 28 (see below). Proverbs is framed by Woman Wisdom, who first appears in chapter 1, and the Woman of Substance, a poem at the end of the book (31:10-31). There has been a great deal of research on the antecedent traditions of Woman Wisdom. The Semitic wisdom text *Ahigaq*, generally understood to be older than Proverbs, is often read as attesting the personification of wisdom as a woman, thus comprising a key text for interpreting this theme in Proverbs. This understanding of Ahigaq has, however, recently and with justification been questioned. Focusing on Proverbs itself, in chapter 1 Woman Wisdom does not entice and encourage students to desire her. Rather she yells in the streets, rebuking her audience and proclaiming their doom for ignoring her words, not unlike a prophet (1:20-31). The major text for this figure is chapter 8. There wisdom is personified as a woman who offers knowledge and instruction that people should heed (e.g., 8:1-9). She calls out to people in public places, as in Proverbs 1, but here she does not rebuke her addressers. Rather she invites people to learn from her and praises the value of her own teaching as better than gold and jewels (vv. 10-11, 19). She presents herself as an object of desire. Her students should not only seek but also love her: “I love those who love me and those who seek me diligently find me” (v. 17). The woman also claims to be divine wisdom, or the wisdom present when God created the world. She recalls, in a remarkable first person testimony, being present with God when he fashioned the world and endowed it with a coherent structure (8:22-31; cf. 3:19).  

The Woman of Substance at the end of Proverbs is not a mythological embodiment of wisdom but rather a sort of woman one could, and should, encounter in real life (31:10-31). She is an ideal, if over-worked, wife. She is in the public sphere, like Woman Wisdom, although not as a teacher calling for students (see however v. 26) but rather as an active and successful figure in the market place.

---

5 Sinvott, The Personification of Wisdom; Yoder, The Woman of Substance, 427–447; Eaton, Wisdom as a Woman of Substance; Camp, Wise, Strange and Holy; Webster, Sophia, 63–79; Murphy, The Personification of Wisdom, 222–233; Newsom, Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom, 142–160.  
6 For good reviews of the search for the religio-historical context of Woman Wisdom and other approaches to this figure, see Camp, Wisdom and the Feminine, 21–66; Weeks, An Introduction, 39–42; Sinvott, The Personification of Wisdom, 10–52.  
7 Blesnik, Can Ahigaq Tell Us Anything? See also Weeks, An Introduction, 40.  
8 Sinott, The Personification of Wisdom, 66–76.  
9 Camp, Wisdom and the Feminine, 272.  
10 Yoder, Wisdom as a Woman of Substance, 12. She argues plausibly that Prov 31:10–31 was produced in the Persian period.  
11 The “rejoicing” of the Woman of Substance can be understood as an expression of the successful and fulfilling life one can attain when guided by wisdom. The rejoicing of Woman Wisdom conveys satisfaction and contentment with how God fashioned the natural world and, in keeping with her testimony about his creation of the world, evokes Genesis 1, in which God considers what he creates to be good.  
12 For the view that she is an ethnic foreigner, see Nam Hoan Tan, The ‘Foreignness’ of the Foreign Woman: Camp, Wise, Strange and Holy, 323–44. This view is often understood against the backdrop of the endogamic policies of Ezra in the Persian period. Consult, for example, Blesnik, The Social Context, 457–473; Washington, The ‘Strange Woman’ of Proverbs, 157–184. Note also the review of traditional critical options regarding the Strange Woman in Fox, Proverbs 1–9, 134–141. Consult also Camp, Wisdom and the Feminine, 271.
fices to God (7:14). She is never described as an ethnic foreigner but one can interpret her in that way. A better reading, in my judgment, is that the “strangeness” of the Strange Woman denotes that she is not known by the man she approaches and is not part of his household.13 She is not a sanctioned sexual partner. The book explicitly connects the Strange Woman to the themes of marriage and sexuality, not ethnicity. She is married to someone else but nevertheless attempts to seduce another man. When she invites him to her chambers, she explains that her husband is currently traveling on business (7:19), showing utter disdain for her marriage.14 Proverbs 2:16-17 asserts that the Strange Woman (in parallelism with “the alien woman” [נַשְׁנָה]) “forsakes the partner of her youth and forgets her sacred covenant,” a reference to the bonds of matrimony.15

Proverbs affirms the sexual allure of the Strange Woman while stridently teaching that succumbing to her wiles is disastrous. The man of Proverbs 7 is persuaded by her seductive words, following her to her house “like an ox to the slaughter” (v. 22). She leads people on the path to death: “her house inclines (נַשְׁנָה) towards death, and her paths to the shades; those who go to her never come back, nor do they regain the paths of life” (2:18-19).16 Proverbs 7 likewise teaches that she represents a way of life that leads to death: “Her house is the way to Sheol” (7:27). This chapter is prefaced by instruction on the dangers of adultery (6:20-35), and Proverbs describes marriage as not only a sanctioned but also satisfying domain of sexuality.17 The book’s account of the Strange Woman is plausibly understood as designed to teach sexual ethics to its students, who are in all likelihood young men. While she certainly can be interpreted as an allegory for ideas or values to be avoided, she represents a type of woman the intended audience could encounter in daily life—women who are disloyal to their husbands, promiscuous and ultimately dangerous. In this sense she is better understood as the negative counterpart to the Woman of Substance, or the wife of the male addressee, than Woman Wisdom.18

The Strange Woman and Woman Folly are not the same. The latter occurs only in Proverbs 9. If the Strange Woman represents a kind of female one could actually encounter, then Woman Folly is better interpreted as the personification of folly, allegorized as a woman. The Strange Woman, much like the Woman of Substance vis-à-vis Woman Wisdom, gives concrete expression to the abstract values Woman Folly symbolizes. This may be why the descriptions of the two females are similar. Both are set in urban contexts (7:12; 9:14) and seek out the simple and dim-witted (7:7; 9:16). They invite men to their domiciles, which are associated with death and Sheol (2:18; 7:27; 9:18).19

There are also parallels between Woman Folly and Woman Wisdom, illustrating that Proverbs’ allegories of wisdom and folly should be understood as contrasting portraits. The woman of folly calls out to passers-by and invites them to her house: “She sits at the door of her house, on a seat at the high places of the town, calling to those who pass by” (9:14-15).20 Woman Wisdom does the same (8:5). Both are teachers who call to the uneducated to heed their instruction (1:22; 8:5; 9:4). Woman Folly provides teaching that is antithetical to Proverbs. Her method, however, is fully consistent with the book—transmitting proverbs to students. She is depicted as teaching her students a single proverb which endorses illicit pleasures: “Stolen water is sweet and bread eaten in secret is pleasant” (9:17; cf. 30:20).

Woman Folly and Woman Wisdom are allegories that express the overarching duality of the book of Proverbs—there are two opposed ways of life, one characterized by wisdom, the other folly. The Woman of Substance represents the ideal wife and the Strange Woman the opposite—she is an adulterous threat to a married man. The book’s descriptions of these two females teach students about the right and wrong paths of life, as do Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly. But the Strange Woman and the Woman of Substance represent females one could encounter in real life. That both are prominently associated with

13 See also FOX, Proverbs 1–9, 140. Christl Maier understands the term “strange” similarly, as signifying women outside one’s family who break socially accepted standards for gender religions in the postexilic period. See her Die “freunde Frau” in Proberien 1–9. For examples of the word נַשְׁנָה not having exclusively an ethnic sense, see, for example, Lev 10:1; Deut 25:5; 1 Kgs 13:18; Job 19:27. Consult further GOFF, Hellish Females, 26–27; ESTES, What Makes the Strange Woman of Proverbs, 158.

14 This, along with the luxury items that make her bed enticing such as fine Egyptian linen, suggests that she does not approach the man because of financial hardship. While she is at times understood as a prostitute, and is dressed like a נַשְׁנָה in 7:10, she is not a sex worker who charges money for her services. No money is exchanged between the man and the woman. See GOFF, Hellish Females, 27.

15 The terms נַשְׁנָה and נַשְׁנָה are also in parallelism in Isa 28:21, without any connotation of ethnicity. See further ESTES, What Makes the Strange Woman of Proverbs, 152–153.

16 There is some debate as to whether Prov 2:18 has the “path” or “house” of the Strange Woman leading towards Sheol. See Fox, Proverbs 1–9, 121–122.

17 “May her (one’s wife) breasts satisfy you at all times; may you be intoxicated always by her love. Why should you be intoxicated, my son, by another woman and embrace the bosom of an adulteress?” (Prov 5:19–20).

18 FOX, Proverbs 1–9, 262.

19 Note, however, that Woman Folly does not wander through city streets or ambush men, in contrast to the Strange Woman.

The Location of Wisdom—Job 28 and Ben Sira

The personification of wisdom and folly is not confined to Proverbs. These traditions were adapted and reflected upon by subsequent authors. Whereas contemporary scholars tend to focus on the thorny issue of defining wisdom, in ancient Judaism the core debate about wisdom was rather about its location and accessibility. Proverbs 8 presents the issue as relatively straightforward, with Woman Wisdom calling out in public for students. One knows where wisdom is; it is just a question of wanting it. Job 28 presents another view, with a speaker, and humankind in general, pitiably searching out wisdom but unable to find it. Only God knows where it is (v. 23), implying that wisdom resides in heaven, as does the fact that it is not on earth. It is plausible to understand this poem as a radical or even parodic appropriation of the personified wisdom of Proverbs 1:19. Job 28 associates the creation of wisdom with elements of the natural order, including the seas, rain and thunder (e.g., vv. 14, 26), not unlike Prov 8:22-31. The claim that the closest thing to wisdom available on earth is the fear of the Lord (Job 28:28) can be reasonably understood as a re-formulation of Prov 1:7, according to which the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

This interpretation of Job 28 is quite significant because it allows one to conclude that the chapter attests and utilizes the tradition of the personification of wisdom from Proverbs, even though the poem never explicitly construes wisdom as a woman. Job 28 can be understood as in dialogue with this tradition, providing a starkly different perspective than Proverbs by depicting Woman Wisdom as in heaven with God, not on earth. As we shall see, it appears that Job 28 sparked much subsequent reflection on the accessibility of wisdom.

Ben Sira’s instruction (early second century BCE) shows a tremendous interest in wisdom. Like Proverbs, Ben Sira’s composition was written to male students who are encouraged to seek and acquire wisdom (e.g., 4:11-19; 6:18-37; 10:20-15:10). As in Proverbs, the sage imagines wisdom as a teacher, whose instruction guides those who strive for it (4:11). He describes wisdom as a yoke that one should accept (6:30). This image conveys political oppression in the Hebrew Bible and here signifies the discipline required by a person devoted to wisdom (e.g., 1 Kgs 12:9; cf. Sir 30:13). To stress the rewards of such rigor, and perhaps to make his instruction seem more palatable to students, he likens submission to the yoke of wisdom to donning a “splendid crown” (חפץ מושי; 6:31; cf. Prov 4:9). He also compares the search for wisdom to a hunter searching for prey (Sir 14:20-21), a metaphor that portrays wisdom not simply as precious but also difficult to find, a notable contrast to Woman Wisdom in Proverbs. Wisdom in Ben Sira is also a spirit that God poured out upon all creation, expressing the view that the natural order has structure and coherence (1:9-10). The sage uses such images to assert that one should search for and desire wisdom, but these metaphors either obfuscate or do not stress the conceptualization of wisdom as a woman. One exception to this tendency is at the beginning of chapter 15. After asserting that one who grasps the Torah will obtain “her,” he states that “she will come to meet him like a mother and like a young bride (בMapView נשתה she will welcome him” (vv. 1-2). The female entity is clearly wisdom. Different feminine metaphors are employed, with wisdom construed as both a mother and a wife. The process of learning from wisdom is compared to a woman feeding and caring for a male student (v. 3), a trope that relies on Proverbs 9, in which Woman Wisdom invites her students to a banquet (vv. 1-6).

The personification of wisdom as a woman is also central for understanding the chapter that concludes Ben Sira, Sir 51:13-30. In this composition the poet describes in the first person his love for a female whom he sought intensely. It is

21 Also note the phonetic similarity of the verbs these texts use to describe the creation of wisdom. Prov 8:22 attests נָחַּ נֵ (nuq) and Job 28:27 נֵ (nun). Job 28:27 asserts that God formed wisdom after making the rain and other elements of nature. This is a direct contrast to Prov 8:22–31, in which Woman Wisdom asserts that she was made before the mountains and seats (vv. 24–25). The book of Job, when compared to Proverbs, lowers the priority of wisdom in the created order. Job 40:19 states that the first of God’s great deeds is the horrible monster Behemoth, a claim that is polemically different from Prov 8:22, in which she says God first created wisdom. See further CLINES, Job 21–37, 924; JONES, Runners of Wisdom; SONNITT, The Personification of Wisdom, 91.

22 The speaker of Job 28 can be interpreted as a man eager to find wisdom and become her pupil, calling out to her but unable to find her. This is clearly different from Proverbs in which wisdom cries out to her students who easily find her.

not at all clear that Sir 51:13-30 was written by Ben Sira. The massive Psalms Scroll from Qumran (11QPs), published in 1964, contains a version of this text, a context that has nothing to do with Ben Sira. The Psalms Scroll is one of the later manuscripts of the Qumran horde, written in the 1st century CE, and on this basis one could argue that it was taken from Ben Sira and added to the Cave 11 text. But the poem is most likely a secondary addition to Ben Sira. Sir 50:27-29 looks conspicuously like the ending of the book.26

The poet expresses an intense and erotic desire for the female. He states, for example: "I kindled my desire (or soul; בוש) for her and would not turn away my face. I bestirred my desire (or soul; בוש) for her" (11QPs 21:16; cf. Sir 51:19, 20). Scholars debate the extent of the poem's eroticism, but it is evident that some is present.27 The male speaker talks about perceiving the hidden parts of the woman (לָיָא לָי; 11QPs 21:17). If one understands the object of desire as wisdom personified, this claim can be read as an erotically charged allusion to the idea that wisdom bestows rewards of rare and precious knowledge upon her students (cf. Sir 4:17-18). It is not explicit, however, in the Psalms Scroll hymn that the female is in fact personified wisdom. But this is nevertheless probably the case. In both the Greek and the Hebrew of Ben Sira from the Cairo Geniza this is unambiguous.28 It is clear in 11QPs, however, that the female is a teacher and the male speaker is her student. He turns his ears towards her and learns a great deal of instruction (נֵק) in a short time from her (11QPs 21:14; cf. Sir 51:16). The poem can be reasonably understood as an adaption of the trope of personifying wisdom as a woman, construing the male student's search for wisdom in a highly romantic and erotic idiom. Ben Sira 51 is consistent with Proverbs 8, since this text, as discussed above, envisions wisdom as a female teacher who calls for her students to seek and love her. The male speaker in Ben Sira 51 is himself a teacher who recounts his own life-long love affair with wisdom. The key portions of the chapter on this point have unfortunately not survived in Hebrew. The poet invokes his own wisdom to encourage students to study with him: "Come aside with me, you untutored, and take up lodging in the house of instruction; how long will you be deprived of wisdom's food?"

26 "Instruction in understanding and knowledge I have written in this book, Jesus son of Eleazar son of Snach of Jerusalem, whose mind poured forth wisdom" (50:27).
27 See further Goff, Discerning Wisdom, 252; Angel, From Wild Men to Wise and Wicked Women, 151.
28 Note, for example, Sir 51:13: "I sought wisdom (ῥύπη)" and v. 15 in the B text (ῥύπη).

29 Although he urges people in v. 26 to submit to the yoke of wisdom through him, not unlike Sir 6:30-31.
30 The scholarship on this chapter is vast. See, for example, Mardock, Einwohnung der Weisheit und das Hauptgebot, 69-81; Schmidt Goering, Wisdom's Root Revealed, 74-78, 173-185; Sinnott, The Personification of Wisdom, 118-141; Sheppard, Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct, 19-71; Conzelmann, Die Mutter der Weisheit, 226-234.
31 She speaks "in the presence of his host" (v. 2). At the very least the sage understands Woman Wisdom as compatible with the angels. Ben Sira 26 may contain an exceptional reference to a female angel in ancient Judaism. Also note that Prov 8:27 depicts Woman Wisdom in heaven. See Rogers, Wisdom—Woman or Angel, 71-80; Eadem, The Concept of Wisdom, 61-79.
32 This may be an effort to clarify the somewhat vague reference to God having "created" (עִקְר) her in Prov 8:22.
33 Rogers, Wisdom—Woman or Angel, 79, makes this same basic point in maximalist fashion, arguing that wisdom in Ben Sira 24 should be considered not a woman but an angel. Note also Sheppard, Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct, 24; Sinnott, The Personification of Wisdom, 121.
cosmos through which she wanders (but see Sir 24:9). Verse 5 describes her encircling the "vault of heaven," most likely a reference to the firmament (Gen 1:6; Prov 8:27), and travelling in the depths of the abyss, a reference to the primordial seas. She also journeys a great deal throughout the inhabited world, since she "held sway" (πρωτοφαίρεια) over all peoples (v. 6). This assumes a period of history in which numerous ethnic groups exist, a striking leap in the poet's account of the primordial period, jumping in a sense from Genesis 1 to Genesis 10. Ben Sira also emphasizes that she did much of this travelling alone, whereas Proverbs 8 stresses that she is beside God. The primordial loneliness of wisdom sets the stage for the most important departure of the poem from Proverbs 8—wisdom taking root in Israel. In Sir 24:7 wisdom looks for a resting place among the nations but finds none; God tells her to make her dwelling in Israel and, in particular, Jerusalem (v. 11). This constitutes a sort of resume of salvation history, lurching from the primordial period to the settlement of the land, ignoring pivotal events such as the conquest and the wandering in the wilderness. Israel, as is well-known, is not a major topic in Proverbs and nationalistic themes are not prominent in this book. Ben Sira combines the tradition of personified wisdom from Proverbs with such concerns to a heightened degree. The sage expresses the election of Israel as the people of God's covenant through the indwelling of wisdom in Jerusalem (cf. Deut 32:8-9). Ben Sira's account of wisdom, even though its author does not explicitly engage Job 28, provides a pointed retort to the key question of that chapter: "Where is wisdom to be found?" (v. 12). The sage provides a specific answer—Jerusalem. In his description of wisdom's residence in Israel, the construal of her as a woman is not particularly important. In v. 10 he claims that she ministers in the holy tent before God, implying that wisdom is rooted in the temple, metaphorically understanding her as a (male) priest. This accords with his praise of the High Priest Simon and his positive evaluation of the Jerusalem cultus (e.g., 7:31). In 24:13-22 the poem describes wisdom as like verdant and aromatic trees, such as the cedar, palm and olive (these verses' affinity with the "tree of life" in Proverbs 3 is discussed below). The fine aroma of the trees is likened to the incense of the temple, another association between cult and wisdom (v. 15). Portraying wisdom as a luxuriant tree also invokes the Garden of Eden, without any sense that this tree is prohibited (cf. 17:7). Sir 24:25-29 resonates with Eden by describing the tree as surrounded by six rivers, four of which are in (Gen 2:10-14) (Pishon, Gihon, Tigris and Euphrates; Ben Sira adds the Jordan and the Nile). The chapter combines Eden and temple imagery.

Ben Sira provides a pedagogical rationale for his portrayal of Woman Wisdom as a lush and well-watered tree—she calls out for people to partake of her fruits: "Come to me, you that yearn for me and be filled with my fruits" (vv. 16-20; here v. 19; cf. 14:25-27). This invitation is a creative adaptation of the image of wisdom in Proverbs as a female teacher calling out to students. Proverbs 3:16-18 connects tree imagery to Woman Wisdom. She holds long life, riches and honor in her hands and this bounty makes her a "tree of life" for those who seize her. The Proverbs poem, unlike Ben Sira, never describes what sort of tree she is. Proverbs itself handles the wisdom as a tree metaphor somewhat loosely; she has hands. In Proverbs anything which is beneficial and valued can be called a tree of life. Proverbs 15:4, for example, calls a "gentle tongue" a tree of life (cf. 11:30, 13:12). Ben Sira takes Proverbs' metaphor that wisdom is a tree and vigorously expands it. This is evident not only from Ben Sira's use of multiple trees and the specification of their kinds. Also, in Proverbs one should simply seize the tree, whereas in Ben Sira one is also to eat from its fruits.

Ben Sira's depiction of wisdom as a tree is the context for the most well-known element of chapter 24—the association of wisdom with the Torah (v. 23). Torah piety is a major theme of Ben Sira's instruction. While it is common for scholars to assert simply that Ben Sira equates personified wisdom and the Torah, in the context of vv. 16-22 the claim of v. 23 that "all this is the book of the covenant of God Most High" most immediately refers to the fruits of the tree. So understood, wisdom is the tree and the Torah its fruit. The call in Proverbs by personified wisdom to learn from her is transformed by Ben Sira into an exhortation to read the Torah. Reflecting his national focus, in Ben Sira

34 Novick, Wisdom's Wandering, 104-118.
35 Sheppard, Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct, 35; Conzelmann, Die Mutter der Weisheit, 250.
36 Collins, Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age, 51.
37 Goring, Wisdom's Root Revealed, 96-102.
38 Muller, Simon the High Priest in Sirach 50.
39 The High Priest Simon is also compared to a majestic tree (50:10), suggesting that the sage considers him an embodiment of wisdom.

40 The image may present personified wisdom as the immanent aspect of God in the temple, the location of his physical presence in the priestly tradition.
41 Fishbane, The Well of Living Water, 3-16.
42 Levenson, Sinai and Zion, 126-129; Murphy, The Personification of Wisdom, 227.
43 Simons, The Personification of Wisdom, 123.
44 For discussion of this issue, see Goring, Wisdom's Root, 3-9, 69-102. Note that the phrase "all this" in v. 23 is broad and allows for a more maximalist identification of the Torah not simply as the fruit of the tree but the tree itself. Consult also Simons, The Personification of Wisdom, 127, 139.
the revelation of the law and its bequest to Israel takes place in Jerusalem, not on Mount Sinai (cf. 1 En. 25:5).45

The sage’s rationale for depicting wisdom as inviting people to learn from her becomes clear at the end of the poem (vv. 30-33). Ben Sira describes himself as a “rivulet from her stream” (v. 30).46 The sage is a tributary of wisdom. He has been recounting wisdom throughout the chapter, it now becomes clear, in order to give legitimation and authority to his own claims that he possesses wisdom. With no small amount of humility he asserts that his “rivulet” has become a river and a sea (v. 31). He also likens his teaching to shining light and prophecy. Both images evoke claims of divine revelation to describe the poet’s direct contact with the heavenly figure Woman Wisdom (vv. 1-4). Ben Sira 24 is thus compatible with chapter 51—in both texts a teacher recalls his own prior reception of wisdom as a way to encourage students to follow and heed him. Ben Sira 24 and 51, even though it is not at all clear that Ben Sira composed the latter, at the middle and end of the book, respectively, provide structural coherence to the book by stressing the pedagogical theme of learning from a teacher who possesses wisdom.

**Woman Wisdom, Lost or Found? Baruch and 1 Enoch**

Other texts indicate a debate in the Second Temple period about the accessibility of wisdom. The book of Baruch, probably from the early second century BCE, contains a passage that is widely and justly regarded as a sapiential poem (3:9-4:4).47 The text attests the personification of wisdom and, like Ben Sira, associates her with the Torah. Engagement with Job 28 is more explicit in Baruch than in Ben Sira 24. Baruch 3:9 asks Israel to heed the commandments, a clear reference to the Mosaic Torah. Echoing Job 28, the poet asks “Who has found her place? And who has entered her storehouses?” (Bar 3:15).48 These are no longer rhetorical questions, as in Job. The plaintive and unsuccessful search for wisdom is not attributed to humankind in general, as in Job 28, but is rather restricted to the gentile nations.49 Israel has the potential to attain wisdom, even though, the author laments, the Jews have strayed from this path (3:12-13). God, the poem asserts, found the way to wisdom and gave her to Israel (3:37; cf. Sir 24:8).50 Compare Job 28:23, which claims that God knows the way to wisdom but did not make it available on earth. God’s gift of wisdom to Israel is the Torah itself: “She is the book of the commandments of God ... All who hold her fast will live and those who forsake her will die” (Bar 4:1).51 The claim of holding on to wisdom and being rewarded with life likely adapts the view in Proverbs 3, discussed above, in which Woman Wisdom is described as a tree of life. The poet of Baruch likely understood Woman Wisdom descending to Israel and growing into a verdant tree, but, in contrast to Ben Sira 24, provides no vivid or explicit arboreal imagery.

The *Similitudes of Enoch* (1 Enoch 37-71), which is preserved only in Ge’ez (classical Ethiopian), contains in chapter 42 a brief but rich poem about the descent of wisdom to earth.52 It begins: “Wisdom (tehab) did not find a place where she might dwell, so her dwelling was in the heavens. Wisdom went forth to dwell among the sons of men, but she did not find a dwelling. Wisdom returned to her place and sat down in the midst of the angels” (vv. 1-2). The poem personifies wisdom, depicting her as looking and searching for a home. The chapter is consistent with Job 28, in that both texts imagine wisdom as not available in the world. In Job 28 humans search in vain for wisdom but in 1 Enoch 42 wisdom herself searches without success. She originates from heaven and comes down to the human world, as in Proverbs 8 and Ben Sira 24. 1 Enoch 42 offers an intriguing contrast to Ben Sira 24 in particular, above all the latter’s

---

45 This may explain the odd fact that, despite the centrality of Torah piety in Ben Sira, Sinai is mentioned just once in the entire book (48:7) and this instance has nothing to do with Moses but rather Elijah’s excursion to Horeb (1 Kings 19).

46 Ben Sira may have also had in mind Psalm 1, in which the righteous who study the law are like trees planted by bountiful streams.


48 Baruch 3:15 and LXX Job 28:12 both ask where is the “place” (τόπος) of wisdom. See MOORE, Daniel, Esther, 298; SINKOTT, The Personification of Wisdom, 96; MURPHY, The Personification of Wisdom, 228.

49 Bar 3:22-23: “She has not been heard of in Canaan or seen in Teman; the descendents of Hagar, who seek for understanding on the earth, have not learned the way to wisdom.”

50 SHEPPARD, Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct, 97.

51 For other associations between Torah and wisdom in ancient Judaism, see 4 Macc 1:16–17: “Wisdom, next, is the knowledge of divine and human matters and the causes of these. This, in turn, is education in the law, by which we learn divine matters reverently and human affairs to our advantage”; 2 Bar 44:14: “These are they who prepared for themselves treasures of wisdom and they have not withdrawn from mercy and they have preserved the truth of the law.”

52 The *Similitudes of Enoch* (1 Enoch 37–71) has recently been dated to the Herodian period see NICKELSBERG/ VANDERKAM, 1 Enoch 2, 62. Translations of 1 Enoch are from this text.
claim that wisdom did in fact find residence on earth, Jerusalem. Nickelsburg and VanderKam understand this Enochic chapter as "a kind of parody of Sirach 24." While scholars of Enochic literature often emphasize the view that 1 Enoch constitutes a rival of the Mosaic Torah, the Similitudes of Enoch seeks in this chapter as polemic against the Torah, particularly if one understands its term "wisdom" as a retool against Ben Sira. Moreover, 1 Enoch uses the word "wisdom" to refer to the revelation available to Enoch. The Similitudes has much in common with Job 28 but ultimately not its pessimism about the accessibility of wisdom. According to 1 Enoch 42, wisdom resides in heaven not earth, but it is accessible to humans through Enoch, who journeyed to heaven and received revelation there.65

1 Enoch 42 appears to seek to diminish the figure of wisdom with the claim in v. 2 rendered above that she "sat down" with the angels when she returned to heaven. The Ethiopic verb here, ṭadē at (from ġdā āna), is not the generic verb "to sit" (which is nabara) but rather a term that often signifies loading a beast of burden or mounting an animal.66 The word is a reference to sitting, but one that is rather denigrating. Personified wisdom sits in Sir 24:4, having her "throne on a pillar of cloud," a striking reference in ancient Judaism to a figure other than God possessing a heavenly throne.67 The account in 1 En. 42:2 of wisdom sitting in heaven is not only significant as an anthropomorphitic image but also because it appears to be an effort to diminish the wisdom praised in Ben Sira 24.

1 Enoch 62 not only states that wisdom was unable to find a place on earth. Her negative counterpart was successful: "Iniquity (ʿammādā) went forth from her chambers; she found that which she did not want and she dwelt among them, like rain in a desert and like dew in a parched land" (v. 3). This is a clear adaption of personified folly from Proverbs 9 (although the word ʿammādā is not used in this chapter). The opposition between wisdom and folly personified as women, so important to Proverbs, is oddly never adapted in Early Jewish literature in a wisdom text but rather in an apocalypse.68 The location of her chambers is not stated but the fact that iniquity is opposed to wisdom, whose domicile is heaven, suggests that she emerges from the netherworld. This would sit with the association between house of folly and Shoel in Proverbs (9:18; cf. 7:27; 2:18). Also, the account of iniquity nurturing the land with water can be understood as a sort of reverse image of wisdom in Ben Sira 24, since there she is situated beside abundant waters. The imagery of water vivifying the world in 1 Enoch 42 may convey iniquity as a sort of teacher, not unlike personified Folly (Prov 9:17) or, for that matter, the figure of wisdom in Ben Sira 24. This would be a much darker depiction of the world as under the domain of evil than one finds in Ben Sira.69

Wise Woman Allegorized as a Woman and Torah in Genesis Rabbah and the Dead Sea Scrolls

The Torah-centric iteration of the personification of wisdom as a woman occurs prominently elsewhere in ancient Judaism. The rabbinic text Genesis Rabbah, compiled in the fourth and fifth century CE, begins with an interpretation of Genesis 1 in which the Torah itself speaks about its role in God's creation of the world:

The Torah declares: "I was the working tool of the Holy One, blessed be He." In human practice, when a mortal king builds a palace, he builds it not with his own skill but with the skill of an architect. The architect moreover does not build it out of his head, but employs plans and diagrams to know how to arrange the chambers and the wicket doors. Thus God consulted the Torah and created the world (1:1).

---

53 Ibid., 139; Eisen, Wo findet die Weisheit ihren Ort, 90; Black, The Book of Enoch, 203.
54 1 Enoch 37-4 reads, for example, "Until now there had not been given from the presence of the Lord of Spirits such wisdom (tehaba) as I have received according to my insight." Note also 1 En. 96:5: "I know that sinners will tempt people to do harm to wisdom; and no place will be found for her." For a recent treatment of 1 Enoch vis-à-vis the Mosaic law, see Kohn, Reflections on the Status, 143–154.
55 For "wisdom" as a key term in 1 Enoch for revealed knowledge, see Nickelsburg, 1 Enoch 2, 52; Eisen, Wo findet die Weisheit ihren Ort, 86.
56 Lēšit, Comparative Dictionary, 543.
57 The issue is complicated by the fact that the Hebrew verb "to sit" (noon) can also mean "to dwell." The Self-Glorification Text from Qumran (4Q491c) also discusses enthronement in heaven (cf. 3 En. 10:1). See Collins, A Throne in the Heavens, 41–58.
58 Contra Barbara Rossing, who argues that the dichotomy of personified wisdom and folly is found in 4Q184 and 4Q185—neither of which attests both entities (cf. Philo, Sacr. 20-21). These texts are discussed below. See Rossing, City Visions, Feminine Figures, 186–187. Consult also Angel, From Wild Men to Wise and Wicked Women, 149–149.
59 Iniquity's activity on earth may loosely refer to the core Enochic myth of angels giving sanctioned teaching, a major factor in 1 Enoch for the rise of evil in the world during the primordial age. 1 Enoch 9:1 states that in this era the world was full of iniquity (ʿammādā), using the same word as in 42:3. See Nickelsburg/VanderKam, 1 Enoch 2, 140–41.
Continuing a theme found in Baruch and Ben Sira, in Genesis Rabbah the rabbis understand the personified wisdom of Proverbs 8 as the Torah. This passage quoted above begins with an explication of Prov 8:30, in particular its well-known crux par. Wisdom’s first person account of creation in Proverbs 8 becomes a prooftext for the view that the Torah is not simply the basis of God’s covenant with Israel but also essential to the fabric of the natural order, the blueprint used by God to fashion the world. Also, the Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer recalls Ben Sira’s description of wisdom as a tree in its claim that the “tree of life” of both Genesis 3 and Proverbs 3 is nothing other than the Torah (ch. 12). It is not the focus of this essay but the trope of personified wisdom also plays a role in Early Christianity. The New Testament attests the tradition, in both Q (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:35) and the gospel of John’s account of the descent of the Logos to earth in the form of Christ (1:14; cf. 1 Cor 1:30). The trope had a lively career in the gnostic tradition, in which the heavenly descent of Sophia is often interpreted as a fall (e.g., Irenaeus, Against Heresies, 1.2.2; 1.29).

The personification of wisdom is likely attested in the Dead Sea Scrolls as well. 4QBeatitudes (4Q525) is an instruction, widely regarded as a wisdom composition, that encourages its audience to lead a pious, moral and Torah-focused life. It is distinctive for having the most explicit identification of wisdom and the Torah in the Qumran corpus: “Happy is the man who has obtained wisdom and follows the Torah of the Most High” (4Q525 2 ii + 3 3-4; cf. 11QPs 18:11-12). The beatitude collection repeatedly urges the student to seek a feminine singular antecedent, suggesting that the author understands “wisdom” and “Torah,” both feminine words, as essentially the same. 4QBeatitudes attests the tradition of wisdom personified as a woman in a Torah-centric mode not unlike Ben Sira and Baruch. The text draws on the account of wisdom in Proverbs 1-9. 4Q525 2 iii 2 recounts the value of wisdom: “she cannot be obtained with gold.” This fragment also refers to items of beauty and value such as “precious stones” (l. 3), “purple flowers” (l. 5), and “jewels” (l. 7). Since the theme of wisdom is central in the second column of this fragment, the feminine entity in column 3 is likely wisdom. Woman Wisdom is extolled as superior to things of great value in Prov 3:14-15 (cf. 8:10-11, 19).

4QBeatitudes likely attests a speech by personified wisdom but the core evidence is fragmentary. 4Q525 24 ii describes the teaching of a female figure. The fragment begins: “And truly she pours out (יִ>({בָּר}) her speech.” The next visible portion urges one to listen to the speaker. Woman Wisdom asserts in Prov 1:23 that “I pour out” (יִ>({בָּר}) words, using the same verb as 4Q525 24 ii.1. The speaker has a house (ll. 4-5). This resonates with Woman Wisdom who invites people to her home to learn in Prov 9:1-6. No extensive description of the woman’s dwelling is unfortunately extant in 4Q525 24 ii. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this fragment contains a poorly preserved account of Woman Wisdom. 4QBeatitudes’s appeal to personified wisdom likely served the main pedagogical purpose of the composition, to encourage male students to desire wisdom, as in Proverbs and Ben Sira.

4Q Sapiential Work (4Q185) likely turns to the personification of wisdom to underscore that she has great value and that one should love and seek her: “Happily is the man who does her (wisdom) and does not play tricks against her, nor with (a spirit) of deceit seek her, nor hold fast to her with flatteries. As she was given to his fathers, so he himself will inherit her, and (hold fast) to her with all the power of his strength” (1-2 ii 13-15). The emphasis on ‘doing’ wisdom suggests that it is associated with the law, as is the claim that “she” was made available to one’s forefathers. But, in a manner not fully explicable if wisdom is understood merely as a book, one is urged to seek her honestly and sincerely. This alludes to the trope, found in Ben Sira 51 and Proverbs, that wisdom is a woman whom a student should love and pursue. Whereas Ben Sira 51 emphasizes the desire and passion one should have for wisdom, 4Q185 stresses the integrity and devotion with which one should strive for her. It is almost as if one should ‘marry’ wisdom, a view compatible with Sir 15:2, in which, as discussed above, wisdom should be one’s bride (see also below on Wis 8:2). The image of seizing wisdom conveys a physical embrace and thus evokes the tradition that she is a tree one should hold (Prov 3:18; 4:13). The Dead Sea Scrolls attest the personification of wisdom as a woman, although not as much as one might expect given the prominence of this trope in the two Early Jewish wisdom texts that were available before the emergence of the Qumran Scrolls—Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon, to which we now turn.

60 Compare Avot 6:7, which praises the Torah for giving life and then supports this claim with eight verses from Proverbs 1-9 (in order, 4:22; 3:8; 1:9; 4:9; 9:11; 3:16, 2).
61 Fox, Atonement Again, 699–702; idem, Proverbs 1–9, 287; Weeks, The Context and Meaning, 433–442.
62 Friedlander, Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, 85.
63 MacRae, 86-101; Staat, The Valentinian Myth of Sophia, 75–104.
64 Goff, Discerning Wisdom, 198–229.
66 Goff, Discerning Wisdom, 122–145.
Woman Wisdom as a Bride and Pervasive Spirit—the Wisdom of Solomon

The Wisdom of Solomon is commonly dated to around 40 CE. Wisdom of Solomon 6:22-8:1 seeks to explain the nature and origins of wisdom. This material never engages the joban theme of the inaccessibility of wisdom on earth as a serious problem, unlike Baruch. On the contrary, in the Wisdom of Solomon wisdom is a spirit that permeates the cosmos. She is not simply present in the natural order but an intelligent entity that binds its elements together (1:7). Wisdom 7:24 states “because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things” (cf. v. 7; 8:1; 9:17).

Wisdom of Solomon’s construal of wisdom is highly redolent of Stoic philosophy. According to this tradition, the world is filled with, and held together by, a breath or spirit that can be understood as the soul of the cosmos, a rarified form of fire that is sentient and spreads through the universe, explaining its coherence. Stoicism espouses a type of philosophical monism. The spirit inherent in the cosmos was at times equated with God. Given the account of personified wisdom in Proverbs 8, particularly the chapter’s association between her and the created order, it is not that surprising that this tradition merged with Stoic philosophy in the Hellenistic Diaspora. This syncretism is also evident in the Wisdom of Solomon’s claim that wisdom is a refined material substance, which Wis 7:22-24 describes as, among other attributes, “mobile” and “subtle,” not unlike the Stoic pneuma.

Wisdom of Solomon at times virtually equates personified wisdom with God. She is, remarkably, called “the fashioner of all things” (7:22; cf. LXX Prov 8:30). The occasional confluence between wisdom and God is due to the text’s view that wisdom is an emanation of God, “an effulgence (ἀνατομαχων) of everlasting light, an unblemished mirror of the active power of God and an image of his goodness” (7:26; cf. 9:2). This construal of wisdom diverges from Stoicism, strictly speaking, in particular its immanent conceptualization of the divine. The Wisdom of Solomon blends Stoic natural philosophy with Jewish monotheism and devotion to a transcendent deity. The blend of traditions constitutes not simply a Jewish appropriation of Stoicism but also a fully consistent with the Middle Platonism that was dominant at the time. This philosophical tradition is a sort of “Stoicising Platonism” that combines Stoic monistic cosmology with Platonism’s traditional emphasis on a higher world beyond the sensible realm.

One could conclude, given Wisdom of Solomon’s portrayal of wisdom as a cosmological entity, that the text leaves little room for the personification of wisdom as a woman, or any anthropomorphization whatsoever. This is emphatically not the case. The literary conceit of the work, it must be remembered, is a speech by Solomon. He explains the nature of wisdom. He has this knowledge because he has direct familiarity with her. Drawing upon the tradition that Solomon prayed for his legendary wisdom (1 Kgs 3:9), his prayer to receive wisdom is construed as evidence not only for his piety but also his genuine love for wisdom: “I loved her more than health and beauty” (WisSol 7:10; cf. 6:18). He speaks of his search for her earlier in life and describes his embrace of wisdom as a marriage: “I loved her and sought her from my youth; I desired to take her for my bride, and became enamored of her beauty” (8:2; cf. Sir 15:2). His success as a king is attributed to his love of wisdom and he encourages his addressees, metaphorically described as the kings of the earth, to do the same (8:14; 9:7; cf. 1:1; 6:1, 20-21). Solomon in this text is quite similar to the speaker of Ben Sira 51 and his autobiographical testimony of his life-long love affair with wisdom. The Wisdom of Solomon is in continuity with the sapiential tradition according to which wisdom is like a woman that a male student should desire and embrace.

68 WHITE, Stoic Natural Philosophy, 124-152; HAMS, The Origins of Stoic Cosmology.
69 Diogenes Laertius 7:166: “Nature in their view is an artistically working fire (ἱππ τηγούς), going on its way to create, which is equivalent to a fiery, creative, or fashioning breath (ματαματούσα, οἰν τηγούς).” Stobaeus 1.213: “Zeus says that the sun and moon and each of the other stars are intelligent and prudent and have the firmness of designing fire.” See further COLLINS, Jewish Wisdom, 197-199; WINSTON, The Wisdom of Solomon, 181; ENGEBORG-PEDERSEN, Cosmology and Self, 19-20; LONG/SEIDLEY, The Hellenistic Philosophers, 1:25. See also BOW EDWARDS, Pneuma and Realized Eschatology.
70 Diogenes Laertius 7:147, for example, asserts that the deity “is, however, the artificer of the universe and, as it were, the father of all, both in general and in that particular part of him which is all-pervading, and which is called many names according to its various powers. They give him the name Zeus (Δίας) because all things are due to (δι) him; Zeus (Δίας) so far as he is the cause of life (ζητη) or pervades all life.” See WINSTON, The Wisdom of Solomon, 104.

71 Contrast Sir 42:22: “He has set in order the splendors of his wisdom ... Nothing can be added or taken away, and he needs no one to be his counselor.”
74 Murray, The Personification of Wisdom, 230, perceptively suggests this mirrors the love between God and wisdom in the book. They dwell together (8:3) and she attends him closely (9:4).
clear, however, that this assessment is accurate. 4Q184 contains a vivid portrait of an evil woman who resides in the netherworld:

Her veils are shadows of the twilight and her adornments diseases of the pit. Her beds are couches of the pit. Her lodgings are couches of darkness and in the heart of the night are her tents. In the foundations of gloom she sets up her dwelling and camps in the tents of silence, in the midst of eternal fire. She has no inheritance among all those who shine brightly. She is the beginning of all the ways of wickedness. Alas! She is the ruination of all who inherit her and the calamity of all who grasp her. For her paths are paths of death and her roads are tracks to sin (l. 5-9).

Though clearly located in the underworld, the woman also roams throughout the human world, looking for unsuspecting victims:

In the city squares she veils herself and in the gates of the village she stations herself and there is no-one who can keep her from [her] incessant walking. Her eyes scan here and there and she raises her eyebrows impudently, to spot a just man and overtake him to sidetrack a man into the ways of the pit and seduce the sons of men with smooth words (ll. 12-17).

Complicating the view that this female constitutes an adaptation of Woman Folly, 4Q184 is much more reliant upon the Strange Woman in Proverbs 7 than Woman Folly of Proverbs 9. Both the female of 4Q184 and the Strange Woman walk the streets alone in an urban setting, looking for men. They are in the “squares” (פִּיתַהוֹן) of a city (Prov 7:12; 4Q184 12). The two texts employ the verb בִּרְפָּאָם to signify that a female attempts to ambush people (Prov 7:12; 4Q184 11). The Strange Woman and the woman of 4Q184 tempt their victims in analogous ways. Proverbs 7:5 exhorts one to seek wisdom and insight “that they may keep you from the strange woman, an alien who speaks smooth words (עֵינֵי אָדָם הַיְּלַעֲלוּת)” (cf. 2:16; 6:24; 7:21). 4Q184 2 likewise stresses the smooth speech of the woman, using the verb בָּרֶפֶם (see also l. 17).

Comparison with Proverbs 7 also clarifies the distinctive profile of the woman of 4Q184. The theme of seductive speech is much more prominent with regard to the Strange Woman than the female in 4Q184. This text never states what she says to men, a striking contrast to Prov 7:18. While the Strange Woman has a couch covered with fine Egyptian linen and sweet aromatics (7:16-17), the female of 4Q184 has “couches of darkness” (בּוֹךְךְּ דַּעַת) (l. 6). The “bed” (פָּרֶפֶם) of the Strange Woman is made enticing with fine cloth (Prov 7:16). The beds of the woman in 4Q184 are by contrast connected to Sheol (פָּרֶפֶם נְעָשִׂים לִשְׁלֹאֵל) (l. 5).

---

Looking for Woman Folly and the Strange Woman: 4QWiles of the Wicked Woman (4Q184)

The ancient Jewish evidence for the reception of Woman Folly from Proverbs is much less extensive than that for Woman Wisdom. The most prominent example of personified folly in late Second Temple literature is the figure of iniquity in 1 Enoch 42, discussed above. The most often-cited example of Woman Folly in this period is a Qumran text, 4QWiles of the Wicked Woman (4Q184). It is not

---

75 Ehr. 31 reads “wisdom is represented as speaking of herself after this manner: ‘God obtained me first of all his works and founded me before the ages’ (Prov 8:22). True, for it was necessary that all that came to the birth of creation should be younger than the mother and nurse of all” (cf. Vern. 62).
77 Compare the account of wisdom as a salvific figure throughout the history of Israel in Wis. 10.
78 Note Wis 6:14, which describes wisdom as “sitting at the gate,” as in Prov 8:3. In Wis 7:9 Solomon refuses to compare wisdom to gold and silver, as if asserting the superiority of wisdom over precious metals would degrade its value. This appears to be the product of reflection on statements such as Prov 3:16, which asserts that wisdom is better than gold and silver.
79 See, for example, White Crawford, Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly, 355–356; Tischler, Lady Folly and Her House, 371–381. There has been an extensive amount of scholarship on 4Q184. Consult, for example, Gopp, Discerning Wisdom, 104–121; Lesley, Exegetical Wiles, 107–142.
80 This translation is with modification from Parry Tov, The Dead Sea Scrolls Reader, 3:284–286. See also Gopp, Discerning Wisdom, 108. All citations are from fragment 1 of 4Q184.
The “coverings” of the woman in this line are likewise associated with darkness. The themes of darkness and the netherworld are heightened in 4Q184 in comparison to Proverbs. The Qumran text includes numerous words for “pit” (ll. 3, 5, 6, 11, 17). The woman of this text possesses tents that are in the middle of “eternal flames” (שׁי נריעות) (l. 7). This line also claims that she dwells in “tents of silence” (ר אביבים; the term און signifies the netherworld in the Psalms 92:17; 115:17). She also has “gates of death” (חרים עלים; l. 10), further evoking Sheol.

The Strange Woman is associated with the underworld, in that she persuades people to commit sins that lead to death. As mentioned above, Proverbs likely describes her house as on the way to Sheol. The woman of 4Q184 not only leads people to Sheol but also resides in this realm. The woman in this Qumran text is best understood as a poetic re-interpretation of the Strange Woman in Proverbs 7.81 She is transformed from a promiscuous woman whom a young man could encounter in real life into a mythological denizen of the netherworld.82 While 4Q184 is primarily reliant upon the Strange Woman, she also resonates with Woman Folly and can be understood as drawing upon the portrait of her in Proverbs. Her house, like that of the Strange Woman, is associated with Sheol (9:18). It is possible that the author of 4Q184 did not think of the two women as distinct figures, as I argued above, but rather understood them as a single evil female. It is significant, however, that the scriptural allusions of 4Q184 are much more consistently from Proverbs 7 rather than chapter 9, allowing for the plausible interpretation that the woman of 4Q184 relies upon the Strange Woman to a greater extent than Woman Folly.83

Conclusion

The personification of wisdom as a woman is an important trope in the Hebrew Bible and Early Judaism. In the late Second Temple period there is some en-

81 Ben Sira may also allude to Strange Woman by using this term (יה רעם) when giving practical advice to male students about the kind of women they should avoid: “Do not go near a strange woman, lest you fall into her snare” (9:3; cf. Qoh 7:26; Tob 4:12). While Proverbs also uses trap language to describe the Strange Woman (7:22–23), Ben Sira does not extensively engage this tradition.
82 David Penchansky obscures this transition when he calls the Strange Woman a “demon from hell.” See his PENCHANSKY, Understanding Wisdom Literature, 29.
83 Note that the woman of 4Q184 never calls for students or invites men to study in her house, unlike Woman Folly.

Bibliography


BAYER-KATZ, Christa, Studien zu Proverben 1–9 (WMANT 22), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1996.


CAMP, Claudia V., Wise, Strange and Holy: The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible (ISOTSup 320), Sheffield 2000.


COLLINS, John I., Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age (OTL), Louisville 1997.


84 MURPHY, The Personification of Wisdom, 232.
Ibolya Balla

"Pillars of Gold on a Silver Base:"

Female Beauty as the Cause of Anxiety and Praise in the Book of Ben Sira

Abstract: The paper examines various comments of Ben Sira on beauty, body and body parts of primarily women. The investigation takes into account the context of the passages and the fact that the sayings reflect a life-long teaching, and it concludes that beauty can be positive in a good marriage, while it can be negative in other contexts, such as regarding one’s daughter, or immoral women. It also demonstrates that attributes, such as haughty eyes are characteristics not only of women, but also of men. While women represent the most anxiety for men and should be watched over, men are also responsible for their actions when it comes to being succumbed to beauty and the desire it awakens.

Keywords: Ben Sira, Female Beauty, Body, Sexuality

Perhaps I am not alone with the experience and feeling that the more of Ben Sira’s teachings I read the more perplexed I become. In trying to draw up his thought system or finding motivations behind his instructions one of the words that first comes to mind is the word “complex.” That is what this long wisdom book is, complex and at times perplexing. This is true about the writer’s comments on the beauty, appearance or form of women.

Ben Sira has a number of comments concerning the appearance of women. This paper aims to take into account not only the descriptions—both general and more specific—but also the human reaction and—where relevant—consequences that are connected with the depictions. In our investigation we will proceed from the general remarks such as beauty, appearance, splendour, body to more specific comments on various body parts. In general when we try to deduce anything from the sayings found in this book we must always keep in mind several things: first, that the sayings of this extensive work reflect a life-long teaching and reflection; we must always consider the context of the individual sayings; finally, without going into details on the question of the complex relationship of Ben Sira and other wisdom writings such as Proverbs, it is