

## Who Is Wisdom in Proverbs 8.

The Bible is composed of different kinds of literature, narrative, poetry, prophecy, epistle (which is The Wisdom of Solomon authoritative teaching in the form of a letter) and so on. Each part of the Bible must be read according to the kind of literature it is. Literary genre should influence our interpretations. An awareness of literary genre can spare us from misreadings of the Bible, though that is not its only usefulness.

One biblical text that illustrates this principle is a famous poem that praises wisdom (Proverbs 8:22–31). Proverbs 8:22-31 is famous for its description of the wisdom of God as a person or entity, a deity-level figure who assists God in some way with the creation of the world. Here are the first eleven verses of the poem:

- The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old.
- Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
- When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water.
- Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth, before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world.
- before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world.
- When he established the heavens, I was there; when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
- when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep,
- when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
- then I was beside him, like a master workman,
- and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always,
- rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man.

Proverbs 8:22-31 gets a lot of attention because of verse 30, where someone was “beside” God “like a master workman.” Christians are used to thinking in these terms because Jesus is cast as God’s agent of creation. But Wisdom in Proverbs seems to conflict with that for a simple reason, throughout the book of proverbs Wisdom is cast as a woman. Look at Proverbs 1 20 to 22. Notice how wisdom is referred to by the pronouns “she” and “her”:

- Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the street plazas she raises her voice;
- at the head of the noisy streets she calls out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
- How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? And those who scoff delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?

Wisdom in Proverbs is consistently described this way. And so when we get to Proverbs 8, scholars devote a good deal of space to talking about “Lady Wisdom” as God’s co-creator.

What’s going on?

In literary terms, what we see here in regard to wisdom is personification, taking an abstract idea like wisdom and casting it as a person or living thing. Since the word for “wisdom” in Hebrew is grammatically feminine (hokmsh), when this personification occurs “wisdom” is cast as a lady. Like other languages, Hebrew nouns are classified, arbitrarily, by grammatical gender. This is indicated by the presence or absence of certain consonant endings. This is done for several reasons, such as the need to align nouns grammatically with verbs, which also have gender classification, typically marked by changes

in a verb's ending. German, for example, has three genders for nouns: masculine, feminine, and neuter. This has nothing to do with actual biological gender. In German, "little girl", is neuter. In Hebrew, the word for "land", is feminine. Dirt doesn't have biological gender. The system is arbitrary.

English personifies abstract concepts as well. We might say, "Lust overtook him," or "Envy blinded her." Lust and envy are cast as though they were living entities that can physically engage someone. That's personification. But unlike Hebrew, English nouns are not grammatically categorized by gender. In English, relationships between verbs and nouns are largely determined by word order, not added endings.

What all this means for our topic is that "wisdom" is not an actual woman or feminine entity who assisted God at creation, as in Proverbs 8:30. The language simply reflects the grammar. Nevertheless, Proverbs 8:30 does describe some sort of co-creator or agent of creation. The New Testament places Jesus in that role, and that means Jesus gets connected with the wisdom figure of Proverbs 8.

The New Testament refers to Jesus as God's agent of creation. That role is assigned to Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 8:30. Is there a connection?

There are several instances in the New Testament where Jesus is identified in some way with Wisdom. 1 Corinthians 1:24 is considered by some an explicit statement to that effect since Paul refers to Jesus as the "Wisdom of God", in 1 Corinthians 1:24. However, it is not completely clear that Paul meant to identify Jesus with the Wisdom of Proverbs 8. Furthermore, in 1 Corinthians 1:30, Paul himself adds, "And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption." The wording here seems to simply list wisdom among a number of other theological concepts. Yet, righteousness, sanctification and redemption are not perceived as the speakers of Proverbs, only Wisdom. Consequently, many scholars are hesitant to affirm a "Wisdom Christology", too firmly with respect to Paul.

Much more striking is Luke 11:49-51. This text refers to the Wisdom of God in personified terms as in Proverbs 8. Note verse 49:

46 And he [Jesus] said, "Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers.

47 Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed.

48 So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs.

49 Therefore also "the Wisdom of God said", 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,'

50 so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation,

51 from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of this generation.

The passage is straightforward. In context, Jesus is the speaker and calls out the hypocrisy of his opposition. But in verse 49 Jesus suddenly interjects another speaker, the Wisdom of God: "I sent you prophets and apostles...." It is noteworthy that Luke has Wisdom speaking in the first person. Jesus creates the impression that it was Wisdom who sent the prophets and apostles. But that's something we know from both the Old and New Testament that God did.

Jesus's statement therefore, suggests Wisdom and God the Father should be identified with each other. But that's odd given the way Wisdom and God are distinguished in Proverbs 8. Is Jesus confused? Is the gospel writer careless? No. The wording is deliberate, but the amazing impact of the statement comes when one compares Luke 11:49 with the parallel passage of the incident in Matthew 23. Note verse 34, remembering that the speaker, as in Luke 11, is Jesus:

29 [And Jesus said,] "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous,  
30 saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.'  
31 Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.  
32 Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers.  
33 You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?  
34\* Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town,  
35 so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.  
36 Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

The point is startling. Whereas in Luke Jesus and Wisdom are clearly distinct, Jesus refers to Wisdom, and Wisdom seems to play the role of God, Matthew puts the words of Wisdom into the mouth of Jesus! Luke and Matthew, through a written tag-team effort, identified Jesus as God's co-creator, Wisdom, who was in turn identified as the God of Israel.

Furthermore, In Proverbs 3:19 Wisdom is praised for her role in creation. Proverbs 3:19 to 20 says:  
-The LORD by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath he established the heavens.  
-By his knowledge the depths are broken up, and the clouds drop down the dew.

Then in Proverbs 8:14, Wisdom says:  
-Counsel is mine, and sound wisdom: I am understanding; I have strength.

Here we can clearly see that Wisdom, understanding and knowledge are simply attributes of God himself. Personified Wisdom and understanding are simply speaking in Proverbs 8, not Jesus. Nor are both, personified Wisdom and Jesus the speakers in Proverbs 8 because of something Paul said.

The gospel writers are not the only ones who make this sort of equation. In Hebrews 1:1-3 we read:

1 Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,  
2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.  
3 He is the radiance, of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

The Greek word for radiance, *apaugasma*, occurs only here in the New Testament. It also occurs in only one place in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Bible of the early Church. In other words, it's rare. The passage in the Septuagint where the word *apaugasma* occurs is from a non-canonical book called The Wisdom of Solomon:

24 For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.

25 For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her.

26 For she is a reflection (apaugasma) of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness. (NRSV)

Through the use of the rare term *apaugasma*, the writer of Hebrews draws on a familiar Jewish idea of a second divine co-creator and aligns that idea with Jesus.

All of this is crucial for understanding the debate over the deity of Christ at Nicea in 325 A.D. Was Jesus Created or Uncreated? The dominant view of earliest Christianity was that the Son (Jesus) was God in the flesh. For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. If Jesus was God in the flesh, then there could never have been a time when the Son had not existed. Opponents to the idea that Jesus was truly God and therefore eternal. Arians believed that there was indeed a time when the Son had not existed, he had been created. They used Proverbs 8:22 to argue that view:

The LORD possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old.

The Hebrew verb translated “possessed” is *qanah*, which has a wide semantic range in the Hebrew Bible, including “to create”. Arians argued that, since the New Testament linked Jesus and Wisdom, then Proverbs 8:22 proved that Jesus was a created being and not eternal.

Is this a coherent idea? It is a poor method to interpret the Old Testament through the New Testament. Interpreting a passage just because we want to protect a theological idea is not honest exegesis. Fortunately, we don't have to do that.

The idea of Wisdom being created by God is not coherent in Old Testament terms. Wisdom is a personified attribute of God. If there was a time when Wisdom didn't exist, then there was a time when God lacked wisdom. You can't have the God of the Old Testament not have wisdom. The idea is incompatible with the Old Testament's profile of God. If God lacked wisdom, he wouldn't be wise enough to create wisdom in the first place. Consequently, a translation of “create” makes no sense in Old Testament terms before we even introduce Jesus into the picture.

So what should we think here?

Those Christians, who held that the New Testament represent Jesus as truly God incarnate, requiring him to be eternal, argued that the verb in Proverbs 8:22 was best translated “possessed” rather than created. In the same sense in Genesis 4:1, where Eve brought forth Cain her son, this difference between brought forth and created, or the difference between beget and create, deserves close attention. The idea conveyed in Genesis 4:1 is not conception, that is, bringing into existence. The same idea of proverbs' difference between possess and create, is also expressed with another verb (*harah*). Eve does not “create” Cain. Cain emerges from her womb after being conceived earlier. That is, ancient Israelites would not view birth as creation since they knew something was already living inside the womb, despite having no scientific knowledge of how that worked. Old Testament women knew they were “with child” when the fetus became active, they would of course suspect pregnancy at the cessation of the menstrual cycle and other physical symptoms, as women of today would discern. From this perspective, *qanah* is understood as speaking to the moment of emergence, not the beginning of

the life. Therefore, although brought forth and create are synonyms, their synonymousness breaks down at some point.

Wisdom was therefore brought forth from the Godhead to assist God the Father with creation. This understanding of the verb in Proverbs 8:22 retained the assertion that Jesus (who is Wisdom and the Son) is eternal.

Proverbs 8:22 then, doesn't undermine the deity of Jesus, yet contributes to understanding how he would be viewed as God's agent of creation.