

SOPHIA: ENGENDERING WISDOM IN PROVERBS, BEN SIRA
AND THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON*

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In the biblical Wisdom Literature, a figure arises that both perplexes and provokes scholars. This figure is personified Wisdom. Most perplexing, perhaps, is that the personification of Wisdom is set in feminine pronouns. Those interested in the history of religions have attempted to account for this feminine engendering by seeking extra-canonical sources for a female figure, even a goddess figure, who is associated with wisdom. They establish links, however tenuous or secure, between these figures and the feminine figure of Wisdom in this body of literature in order to argue for sources, provenance, date or authorial intention.¹ Feminist theologians have been drawn to this

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1. C.A. Brown, *No Longer Be Silent: First Century Portraits of Biblical Women* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 25, claims that feminine imagery is influenced by worship of goddesses: Isis (Egyptian) or other Graeco-Roman or Oriental deities. So also D. Winston, *Wisdom of Solomon: A New Translation with Commentary* (AB, 43; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970); R.E. Witt, *Isis in the Greco-Roman World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1971); J. Blenkinsopp, *Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament: The Ordering of Life in Israel and Early Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). J. Sanders, *Ben Sira and Demotic Wisdom* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983) and G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1972), p. 147, both deny that a hypostasis lies behind this figure.

female figure as a source for feminine images and/or reflection of God.² Christian theologians have connected personified Wisdom with the wisdom tradition found in the Gospels, especially in the Gospel of John;³ this has become an important factor in the discourse on christology.⁴ Others reflect on the place of personified Wisdom in a social or political context.⁵ Still others attest that personifying Wisdom is simply a reflection of grammatical gender.⁶

In this paper, I will explore and compare the literary effect achieved through engendering Wisdom in Proverbs, the Wisdom of Solomon and Ben Sira. To achieve this objective, I will focus attention on the female images evoked by the text. I will consider the element of sexuality inherent in these images and how erotic language is used to emphasize various elements in the text.

I will argue that each text uses the engendering of personified Wisdom differently. In the book of Proverbs, a female Wisdom figure is constructed as a good wife too difficult to resist. In Ben Sira, a highly erotic Wisdom arouses desire which is then redirected toward the Law. In the Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom's gender becomes hazy, like her substance, in order to remain an unsolvable enigma. For the sake of

2. See for example, L. Lefebure, 'The Wisdom of God: Sophia and Christian Theology', *Christian Century* (Oct. 1994), pp. 951-56; C.V. Camp, 'Woman and Wisdom as Root Metaphor: A Theological Consideration', in K. Hoglund *et al.* (eds.), *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in Honour of Roland E. Murphy* (JSOTSup, 58; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987).

3. See, e.g., Jn 6.35-40; 7.33-36; 8.21-23; 16.16.

4. See, e.g., J.M. Robinson, 'Jesus as Sophos and Sophia: Wisdom Traditions in the Gospels', in R. Wilken (ed.), *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), pp. 1-16; M.J. Suggs, *Wisdom, Christology and the Law in Matthew's Gospel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970); M. Scott, *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus* (JSOTSup, 71; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1992); E.A. Johnson, 'Jesus, the Wisdom of God: A Biblical Basis for Non-Androcentric Christology', *ETL* 61 (1985), pp. 261-94.

5. See C.V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Bible and Literature Series, 11; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1985); S. Schroer, 'Die göttliche Weisheit und der nachexilische Monotheismus', in M. Wacker and E. Zenger (eds.), *Der eine Gott und die Göttin: Gottesvorstellungen des biblischen Israel im Horizont feministischer Theologie* (Quaestiones Disputatae, 135; Freiburg: Herder, 1991), pp. 151-83.

6. See R.B.Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* (AB, 18; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), p. 69.

clarity, throughout this paper I will refer to the feminine personified Wisdom as Sophia.

Proverbs

Proverbs 1–9 constructs two interconnected sets of opposing images which serve to highlight differences and similarities between a young man's moral and religious life.⁷ On one side, Sophia (divine wisdom) is placed in a parallel construction with the good wife. On the opposite side, 'Strange Woman' (the social, legal or religious 'other') is placed in a parallel construction with the evil wife. As Sophia is the polar opposite of Strange Woman,⁸ the good wife is the polar opposite of the evil wife.

Sophia is constructed as a metaphor for divine wisdom (2.6). Shaped in wifely images, Sophia prepares her home (9.1) and offers food and hospitality: 'Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed' (9.5; cf. 1.31; 4.17). Accepting her hospitality causes one to enter into her life-giving path (9.6). Like a fertile woman, Sophia is imagined as the 'tree of life' (3.18) whose fruit is 'better than gold' (8.19).⁹ Similarly, the response to Sophia evokes the actions of a husband toward a beloved wife: she is to be held fast (3.18) and embraced (4.8); she is to be loved (4.6) and guarded (4.13), but not to

7. C.A. Newsom, 'Women and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1–9', in P. Day (ed.), *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), pp. 142–60, develops the relationship of these four figures in terms of patriarchal discourse.

8. So also W. McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), p. 360.

9. N. Habel, 'The Symbolism of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9', *Int* 26 (1972), p. 142, distinguishes three layers of symbolism in Proverbs. In the layer of personal human experience (4.7), Sophia is a companion who accompanies her disciples on their journey (3.17). In the layer of communal covenantal wisdom (1.7), Sophia is equated with 'the fear of the Lord' and obedience to his commandments (6.20–23). She is the bold wisdom teacher who interprets the journey for those who pass by (8.2). In the layer of cosmological reflection (8.22), Sophia is a primordial personality chosen by God as a mediator, counselor and sustainer of creation (8.22–31). As a mythical figure, her path leads to the Tree of Life (3.18). C.V. Camp, 'Wise and Strange: An Interpretation of the Female Imagery in Proverbs in Light of Trickster Mythology', *Semeia* 42 (1988), pp. 14–36, claims that path imagery relating to Sophia indicates her marginal, liminal status. This liminal state typifies the relationship between wisdom and tradition.

be forsaken (4.6). She is called a 'sister' and an 'intimate friend' (7.4). The benefits of a relationship with her are honour (4.8; cf. 4.9) and life (4.13). Thus, Sophia, depicted in wifely language, is an engendered metaphor for divine wisdom.

Throughout this discourse, the language used to describe Sophia mirrors the description of a good wife (31.10-31).¹⁰ Like Sophia, this good wife is sought and found (3.13; 8.17; 31.10, especially 8.35 and 18.22). Once found, she is more precious than jewels (2.1-4; 3.14-15; 31.10)¹¹ for she brings life (3.13; 8.17, 35, 36; 18.22; 31.10). Like Sophia she works with her hands (8.27; 31.13). She too speaks wisdom (1.23, 30; 31.26) and is concerned with the ways of her household (2.12; 31.27), nor does she eat the 'bread of idleness' (31.27). Like Wisdom she is praised (31.28). Finally, the 'woman who fears the Lord is to be praised' (31.30) and 'the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord' (9.10). Thus, similar expressions and descriptions align the good wife and Sophia in parallel construction.

On the opposite side of the equation is Strange Woman who serves as a metaphor for the religious, legal and social 'other'. Various referred to as 'strange', 'foreign', or 'loose' (2.16; 5.3) or as 'Lady Folly' (9.13-18), this figure is set up in contrast to Sophia and thus may be regarded as the antithesis of the positive figure. Instead of life (4.13), love (4.6), creation (3.19), wisdom (1.23), social order (1.33) and truth (8.7), Strange Woman is portrayed as death (2.18-39; 5.6; 9.18), folly (9.13), darkness (2.18), social disruption (2.22; 5.14) and falsehood (2.16). The terms, 'foreign' and 'strange' connote a sense of separation or 'otherness'. As a 'foreign' woman, she would be separated by religious laws regulating endogamy. Though she is foreign, she dwells amid the community: she appears in public places and invites people into her house. As a 'strange' woman, she is separated socially, religiously and legally: she 'left the companion of her youth' (2.17), and is thus a social anomaly to be avoided; she has 'forsaken the covenant of her God' (2.17), and is thus outside of religious boundaries;¹² she is an adulteress

10. R.E. Murphy, 'Wisdom and Eros in Proverbs 1-9', *CBQ* 50 (1988), p. 601, argues that the good wife is a symbol of Wisdom. See T.P. McCreesh, 'Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31.10-31', *RB* 92 (1985), pp. 25-46. A. Wolters, 'Šôpiyyâ, (Prov. 31.27) as Hymnic Participle and Play on Sophia', *JBL* 104 (1985), pp. 577-87, argues that semantic connections make this allusion clear.

11. See Job 28 for similar language.

12. Newsom, 'Women and the Discourse', p. 148.

(7.19), and thus is legally 'off limits'. Representing 'otherness', this figure is clearly the polar opposite of Sophia and is to be repudiated (5.8; 7.25-27).¹³

Sexual imagery is used to drive a wedge between divine wisdom and 'otherness'. The Strange Woman, as the metaphor for 'otherness', exudes sexuality. Her 'lips drip honey and her speech is smoother than oil' (5.3). Her sexuality is often associated with speech: 'smooth words' (7.5) and 'smooth talk' (7.21) and her 'teaching' leads youth astray.¹⁴ She is also associated with food images that are frequently used in sexual imagery: the one who pursues her satisfies his appetite (6.30); she invites young men to dine on stolen water and secret bread (9.17), but her fruit is bitter as wormwood (5.4). She is 'loud and wayward' (2.16; 7.11; 9.13), seeks aggressively (7.15), is herself an unfaithful wife (2.17; 7.18-19), and she knows no shame (9.13). She is 'decked out like a prostitute' (7.10) and has prepared a bed for her seduction (7.16). Her sexuality, however, is not perceived as attractive and enticing. Attraction and enticement are the weapons which she uses to entrap her enemy for the victim of her attack is slaughtered and consumed (7.22-27). Her 'two edged sword' is a menacing phallic symbol turned against her male prey (5.4).¹⁵ Terrifying images of death are associated with Strange Woman's sexuality. She is a dangerous alternative to divine wisdom.

Like the association of Sophia with the good wife, the Strange Woman has her counterpart in the adulteress or evil wife. The wife of another pursues a young man (6.24) with her 'smooth' tongue (6.24; 7.5). He is advised to flee (6.25; 7.25) for she, too, brings death (6.26; 7.27).

13. Using the interpretation of Habel ('Symbolism of Wisdom', pp. 131-57) again through the three layers of symbolism we see that Strange Woman represents (1) alternative approaches to experiential wisdom (5.7-14) which is (2) interpreted as the threat of apostasy in the covenant community (2.16-19) and (3) the goddess of the underworld (2.18; 9.13-18) on the level of cosmological reflection.

14. It is quite possible that the attraction to Hellenization, symbolized by the attraction to Strange Woman, attempts to draw the careless into its embrace but must be resisted. Adultery is often a metaphor for apostasy. See, e.g., Hos. 2; Jer. 2.23-25; 3.1-2; Ezek. 16.

15. Newsom, 'Women and the Discourse', p. 153. Habel ('Symbolism of Wisdom', p. 143) argues that Strange Woman, though presented as a bawdy street-walker, may have been a cult prostitute known for her wisdom. As such, she represents the possibility of an alternative way to that of covenantal Israel.

Although Sophia and the Strange Woman are played as opposites, similar language is used for both of them.¹⁶ The one who embraces Sophia will be honoured (4.8) but he is warned against embracing 'the bosom of an adventuress' (5.20). One holds fast to Sophia (3.18; 4.13) but is 'seized' by Strange Woman (7.13). This grasping takes place in the street and in the marketplace where both are to be found (1.20-21; 7.12). Both invite youths into their houses (7.15-20; 8.34; 9.1-6, 14-16) and offer bread (9.5,17) and water (5.15; 9.17) at their banquets. Finally, both Sophia and Strange Woman call out in the streets in contrast to the proverbial teaching that words should be sparing (10.19; 13.3).¹⁷ Throughout this text, therefore, similar images clump around all the female figures whether they are positive or negative.¹⁸

The engendering of wisdom in the book of Proverbs therefore shapes the seminal metaphors for the construction of this discourse. Divine wisdom, cast in the role of Sophia, a good wife, is compared to the religious, social and legal 'other', cast as Strange Woman, the evil wife. This literary construct metaphorically establishes a model relationship between the 'son' and divine wisdom. The 'son' is encouraged to pursue the ideal wife and her parallel, life-giving Sophia¹⁹ whose 'homininess' is comforting. He is warned against immoral liaisons with women and the parallel death-dealing association with Strange Woman, be it death in a religious, social or sexual realm. Her sexuality is terrifying. By using engendered metaphors, the pursuit of divine wisdom resonates in the context of a divinely-ordained, stable, safe, and peaceful family life.²⁰ In addition, the dangerous power of sexuality, possible

16. See J.-N. Aletti, 'Séduction et Parole en Proverbes I-IX', *VT* 27 (1977), pp. 132-34, for a full treatment of this topic. Camp ('Wise and Strange', pp. 32-34) argues that Wise and Strange Woman are the two sides of the traditional trickster figure who is both creative and destructive, life- and death-giving, and true and false.

17. Newsom ('Wisdom and the Discourse', p. 149) argues that these figures represent an irritating voice from the margins whose 'dissonance can no more be eliminated than can sexual difference itself'.

18. Camp ('Wise and Strange', p. 33) argues that their association depicts the ambiguity of reality known to all people, or the mixture and balance of good and bad.

19. Murphy ('Wisdom and Eros', p. 603) argues that sexual fidelity is the symbol of one's attachment to Sophia.

20. The discourse between father and son confirms this context. Camp (*Wisdom and the Feminine*, pp. 261-81) claims that the nurturing loving woman image in

only in an engendered context, motivates the flight from 'otherness'.²¹

Ben Sira

The imagery used to describe Sophia in Ben Sira is rooted in the imagery of the book of Proverbs.²² Like Proverbs, Ben Sira personifies the notion of wisdom through the use of feminine personal pronouns. As well, the opposition of good wife versus evil wife associated with the wise and foolish is preserved.²³ However, Ben Sira shapes these images differently. By so doing, the images serve a different purpose in supporting the general theme of the text. Ben Sira locates wisdom concretely within the Law of Israel (1.26-28; 19.20; 24.23-29);²⁴ as God gives wisdom to the people of the covenant (45.5), so also God gives the Law to the people. Wisdom, and hence the Law, is to be sought with passion and enthusiasm. The feminine images of Sophia are thus used to inspire enthusiastic passion. In this way, Ben Sira may claim in the final verses of the text, 'My heart was stirred to seek her' (51.21).

Because the images take shape within their context, I will focus discussion on three passages which deal explicitly with Sophia, that is, a feminine personification of wisdom.

Ben Sira 7.18-31

In 7.18-31, three metaphors present Sophia in succession. The first is a field, the second, a testing stone, the third, fetters. These metaphors are placed in the context of one working towards a worthy goal. For

Proverbs fills the gap left by the failure of the male-centred political power. The household serves as a life- and identity-source for the community. Cf. Camp, 'Wise and Strange', p. 32.

21. M. Scott (*Sophia*, p. 79) claims that Sophia is engendered in order to offer something God cannot offer, namely, her feminine attractiveness.

22. See for example, P.W. Skehan and A.A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira: A New Translation with Notes* (AB, 39; New York: Doubleday, 1987), pp. 40-45. Ben Sira is dated to 180 BCE with translation into Greek around 132 BCE, so for example, Blenkinsopp, *Wisdom and Law*, p. 140.

23. See H. McKeating, 'Jesus ben Sira's Attitude to Women', *ExpTim* 85 (1973-74), pp. 85-87, for a discussion on the comparison of good and bad wife.

24. These concrete parameters may indicate the desire to bring Sophia under control, like the 'beauty of a good wife in a well-ordered home' (26.16). Scott, *Sophia*, p. 55.

example, Sophia is a field sown then harvested (6.19), a burden turned to joy (6.28), and fetters turned to adornment (6.30). Within this context, the broad range of meaning is restricted to a limited domain. The first image used to describe Sophia draws on agricultural imagery:

My son, from your youth embrace discipline; thus you will gain wisdom with greying hair. As though plowing and sowing, draw close to her; then await her bountiful crops, for in cultivating her you will labour but little, and soon you will eat of her fruits (6.18-19).²⁵

Fields, gardens, earth and soil are often associated with female fertility; the connection between sexuality and agriculture is not surprising given the association between (male) seeds being planted in fertile (female) ground, the result being (progeny) fruit. As a plowed field, Sophia is the object of intrusive and disruptive penetration; 'a little toil' will open her to 'sow' the seeds in expectation of an abundant outcome.²⁶ From an earlier passage we learn that she 'satisfies [or intoxicates] men with her fruits' (1.16; cf. 19.19; 23.25; 24.17). Though the larger context of this metaphor directs the meaning towards the rewards of hard work, the eroticism used to describe Sophia overrides the simple agricultural image of a farmer plowing a field. The invitation stands: 'Come to her' (7.19, 26).

The second image of Sophia in this cycle is that of heavy burden: 'Put your shoulder under her and carry her, and do not fret under her bonds' (6.25). For the uninstructed (or foolish),²⁷ Sophia seems like a 'heavy testing stone' (6.21; cf. 51.26). In fact, she is the image of strict discipline.

The third image is drawn from the realm of hunting, if translated 'Put your feet into her net and your neck into her noose',²⁸ or from the realm of slavery if translated, 'Put your feet into her fetters and your neck into her collar' (RSV, NRSV). Either way, the imagery evokes a sense of helpless entrapment and powerlessness. The reader is instructed to submit to this external control only to discover that the collar will become

25. Skehan's translation preserves the erotic nature of this imagery and thus is favoured over the RSV.

26. Di Lella (*Wisdom of Ben Sira*, p. 193) argues that these images depict the process of growth and maturity but fails to comment on the obvious erotic language.

27. Di Lella (*Wisdom of Ben Sira*, p. 193) identifies this one as a fool who is morally deficient rather than unintelligent.

28. So Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, p. 194.

a 'glorious robe' and the bonds a 'cord of blue' and a 'crown of gladness' (6.29-31). The 'cords of blue' evoke the tassels on the garments which remind the Israelites to 'remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes' (Num. 15.37-39).²⁹ The bonds are thus interpreted positively and are associated with the bonds of the Law to which Israel is wed (Deut. 6.8; 4.5).

Wisdom is engendered with feminine pronouns and with an image of agricultural fertility. This sensual image stimulates carnal passion which Ben Sira restricts to the context of Law and discipline. By personifying wisdom, Ben Sira provides a healthy alternative for desire and stimulates the appetite to 'seek' the Law.³⁰

Ben Sira 14.20–15.10

The next passage that deals with Sophia is found in 14.20–15.10. Again, sensual feminine language is used to arouse the passions of the one seeking her. At a dizzying pace and in progressive steps, the seeker comes closer and closer to his goal. He 'hunts' her, patiently placing himself in her path (14.22).³¹ He spies on her through a window (14.23) just as, in the highly erotic Song of Songs, the Beloved gazes in through the window and peers through the lattice (Song 2.9). He listens at her door (14.23). He is first 'near her house', then attached to her walls, then near her tent. He 'fastens his tent peg to her walls' (14.24).³² His children enter her shelter (14.26), then he follows, first to be sheltered by her as well, then to 'dwell in the midst of her glory' (14.27). He penetrates her locative, visual, auditory space to climax in the midst of her. This erotic language arouses passions which need to be focused in the appropriate domain. The next verse does just this:

29. Di Lella (*Wisdom of Ben Sira*, p. 194) identifies these 'lusts' as 'allurements of Hellenistic learning and culture'.

30. The Law of Moses (24.23) provides the framework into which one strives for wisdom. Adherence to the Law manifests wisdom; thus, the Law becomes the 'content' of wisdom. For example, the wise demonstrate appropriate ethical behaviour, especially in the nature of human relationships (3.1-16; 4.1-6; 6.5-17; 7.18-19.18; 30.1-13; 33.24-31). An extensive historical survey of 'famous men' (chs. 44-50) provides the historical 'proof texts' for the notion that obedience to the Law manifests wisdom.

31. Di Lella (*Wisdom of Ben Sira*, p. 78) suggests that the stalker is a 'scout'.

32. See S. Niditch, 'Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael', Day (ed.), *Gender and Difference*, pp. 43-57, for an exploration of the tent peg as a phallic symbol.

'The man who fears the Lord will do this, and he who holds to the Law will obtain Wisdom' (15.1). Again, Ben Sira stimulates carnal passion through evocative feminine imagery and then redirects that passion toward the Law.

After this brief redirection, the text returns to feminine imagery for wisdom. Sophia is no longer the pursued, but the one who 'will come to meet him' (15.2). She will feed him (15.3), support him (15.4) and exalt him (15.5). The image of a silent seductress, once she has been obtained (15.1; cf. 15.7), is replaced by a nurturing and loving mother and/or wife of his youth who is loyal to her man. In previous passages, she is depicted as loyal and trustworthy (1.15). She provides for her whole household (1.17). She 'exalts her sons and gives help to those who seek her' (4.11).³³ She is held fast (4.13) and obeyed (4.15). She accompanies one learning to walk 'on tortuous paths' (4.17), disciplines and teaches to the point of confidence (4.17) and requires loyalty (4.19). The benefits of 'obtaining' wisdom, of 'holding the Law' (15.1; also 4.15), are likened, therefore, to the security, peace and prosperity of a happy home. The sensual arousal of the first stanza is solidly placed within an acceptable, stable, familial setting (15.5).

In this passage, therefore, engendering wisdom accomplishes two things. First, the passion that one should feel towards the Law is like the passion that one might feel towards a woman. The Law, like a woman, should be sought until found. Though this passion is not restrained, it is directed into socially appropriate channels: marriage. Likewise, Israel's passion for the Law is channeled into an equally appropriate covenantal relationship with God. By using an engendered notion of wisdom, Ben Sira is able to draw on the traditional imagery of Israel as the wife of God (Hos. 2; Jer. 3.20) with the subtle shift from devotion to God to devotion to the Law (1.25-27; 24.23). Sophia is the feminine toward which ardent admirers direct their attention.

Ben Sira 24.1-22

The next passage concerning Sophia in the text of Ben Sira is found in 24.1-22. This is the first time that Sophia speaks in the first person; she 'praises herself' (24.1). The focus of the first part is the origin of

33. Skehan translates *huios* as 'children' in 4.12. The catch word *huios* in v. 10 connects these two verses but in v. 10 *huios* refers to one who is also a *pater* and an *andros*. I have therefore chosen to retain the RSV translation as 'sons' rather than as 'children'.

Sophia and draws on traditional imagery of creation (24.3), exodus (24.4) and royalty (24.4). Sophia, in spite of having access to universal options, is given by God to Israel as a daughter is given in marriage (24.8; also 1.10). Unlike the faithless wife in 23.22-27, Sophia will take root and bear fruit in Jerusalem (24.12; also 1.20; 6.19; cf. 23.25). Again, agricultural images speak of Sophia's beauty, fragrance³⁴ and productivity and appeal to the senses (24.12-17). The multiple references to trees invite cool and quiet rest, provoking desire on the plane of personal comfort. But trees are also associated with sexuality: negatively, they are the sight of cultic and marital infidelity (Isa. 1.29; 57.5; Jer. 2.20-21); positively, they evoke licit sexuality in the Song of Songs (7.6-9). Her 'produce' beckons: fullness (24.19), food and drink (24.21) and honey (24.20). Honey is a particularly sensual image, evoking the 'lips of the loose woman' that 'drip honey' in Prov. 5.3, and the sensual lips of the bride in Song of Songs (4.11). Desire, like hunger and thirst, is not easily satisfied (24.21). Again, Ben Sira capitalizes on the feminine personification of wisdom to arouse desire which is, in turn, focused toward the Law: 'All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the Law which Moses commanded us as an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob' (24.23; cf. Deut. 33.4).

As in Proverbs, a close relationship exists between Sophia and the good wife. Like Sophia, the good wife is beautiful (26.16; 24.14), she brings peace (26.2; 1.18), rejoicing (26.2; 1.12), gladness (26.4; 1.11), and long life (26.1; 1.20) to 'the man who fears the Lord' (26.3; 1.13). Ben Sira, however, has much more to say about the evil wife. The evil wife is ugly (25.17), does not provide for her husband (25.18), and causes a 'dejected mind, a gloomy face, and a wounded heart' (25.23). Rather than life, she brings death (25.24). Again, as in Proverbs, the evil wife is also opposed to Sophia. For example, the evil wife is 'an ox yoke which chafes' (26.7), whereas Sophia's yoke 'is a golden ornament' (6.30); to hold fast to an evil wife is to grasp a scorpion (26.7), whereas to hold fast to Sophia brings rest and joy (6.28). Like Proverbs, the evil wife is the polar opposite of the good wife, as the fool is the polar opposite to Sophia. A personified unwise figure such as Strange Woman does not appear, however; Sophia stands alone as the only concrete locus for desire. Ben Sira will brook no competition for the Law (28.23-26).

34. Like the incense offered in worship, Sophia is sacred, acceptable and pleasing to the Lord (24.15; cf. Song 3.6; Prov. 27.9).

In summary, Ben Sira preserves the feminization and personification of wisdom found in the book of Proverbs. It also retains the opposition of good wife versus evil wife and Sophia versus unwise one found in Proverbs (19.20-23), though it does not personify Sophia's opposite as Proverbs has done. In the profoundly sensual imagery used in descriptions of feminized Sophia, Ben Sira is able to arouse sexual desire but redirects this tension and energy into finding satisfaction in the Law alone. By retaining the engendering of wisdom, he is able to use marriage language to reinforce the notion of a covenantal relationship between Israel and God's Law.

The Wisdom of Solomon

The Wisdom of Solomon, like Ben Sira which was written about one hundred years earlier,³⁵ also preserves the feminine personification of wisdom.³⁶ The presentation of Sophia is much different, however. Of the three texts studied, Sophia is described in the most extensive and elaborate way; structurally she stands importantly in the centre of the discourse.³⁷ Despite her prominence in this text, she has no voice of her own. She is silent. Likewise, erotic language is not used to describe her. The Wisdom of Solomon's Sophia does not frighten, nor does she stimulate passion. Instead, Sophia is 'de-gendered' through association with male, female and 'neuter' images. I will discuss this 'de-gendering' by exploring various images of this ambiguous figure.

The imagery used to describe Sophia in Proverbs and Ben Sira is concrete and tangible. She may be grasped and held; her aroma may be inhaled; she may be entered; her fruit may be eaten. The dominant imagery used to describe Sophia in the Wisdom of Solomon, however, is much more abstract. Her association with light imagery is particularly strong: she is radiant and unfading (6.12), clear (7.22) and a 'pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty' (7.25).

35. So Blenkinsopp, *Wisdom and Law*, p. 146; A. Wright, 'Wisdom', in R.E. Brown, J.A. Fitzmyer and R.E. Murphy (eds.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), p. 510.

36. According to Wright ('Wisdom', p. 512), the Wisdom of Solomon asserts that it is really Sophia who possesses the qualities of the pagan goddess of wisdom, Isis, and of the world soul of the Greeks.

37. See M. Stone, *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 301-13, for a full discussion of the structure of this book.

For she is more beautiful than the sun, and excels every constellation of the stars. Compared with the light she is found to be superior, for it is succeeded by the night, but against wisdom evil does not prevail (7.29).

She is also described as spirit (1.6, 7; 7.7, 22; 9.17),³⁸ and as the vapour (atmis) of the power of God (7.25). She is a 'reflection' of God (7.26). Sophia is predominately presented as ethereal in the Wisdom of Solomon compared to the more solid presentations in Proverbs and Ben Sira.

Though well developed in some aspects, Sophia is much less developed with respect to female imagery than in the other texts. For example, the text hints that she is God's daughter, for it says, 'She glorifies her noble birth by living with God, and the Lord of all loves her. For she is an initiate in the knowledge of God and an associate in his works' (8.3-4). She is also called the 'mother' of all good things (7.12). The word 'wife', however, is not found in this text, although there are several allusions to a marriage relationship. First, she is desired for a bride (8.2). Then the author writes, 'I determined to take her to live with me' (8.9). Finally,

When I enter my house, I shall find rest with her, for companionship with her has no bitterness and life with her has no pain, but gladness and joy. When I considered these things inwardly and thought upon them in my mind, that in kinship with wisdom there is immortality and in friendship with her pure delight and in the labours of her hands unailing wealth and in the experience of her company understanding and renown in sharing her words, I went about seeking how to get her for myself (8.16-18).

Like Proverbs and Ben Sira, Sophia is to be loved (6.12, 17; 8.2), sought (6.12; 8.2), and desired (6.13; 8.2). She, too, is considered more precious than treasures (7.8-12).³⁹ However, the absence of sexual imagery is remarkable in comparison with the other two texts. She is seen but not heard (6.16), present but not touched (9.10), given but not grasped (8.21). Wisdom is indeed personified with feminine pronouns

38. The Greek *pneuma* acquired specific meaning: the Platonic 'soul' of the world, the Stoic 'universal divine principle which animated and penetrated the entire universe, giving it substance and unity'; see C. Larcher, *Etudes sur le Livre de la Sagesse* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1969), p. 361.

39. See Job 28.

and images,⁴⁰ but this personification is as elusive as light, and definitely not erotic.

In addition to the feminization of wisdom, there is also an element of male engendering. First, although Sophia is personified with feminine personal pronouns, some verbs used to describe her actions are masculine. For example, 'she pervades and penetrates all things' (7.24) and 'she passes into holy souls' (7.27). Second, Sophia is clearly associated with personified Word/Logos (18.14-16):⁴¹ both Logos and Sophia are sent from the heavenly throne (9.10; 18.15); both are the means of divine punishment (1.6-9; 12.9; 18.19), healing (7.27; 16.12), sustenance (7.27; 16.26) and salvation (18.21-22; 11.1); both are the objects of desire (6.11, 13, 17); both are intricately involved in creation (9.1-2). The Logos, however, bears masculine gender traces as a 'stern warrior' who carries a 'sharp sword' (18.15). Third, masculine engendering occurs in a historical survey of the function of wisdom in Israel's history. This survey begins with Sophia as the active saving agent (last mentioned in 11.1) then it shifts to God who is described with masculine pronouns and such signifiers as father and king (11.10).⁴² Thus, Sophia fades into a male deity. Therefore, through masculine verbs and the association of Sophia with the Logos and a male deity, Sophia carries elements of masculine engendering.⁴³

One further element draws our attention to the question of gender in this text. An important aspect of Sophia, absent in the other two books, is purity (7.22-25) or holiness (1.5; 6.9-11; 7.22, 27; 8.20; 9.10, 17). For example, 'nothing defiled gains entrance into her' (7.25) and she

40. Scott (*Sophia*, p. 80) argues that Sophia is the female expression of the one God.

41. Philo identifies wisdom with logos, *Allegorical Interpretation* 1.63. H. Koester in *Introduction to the New Testament. I. History, Culture and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 188, comments: 'The term "word" (*logos*) has replaced the older term "wisdom" (*sophia*), something which also happened with Philo of Alexandria under Greek influence. Like the Jewish figure of Wisdom, the *logos* is pre-existent with God, who creates the world through him. He appears in the world as a revealing light, is not understood, but gives to those who accept him the right to become God's children.'

42. So also Larcher, *Etudes*, pp. 402-14; Winston, *Wisdom of Solomon*, p. 125.

43. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 137, suggests that Sophia as feminine was such an affront that she was reconceived as male. She cites Philo as another example of this move.

'enters into holy souls and makes them friends of God and prophets' (7.27). Chapter 3 of the *Wisdom of Solomon* gives us some indication of what is meant by these holy souls. In spite of textual difficulties in 3.9 which could be rendered either 'he watches over his chosen [eklektōis]' or 'his holy ones [osiois]',⁴⁴ two types of people are mentioned as 'blessed'. The first is the 'barren woman who is undefiled, who has not entered into a sinful union'—she will have fruit 'when God examines souls' (3.13). The second is 'the eunuch' (3.14)—his fruits are 'good labours' and 'understanding' (3.15). Both the concept of female and the concept of male are considered more blessed when they are, in a sense, de-gendered. By this, I mean that they are neither male nor female in terms of traditional sexuality for their sexuality does not produce human offspring. Theirs is a 'spiritual fertility'.⁴⁵ Sophia is analogous to these 'de-gendered' people. Like the barren woman, she is undefiled and functions at the level of souls. Like the eunuch, she is the 'mother' of all good things (7.11-12) and of understanding (8.18). Sophia is equated with those whose gender is neither fully male nor fully female.

The engendering of wisdom in this text is therefore very unstable. Feminine engendering is indicated by feminine pronouns and association with female figures. Masculine engendering is indicated by the use of masculine imagery and a close connection with the Logos and a male deity. Finally, de-gendering is indicated by Sophia's association with barren women and eunuchs. Like her substance, Sophia's gender disappears in abstraction.

Destabilizing engendered wisdom in this text, therefore, prevents concrete identification of the ever mobile Sophia (7.24). It is thus possible for her to meet every generation whose interpretation is unhindered by concrete inflexible limits⁴⁶ for 'while remaining in herself, she renews all things' (7.27). At the same time, Sophia is unknowable as an other-worldly figure—a 'person' of no fixed gender.⁴⁷ Sophia therefore remains 'a divine secret in the created world'.⁴⁸

44. Winston, *Wisdom of Solomon*, p. 129.

45. Winston, *Wisdom of Solomon*, p. 131.

46. So also R. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), p. 146.

47. Johnson ('Jesus', p. 275) argues that Sophia is 'God imaged as female acting subject'.

48. Murphy, *Tree of Life*, p. 135.

Conclusion

The engendering of wisdom takes different forms in the three texts we have considered. In the book of Proverbs, engendering divine wisdom allows it to take the role of Sophia/good wife who provides a safe and stable homelife. The religious or social other, played by Strange Woman/evil wife, described with frightening sexuality, drives young men into the arms of lawful union. Engendering shapes the metaphors and allows them to function in this discourse. In Ben Sira, wisdom is engendered in order to stir the same kind of passion for the law as one might have for a beautiful woman. In the Wisdom of Solomon, wisdom is engendered as male, female and 'other' in order to retain its mystery. It thus remains a 'riddle' to be interpreted by future generations. All texts engender wisdom in different ways with different results.

One might ask what overall effect engendering wisdom has on the notion of God. In all three texts, Sophia is strongly associated with God. Wisdom comes from God, acts with God in creation, and continues to act through providence and instruction. In many ways, Sophia is the agent of God. The association of God and Sophia, however, does not extend to equating Sophia with God; Sophia stands as an intermediary between God and humanity. For example, in the Wisdom of Solomon, Sophia is the 'breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty' (7.25). By separating the notions of God and Sophia, therefore, the feminization of wisdom does not interfere with the traditional notion of a male God of Israel. There is no conflict.

By examining these three texts which personify wisdom, and comparing the way that engendering this concept functions on a literary level, several observations may be made. First, engendering wisdom as feminine does not necessarily depend upon a social, political, religious or theological context crying out to be corrected, integrated or contained. Engendering wisdom with the use of feminine personal pronouns, female images and feminine sexual language accomplishes its purpose on a literary level alone, as I have demonstrated. However, the possibility that social, political and religious forces were behind the feminine personification of wisdom is not ruled out—as many have convincingly argued.⁴⁹ Second, engendering allows the author to speak

49. See, e.g., Winston, 'Wisdom', p. 24; Witt, *Isis*, pp. 130-35, 194-95.

about divine wisdom in ways that otherwise would not be possible. What better way to talk about security than by comparing it to the arms of a mother/good wife? What better way to illustrate passion than by stimulating it? Third, in patriarchal discourses, such as we find in these texts, feminization of this concept places wisdom in the category of the 'other'; in other words, wisdom is something outside and distinct from the self. Like a woman, the typical 'other' in patriarchal discourse, wisdom may be drawn into a relationship. Engendering wisdom therefore allows connections on a deeper, more relational, level. It is at this level that the texts wish to speak.

ABSTRACT

This paper considers the literary effect achieved through engendering divine wisdom in three texts. In the book of Proverbs, wisdom is compared to a good wife who provides a safe and stable homelife as an alternative to the frightening sexuality of alternatives. In Ben Sira, wisdom is engendered in order to stir the same kind of passion for the Law as one might have for a beautiful woman. In the Wisdom of Solomon, wisdom is engendered as male, female and 'other' in order to retain its mystery. It thus remains a 'riddle' to be interpreted by future generations. Engendering divine wisdom shapes these metaphors and allows them to function in very different ways.

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