

**THE WOMEN IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS:  
WOMAN WISDOM VERSUS WOMAN FOLLY**

**Dr. Scott Ventureyra**

**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to provide an in-depth analysis of the women in the book of Proverbs, with particular attention to the dynamics between Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly. The following themes will be explored concerning Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly: the variety of views on the origin of wisdom's personification, Woman Wisdom as portrayed throughout wisdom literature outside of Proverbs, the "strange" woman and Woman Folly, the choice between Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly in Proverbs 9, a look at the good wife/woman of strength in Proverbs 30:10-31, some theological considerations and finally some concluding remarks in an attempt to draw some threads between the multiplicity of subtopics concerning the women in Proverbs. It should be noted that although there will not be an in-depth examination of feminist interpretations there will be a mention of such methodologies throughout the paper. The bulk of this paper will focus on Proverbs 1 to 9 and 31:10-31.

**Keywords:** folly; Proverbs; wisdom; wisdom literature; woman folly; woman wisdom

**INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this paper is to provide an in-depth analysis of the women in the book of Proverbs, with particular attention to the dynamics between Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly. The following themes will be explored concerning Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly: the variety of views on the origin of wisdom's personification, Woman Wisdom as portrayed throughout wisdom literature outside of Proverbs, the "strange" woman and Woman Folly, the choice between Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly in Proverbs 9, a look at the good wife/woman of strength in Proverbs 30:10-31, some theological considerations and finally some concluding remarks in an attempt to draw some threads

between the multiplicity of subtopics concerning the women in Proverbs. It should be noted that although there will not be an in-depth examination of feminist interpretations there will be a mention of such methodologies throughout the paper.<sup>1</sup> The bulk of this paper will focus on Proverbs 1 to 9 and 31:10-31.

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

The key words for this paper's topic include woman, wisdom and folly. The conjoint of woman with both wisdom and folly will be looked at throughout the paper. The context upon which defining and researching these words and terms will be from the framework of the Old Testament. The term woman has five distinct usages and contexts that are found in the Old Testament. The word, *woman*, is a noun which signifies either "woman" or "wife."<sup>2</sup> For example, if we look at Genesis 2:22, where it is stated that woman was created after man: "And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man." This demonstrates the idea that woman is part of man not an isolated sovereign entity. Genesis 2:23b goes on to state "This one shall be called woman, for she was taken out of man." These passages are meant to delineate the personhood of both man and woman. In a more controversial light, but entirely consistent with the contexts aforementioned, although not mentioned within the Mounce's expository dictionary, is that women were viewed as the property of their husband.

A second sense points to wife. This denotes both the signification and the longevity of the institution of marriage. Moreover, that once man and woman leave their parents' family they form a stronger bond with their husband or wife than the previous filial one. Genesis 2:24 states

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<sup>1</sup> There are a series of valuable works that have been written by feminist scholars regarding the theme of Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly as found in the book of Proverbs and other wisdom literature.

<sup>2</sup> William D. Mounce, *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006), 798.

“Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.”

The third meaning is intimately involved with how a woman was to be viewed in society. The society depicted in the Old Testament, was a male dominated one.<sup>3</sup> That is to say, a patriarchal society that had very few commands directed towards women, an exception is seen in Leviticus 18:23 and 20:16. These commandments are prohibitions with respect to engaging in sexual relations with men, women and animals. Typically, within this type of patriarchal society women did not have access to men outside of their respective families. There were also protections for women that prohibited the coveting of women (Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21).<sup>4</sup>

A fourth use of the word woman is in the portrayal of Israel as a whole, belonging to the Lord, as a bride. The following passages of Isaiah 54:6, Jeremiah 3:20 and Ezekiel 16:23, depict Israel as an adulterous wife, one by which the Lord wishes to divorce because of her deceptive ways, yet, the Lord does retain His love for her (Hosea 1-3).<sup>5</sup> Similarly within the Christian tradition the Church is often used as a metaphor for being Christ’s bride.

A fifth usage is under an unusual context where the word woman denotes female animal livestock seen in Genesis 7:2.<sup>6</sup> With respect to the paper’s theme a depiction of the word woman is used in Proverbs 31:10 signifying the concept of a wife and woman, who is of a noble and wise nature. Moreover, it is also used in a negative sense to denote a wife that creates disputes (Proverbs 6:24).

Wisdom is associated to creativity, the wise, prudence, discipline, discretion, strategy, good sense and competence. Wisdom as it will be applied and correlated to the word woman will not solely be an intellectual component, but it will be inextricably linked to morality and ethical action.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mounce, *Expository Dictionary*, 798.

<sup>4</sup> Mounce, *Expository Dictionary*, 798.

<sup>5</sup> Mounce, *Expository Dictionary*, 798.

<sup>6</sup> Mounce, *Expository Dictionary*, 799.

<sup>7</sup> Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Proverbs* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2002), 30.

Folly is seen as being the opposite of wisdom<sup>8</sup>; throughout the book of Proverbs, folly is sharply contrasted to the notion of wisdom. A fool is someone who embodies the concept of folly and dislikes or even hates knowledge and does not fear the Lord (Proverbs 1:29). Some terms outlined that denote folly include ignorance, unintelligence, foolishness, stupidity, insolence and naivety.<sup>9</sup> Other synonyms associated with folly in the context of the topic include strange, foreign, evil and foolish, that are associated with Woman Folly.

## THE WOMEN IN PROVERBS

There are four “women” found throughout the book of proverbs. The most prominent woman figure is Woman Wisdom who is found in Proverbs 1:20-33; 3:3-20; 4:5-9; 7:4; 8:1-36; 9:1-6; 30:10-31; whereas her antithesis, Woman Folly, is only found in Proverbs 9:13-18; there is also someone’s wife that is mentioned in 5:5-19 and lastly the figure of the “stranger” who is found in 2:16-19; 5:1-14; 20; 6:24-32; 7:25-27.<sup>10</sup>

The most interesting dynamic in the book of Proverbs is the depiction of Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly. Woman Folly’s role is less significant than Woman Wisdom’s. It is no doubt that many questions arise with respect to these females in Proverbs. Questions arise revolving around the true role and significance they play within the text and their mysterious origins.<sup>11</sup> A deep interest is found among both exegetes and theologians because they are also found throughout some of the books of the intertestamental period, the New Testament and the early Church Fathers. Feminist theologians have also taken a great interest in both Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly, particularly Woman

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<sup>8</sup> John A. Davies, “Folly,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings* eds., Peter Enns and Tremper Longman III (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 223.

<sup>9</sup> Davies, “Folly,” 223.

<sup>10</sup> Roland Edmond Murphy, *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary 22 (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1998), 278.

<sup>11</sup> Tremper Longman III, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, eds., Peter Enns and Tremper Longman III (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 912.

Wisdom. A look into particular aspects of the thought of feminist theology with respect to the women of proverbs will be taken. Woman Wisdom (also known as lady wisdom) is a personified wisdom.<sup>12</sup> Some feminist scholars have taken this to signify a way of viewing and worshipping Yahweh within a female but still biblical form.

### **THE ORIGIN OF WISDOM'S PERSONIFICATION**

The question of the origin of the personification of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9, has been the source of much vested interest among sapiential literature scholars. There are many proposed hypotheses to explain the origin of the personification of Wisdom. Some scholars have proposed that Woman Wisdom is a personification of God's divine omniscience or that she is the personification of the wisdom that God endowed into the Universe itself.<sup>13</sup> Early Christians believed that Woman Wisdom was the second person of the Trinity; the logos.<sup>14</sup> A very common approach to discerning the origin of the personified Wisdom, was to propose that the Israelite Wisdom was an offshoot that was devised at least partially, if not entirely, from other sorts of female divinities proper to surrounding Near Eastern belief systems and cultures. Some of the possible female divinities that came to shape the Israelite Wisdom according to Elizabeth Yoder, include: "the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar, Egyptian Maat, a Hellenized form of the Egyptian goddess Isis, Asherah and an unnamed, hitherto unknown Canaanite wisdom goddess."<sup>15</sup> Yoder has suggested that the fact that there is no consensus is a sign that this approach is problematic.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> R.S. Hess, "Feminist Interpretation" in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, eds., Peter Enns and Tremper Longman III (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 208.

<sup>13</sup> Mounce, *Expository Dictionary*, 794.

<sup>14</sup> Mounce, *Expository Dictionary*, 794.

<sup>15</sup> Christine Elizabeth Yoder, *Wisdom as Woman of Substance: a Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31* (Berlin, Germany: W. De Gruyter, 2000), 40.

<sup>16</sup> Yoder, *Wisdom as Woman of Substance*, 43.

An often-cited source for the origin of this personification is the Egyptian goddess, *Maat*, a goddess of truth, order and justice.<sup>17</sup> This notion has been critiqued by Michael Fox. Fox's critique concerns the fact that there is no recorded evidence of any speech or words about *Maat*.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, this goddess never gained popularity within and outside of Egypt. Whybray has critiqued the hypothesis involving the contention that the Canaanite goddess of wisdom played an influential role in the origin of the personified Wisdom in Proverbs.<sup>19</sup> The critique involves presenting evidence of there being no known Canaanite goddess of Wisdom.<sup>20</sup>

Interestingly enough, Bernhard Lang, a scholar who has extensively researched this subject, has labelled the search for the origin of the personification of Wisdom a riddle. He is sceptical that the notion of Wisdom's personification has originated in a foreign goddess, yet, he proposes that its origins is found in an Israelite goddess.<sup>21</sup> However, Ernest Lucas suggests that such a hypothesis has practically no evidence to support it.<sup>22</sup> There has been some similitude with respect to speeches of Wisdom in Proverbs and hymns of praise regarding the goddess Isis. Yet, the worship of the goddess Isis began in the late third century B.C.E., while hymns are not accounted for until before the first century B.C.E.<sup>23</sup> Carole Fontaine pushes forward the view that perhaps a plethora of goddesses from the surrounding cultures and beliefs were in a

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<sup>17</sup> Ernest C. Lucas, "Wisdom Theology," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, eds., Peter Enns and Tremper Longman III (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 905.

Ernest C. Lucas, "Wisdom Theology", in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, eds., Peter Enns and Tremper Longman III (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 905.

<sup>19</sup> Roger Norman Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: the concept of wisdom in Proverbs 1-9* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 83-87.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 335.

<sup>21</sup> Murphy, *Proverbs*, 278.

<sup>22</sup> Lucas, "Wisdom Theology," 905.

<sup>23</sup> Lucas, "Wisdom Theology," 905.

sense co-opted to devise Woman Wisdom. In a way that is conforming to a Yahwist view of God, without diminishing patriarchal monotheism, while at the same time providing female imagery.<sup>24</sup> Lucas suggests that the explanation regarding the origin of the personification is simpler than these hypotheses imply. Lucas speculates that literary devices are at play. He proposes that something as simple as the feminine noun of wisdom in Hebrew could have led to the personification of Wisdom as female. Lucas also points out that “[a]s a literary construct, Wisdom is able to combine different roles that might never be expected to be found together in any one human person.”<sup>25</sup> Female personifications seemed to be agreeable within Israel. “Daughter Zion” would be an example of this, referring to a small hill in Jerusalem mentioned somewhat ambiguously in Zechariah 4:7. The erotic elements attributed to Woman Wisdom as seen in Proverbs 4:5-9 and 7:4 made her enticing to students. It seems that Woman Wisdom functioned as a pedagogical tool.<sup>26</sup> It is apparent that there is great uncertainty among all the differing hypotheses but the possibility that the figure of Wisdom was derived from an outside source should remain open. In order to get a fuller picture of a personified wisdom, it would be useful to examine its presentations throughout Old Testament wisdom literature. Women with respect to their roles in Israelite society embodied wisdom, (Proverbs 31:10-31) which will be explored further into the paper.

### **THE “STRANGE” WOMAN AND WOMAN FOLLY**

There are strong connections between the depiction of Woman Folly and the “strange woman” seen in proverbs 2:16, 5:3, 20; 6:24; 7:5; 20:16; 22:14; 23:27; 27:13. The character of the “strange woman” is also seen

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<sup>24</sup> Carole Fontaine, “The Personification of Wisdom”, in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, ed., J.L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 502.

<sup>25</sup> Lucas, “Wisdom Theology,” 905.

<sup>26</sup> For a fuller treatment of such notions and suppositions see: Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*. Bible and Literature Series, 11. (Decatur, Ga.: The Almond Press, 1985), 21-70.

as a foreign woman; a foreign seductive woman to be more precise. There exist a variety of different interpretations as to who this “stranger” woman is. Some of these interpretations include Bostrom’s proposition that the woman was a foreigner who was a follower of the goddess Astarte (the Greek name of a goddess from the Eastern Mediterranean who is connected with sexuality), who has her sexual cultic type role delineated in Proverbs 7.<sup>27</sup> Some understand this “stranger” woman to be an adulteress while others suggest that she was someone who came from the outside, who threatened to disrupt the orderliness of the society. Taking into consideration the encounter found in Proverbs 9, where Woman Wisdom incites an invitation to dine with her and a “stranger” woman who provides an invitation for a sexual encounter. This “stranger” woman seems to have a semblance to what we refer to as Woman Folly, she embodies the nature of a prostitute through her sexually deviant invitation but also is transcendent because of her correlation to death (9:18). These distinctions in proverbs 9 made between Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly, serve the purpose of attempting to incline youth to choose life. What about the similarities between Woman Folly and the “stranger” woman?

The ability of the “stranger” woman to “smooth talk” in Proverbs 2:16; 5:3; 6:24; 7:5, 21 which is also witnessed in 9:17 with the mention of “stolen water” and is warned against in 5:15. The mention in 9:17 “bread eaten in secret is pleasant” alludes to a sexual type of seduction. According to Murphy, there is a connection in chapter 9 between the Woman Stranger and the Woman Folly, he states that “chapter 9 suggests a symbolic identification of Woman Stranger with Woman Folly, and this figure is opposed to Wisdom.” It is interesting to note that although it is indicated in 8:22-25 that Woman Wisdom is the daughter of Yahweh and is an embodiment of virtuousness for youth to emulate, on the other hand, Woman Folly’s origin is never stated throughout Proverbs. All that we know is revealed in 9:14, 16, namely that she has a house but is on the streets to pursue the youth or those without sense.<sup>28</sup> Both Woman Folly and Stranger Woman are portrayed as opposing figures to Woman Wisdom.

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<sup>27</sup> Murphy, *Proverbs*, 281.

<sup>28</sup> Murphy, *Proverbs*, 282.

## **WOMAN WISDOM THROUGHOUT WISDOM LITERATURE**

In order to fully understand this figure of Wisdom presented in the book of Proverbs, it will be prudent to take a look at the overall context of Wisdom throughout wisdom literature. It is important to note, that particular passages within the wisdom literature have a very intimate correlation between Wisdom and God, these include the texts of Job 28; Baruch 3:9-44; Sirach 1:1-10, 24:1-33 and Wisdom of Solomon 7:1-9:18. In Job 28:12, we witness the posing of profound and insightful questions: “But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?” This passage reveals that only divine vision can discern where Wisdom lies. It does not expound any personified view of Wisdom as female. An interesting element is the fact that God does not reveal where Wisdom lies. The answer is revealed in Sirach 1:9-10 as there is a reference alluding to Job 28:27.<sup>29</sup> The response includes Wisdom being found among all living things and God’s chosen people. In Sirach, Woman Wisdom is presented as the Law (Sirach 24:23), this context is understood because of Ben Sira’s complete devotion to the Law and identifies living as such to be the truest form. We see within the book of Baruch a repetition of the question of Job 28:12 with a response that is similar to Sirach’s.<sup>30</sup> “She is the book of commandments of God, the Torah that endures forever” (Baruch 4:1). There is also the Wisdom of Solomon where there are various different views of Wisdom. Wisdom is identified as a spirit as seen in 1:6 and 7:7<sup>31</sup> and is shown to be the soul of the world, suggestive of an all-encompassing immanence. In Wisdom 7:21 and 8:6, she is depicted as being intimately involved with God in the creation of the world, very similar to Proverbs 8:30 but even more evident. Moreover, in 7:25-26, Woman Wisdom is stated to be the breath of God’s power.<sup>32</sup> The Wisdom that was absent and inaccessible in Job, is now readily accessible to all as a gift through prayer.

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<sup>29</sup> Murphy, *Proverbs*, 279.

<sup>30</sup> Murphy, *Proverbs*, 280.

<sup>31</sup> Murphy, *Proverbs*, 280.

<sup>32</sup> Murphy, *Proverbs*, 280.

A final point on Woman Wisdom's role in a post-Proverb's writings (Song of Solomon which is commonly known as Song of Songs) includes her correlation with the Strong Woman found in Proverbs 31:10-31 and Woman Wisdom in general, throughout Proverbs. Kathleen O'Connor suggests that there seems to be a reversal role between man and woman found throughout Song of Songs, which is correlative to the woman depicted in Proverbs 31.<sup>33</sup> This could be understood as referring to the central role that the woman in Proverbs 31:10-31 takes on, with respect to the household, which is likened to a dominant role. She also suggests an interesting comparison of both Wisdom Women, in Proverbs and in the Song of Songs, concerning the following verses of Song of Songs 1:1 and 6:6 with Proverbs 1:22 and 8:4; Song of Songs 3:15 and 5:2-6 with Proverbs 1:24-31; Song of Songs 7:10 and 8:14 with Proverbs 8:17. Sirach 4:12 and Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-14. O'Connor intimates an interesting perspective since many scholars have overlooked the connections between Proverbs, specifically 31:10-31 and the Woman figure in Song of Songs, she states that:

These connections suggest a poetic coloring for the love poems, an additional layer of meaning in connection with the wisdom traditions. If this interpretation is correct, not only is the sexual arena blessed as good in itself, the Song also serves as a metaphor for Wisdom's relationship with human beings. To live with Wisdom, to pursue her and to be pursued by her, is to enter into a love affair set in a garden of paradise where true human desires will be realized. It is a relationship which itself expresses the harmony and blessedness of the universe.<sup>34</sup>

## **PROVERBS 9: THE CHOICE – WOMAN WISDOM OR WOMAN FOLLY?**

It is important to note that Proverbs 9 presents a tension through inciting a choice. This tension involves an encounter between a young man

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<sup>33</sup> Kathleen O'Connor, *The Wisdom Literature* (Wilmington, Del.: M. Glazier, 1988), 81.

<sup>34</sup> O'Connor, *The Wisdom Literature*, 82.

having to choose between two women: Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly. I think it is worth mentioning a brief word on the implied reader. The implied reader of Proverbs is a young man and the discourse in Proverbs is addressed to a young man. Take for instance, the father's admonitions and advice which are directed towards "my son" in Prov. 1:8; 1:10; 1:15; 2:1; 3:1; 3:11; 3:21 and in seventeen other instances. D.A. Garrett, describes when the New Standard Revised Versions of the bible, substitute "my son" with "my child" as being "misleading and unfortunate."<sup>35</sup> He goes on to suggest that from the very nature of the person, the text is addressing young men and no other groups such as children, young women or elderly people, which determines the content of the message itself.<sup>36</sup> The point of mentioning this, is not to enter into the debate of who the implied reader of Proverbs is, but to point out that such a view is pragmatic for approaching the dynamics of both Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly. It is obvious that there are many readers beyond the implied ones and that such interpreters can come to interpret the text in different ways, than the implied reader would have. At the time, these texts and passages, were accessible to the people of the relevant time period. Indeed, there are many layers upon which texts can be interpreted. Nonetheless, such an approach of viewing the implied reader as a young man puts the Proverbs 1 to 9 and particularly Proverbs 9 into relevant context. If the text itself was to address young women, we would expect the context to be quite different.

One must keep in mind that the title of this paper contains the word "versus" which sets up a competition of sorts, a sharp contrast and dichotomy between Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly. Tremper Longman III exemplifies this dichotomy and contrast into a choice by stating: "The text is clear: he [the young man] must choose between them."<sup>37</sup> In a sense, anyone one of us can identify with the choice that the young man is presented with, that is ultimately to choose between

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<sup>35</sup> Duane A. Garrett, "Discourse in Proverbs", in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, eds., Peter Enns and Tremper Longman III (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 107.

<sup>36</sup> Garrett, "Discourse in Proverbs," 107.

<sup>37</sup> Longman, *How to Read Proverbs*, 29.

wisdom and folly. This could be couched in everyday living between what is right and what is wrong. I will present a couple of contemporary applicable examples to a modern choice that is essentially of a similar nature, at the conclusion of this paper. Needless to say, we are presented with moral decisions every day of our lives, some decisions come more instinctively or intuitively, while others require more consideration. Certain decisions do not require much introspective reflection but are more reactionary. However, at times we are presented with thought provoking moral dilemmas. This is captured within the context of the choice facing the young man in proverbs 9 since it seems at least on the surface as a choice between life and death. It is important to realize that within the context of the ancient Near East, an invitation to dine with someone, suggests great intimacy as is the case with the women of Proverbs 9.<sup>38</sup> Proverbs 9:1-2 reveals the extravagance of Woman Wisdom's meal and Proverbs 9:17 demonstrates a more treacherous scheme. The choice is revealed as being one between life and death: "But they do not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol." The text indicates that a choice must be made. The young man cannot simply choose both women, as the consequences of the choice are permanent. One inevitably leads to death as the text points out. Exclusivity is demanded by Woman Wisdom.

### **PROVERBS 31:10-31 – THE GOOD WIFE OR WOMAN WISDOM?**

Despite having witnessed an often-negative construal of women through the examples of the "stranger" woman and Woman Folly, there is also present the praise of goodness of wives (Proverbs 5:18 and 18:22). This praise culminates at the end of Proverbs in the last portion of the last chapter, namely 31:10-31. Proverbs concludes with an acrostic poem. According to Yoder, such a poem is a reflection upon the socioeconomic realities of women within the Persian period.<sup>39</sup> This poem is considered

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<sup>38</sup> Longman, *How to Read Proverbs*, 34.

<sup>39</sup> Christine Yoder, "The Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 31:10-31," *The Journal of Biblical Literature* 122 (2003): 428. This work constitutes a comprehensive study of

to be likely written by a male, for the simple fact that it would be doubtful that such a woman of high esteem, would praise herself through the writing of her own virtues.<sup>40</sup> Although, it could have been potentially written by a female observer but we do not have much evidence to conclude such a thing.

It has been a matter of dispute as to whether Proverbs 31:10-31 seems to be indicative of a good wife or Woman Wisdom.<sup>41</sup> It is suggested because of the number of things accomplished and to the degree of perfection that it is not about a wife but another depiction of Wisdom.

A useful way of looking at the poem is as a pedagogical tool for educating young men on choosing the correct wife. The woman in the text embodies strength, substance and valour. In Proverbs 18:22, we see that finding the correct wife puts one in favour of the Lord. The family is the real nuts and bolts of society. Thus, to find an appropriate wife would be one of the culminations of the demonstration of wisdom in society.

The woman portrayed in the poem, embodies wisdom along with many of its attributes. She gets up before dawn, attends to the duties of the household, makes quilts and raises her children.<sup>42</sup> As a whole what seems to be revealed from this poem is a life of joy with much merit in what is produced. It is important to note that what is revealed is not only the great virtuousness and embodiment of wisdom as seen in through the woman, but also a reflection on the marriage. In Proverbs 31:28-29, we witness the husband publicly praising his wife. The wife's ability to sustain and accomplish so much provides the husband with the freedom to excel at the city gate (31: 19, 23). The wife demonstrates a large independence with her ability to make investments without the consultation of the husband. She has great material prosperity which is

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socioeconomic contextual interpretation of the differing women figures of Proverbs particularly the good wife/Woman Wisdom found in Proverbs 31:10-31.

<sup>40</sup> Robin G. Branch, "Women," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, eds., Peter Enns and Tremper Longman III (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 921.

<sup>41</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 34.

<sup>42</sup> Branch, "Women," 921.

seen to be one of the greatest rewards of wisdom in the book of Proverbs.<sup>43</sup> The partnership of the marriage thrives because of the trust that is placed from the husband onto the wife. Moreover, his praise seems to incite her to be even more industrious, this is seen a positive feedback mechanism.<sup>44</sup> So, the husband's praise allows him to fulfill his own duties outside of the household, while in turn propels his wife to thrive more, and therefore overall, as a partnership and family. It is evident that such a woman is in fear of the Lord as mentioned in the very last verse: 31:30 – "Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised." A very interesting question arises from the placement of this poem at the very end of the book of Proverbs. Why do these verses not appear until the completion of the book of Proverbs? This poem also puts women in a positive light as opposed to the depictions seen with respect to the Woman Stranger and Woman Folly. We see the merging of the good wife with Woman Wisdom. Perhaps this is best expressed through R. G. Branch's words:

The noble wife and Woman Wisdom merge on several levels. Each is practical: each is a faithful guide and lifelong companion. Although the origin of Woman Wisdom is God (Proverbs 8:22-30), her home is the world. Although Woman Wisdom may be abstract the noble wife of Proverbs 31 is a believable, confident, real woman contributing to the needs of her community and thoroughly enjoying the life she lives. The noble wife serves as a concrete example of Woman Wisdom.<sup>45</sup>

## **THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

### ***An Interesting Proposition: God and Wisdom Transcending Gender***

What is one to make of this concurrence of Woman Wisdom with Yahweh in Proverbs 8, the apparent semblance with the Torah in Sirach 24 and the finally being consummated in the Christian tradition with

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<sup>43</sup> Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 34.

<sup>44</sup> Branch, "Women," 921.

<sup>45</sup> Branch, "Women," 921.

Jesus? On the converse, what is one to make of the leanings towards explaining Wisdom away via reference to a foreign or an Israelite goddess?<sup>46</sup> One can easily become entrenched within the disputes of whether to interpret the scriptures, with respect to this paper's topic, from the lens of the patriarchal masculine interpretation of God or through the lens of feministic revisionist work. Judith E. McKinlay, has indicated that through ascribing a gender to biblical wisdom, one will not discern its theological meaning.<sup>47</sup> In other words, the biblical God, cannot be limited to masculine nor feminine genders. It is an obvious point theologically, namely that God transcends gender, since God as a sovereign transcendent Creator is not determined by any biological, sociological or anthropological delineations. These are merely some of the tools we use to attempt to comprehend the ineffable. Much in the same way, neither can Wisdom be limited to gender assignments. The limitation or structural mode of language may be coincidental, even though the linguistics of the bible could not go beyond the limitations of patriarchalism, in terms of the masculinization of Yahweh, perhaps itself a contingent event. This is not to take away from divine inspiration but to clearly indicate the involvement of human free will in the process of writing and compiling the books of both the Old and New Testaments. Patriarchalism and its influence through scriptures was not a necessary component but happened to have developed that way. Murphy elucidates this when he states that "Wisdom is best understood as a communication of God, manifested in the world, in the Torah, and (for the Christian) in Christ: all three levels are somehow to be affirmed. Wisdom is not to be sacrificed to either patriarchalism or to feminism."<sup>48</sup> Let us examine one final theological consideration.

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<sup>46</sup> An interesting work that is worth mentioning is: Françoise Mies, "Dame Sagesse" en Proverbes 9: Une personnification féminine? ("Lady Wisdom" in Prov. 9: A Feminine Personification) *Revue Biblique* 108 (2001): 161-183.

<sup>47</sup> Judith E. McKinlay, *Gendering Wisdom the Host: Biblical Invitations to Eat and Drink* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 238-53.

<sup>48</sup> Murphy, *Proverbs*, 284.

***Who are they really - the development of a metaphor?***

Throughout this paper, we have seen evident contrasts between Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly, particularly as found in Proverbs 9. We arrive at a controversial conclusion as to who Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly are and the choice to be made. One which has been argued by biblical exegete Tremper Longman III.

Longman indicates that, in the ancient Near Eastern culture, to eat with someone is to form an intimate relationship with that person.<sup>49</sup> These women want a relationship because it is not possible to be united to both of them, they compete for attention. This is ultimately why the choice is pressing and can even be understood by modern readers - a choice needs to be made since both cannot be chosen. The choice to be made is answered through finding out what or who the two women, “really” are. Longman suggests that the key to who these two women really are, is revealed by the location of their houses.<sup>50</sup> Proverbs 9:3 reveals that Woman Wisdom’s house is located at “the highest places in the town”. In order to visualize the argument that is being made here, we must envision the world in which the text was written. During this time period, the buildings that were located at the highest point of the cities were the temples. During the context of the time, even with the Mesopotamians where the lands were typically flat, human designed mountains were where the gods were to reside. For example, in Israel, God appeared on Mt. Sinai and the people were instructed to build a home for Him on Mount Zion, similarly, in Canaan, Baal was believed to have lived on Mount Zaphon.<sup>51</sup> The location of the highest point of the city reveals that Woman Wisdom is a metaphor for Yahweh. She is not only a personification of God’s wisdom but embodies and represents the totality of God. There have been many metaphors used to describe God by His people including warrior, shepherd, father, king etc., these are not meant to reduce god to a particular metaphor but are indicators of what they represent about God for the people.<sup>52</sup> The argument goes deeper since Woman Folly rests at the heights of the city, as revealed in Proverbs 9:14. Woman Folly is argued

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<sup>49</sup> Longman, *How to Read Proverbs*, 34.

<sup>50</sup> Longman, *How to Read Proverbs*, 33.

<sup>51</sup> Longman, *How to Read Proverbs*, 33.

<sup>52</sup> Longman, *How to Read Proverbs*, 33.

to represent the false gods and goddesses taking attention away from the true God of Yahweh. It is not clear which false gods are represented by Woman Folly but a possible candidate could be the gods of Canaan – Asherah and Baal, for their alluring nature.<sup>53</sup> A brief word on these deities should be made, during this time period, gods were territorial and worshipped with respect to which one lived in. Israelites would feel the necessity to survive and be successful in new areas. Baal was the god of fertility, so during the times of drought there would be an overwhelming temptation to worship such a god. So, the choice incited by Proverbs 9, when viewed from this perspective reveals a genuine choice to be made since Yahweh is a jealous god as well. Not only that, but it is revealed in Proverbs 9:18 through Woman Folly's invitation that former guests have perished. This pushes the argument forward that those who chose to worship false gods such as Baal have died because nothing fruitful is to be gained but one's own destruction, as a result from betraying Yahweh. This message is also iterated in the narrative of 1 and 2 kings and also in Jeremiah's warnings.<sup>54</sup> The people who betrayed Yahweh were ignorant that Yahweh was in control of the rain that was necessary for the production of crops. So, in essence to turn towards Woman Wisdom, which is the embodiment of God, we are granted life and prosperity. This is true because Yahweh is the ultimate true God who controls the world and its order. To choose Woman Folly leads to one's own destruction, since such a god is a false one. This is seen within Proverbs 1:24-27, where to not choose Wisdom, there are dire consequences, where in Proverbs 1:32-33 it leads to death.

Longman admits that his conclusion is highly controversial among biblical scholars. Although many scholars would admit that Woman Wisdom in some sense stands for Yahweh's wisdom, they are extremely cautious in taking the next step, namely that she represents Yahweh himself. Longman suggests that "such denials [not seeing Woman Wisdom representing Yahweh] do not take into account the location of her house and conversely the house of Woman Folly."<sup>55</sup> A

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<sup>53</sup> Longman, *How to Read Proverbs*, 34.

<sup>54</sup> Longman, *How to Read Proverbs*, 34.

<sup>55</sup> Longman, *How to Read Proverbs*, 165.

minor difficulty that could arise is that Woman Wisdom is seen to be a creation of Yahweh (Proverbs) 8:22. Longman in his article on “Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly” provides a response to this difficulty by suggesting that one need not take a literalistic interpretation since the language is poetic.<sup>56</sup>

## CONCLUSION

There are different modes of interpretation, at different levels of reading the text. At one level the figures of Woman Wisdom, the “Stranger” Woman and Woman Folly act as pedagogical tools to instruct the youth, in particular young men and their behaviour (sexual). On the other hand, there are deeper issues such as who these women actually are and what they represent since they represent a choice between life and death. So, the book of Proverbs, in lieu of Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly, can be read at two distinct levels. The first level is one which is concrete and materialized with the offering of practical advice for daily living whereas the second level invokes a transcendent realm with the use of metaphors and personifications. This sort of realm is best exemplified with the personifications of wisdom and folly.

What can be truly affirmed from the study of the women in Proverbs? I would say that over the true nature of the women in Proverbs and origin of the personification there will be no real attainable consensus unless some irrefutable piece of evidence were to arise, but I am not sure how such a thing would even be possible. I believe that Longman’s argument concerning the nature of Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly is an interesting coherent notion that can incite further research.

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<sup>56</sup> Longman III, Tremper, “Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, eds., Peter Enns and Tremper Longman III (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 913.

We can affirm that the original implied reader was a young man, God's transcends of our linguistic limitations regarding gender, and that it could be inferred that the woman described in 31:10-31 is a strong representation of Woman Wisdom.

Some issues and questions are raised from this study which could merit further exploration. How can we come to discern wisdom and folly in today's world? What criteria would we use? The question of wisdom and folly are correlated to truth and falsity. We see these conflicts throughout the Scriptures, the controversies which also the early church fathers dealt with and throughout even more recent Christian history. Today, it manifests itself in various forms. So, are there any contemporary debates within our society that could reflect such a thing? Perhaps it could be located with the in-house Christian debates over creation, evolution, original sin and the Fall. The debates revolving around the reliability of mind necessary for scientific understanding and communication between naturalism and Christian theism. Or the more poignant and pragmatic moral theological debates revolving around abortion, same sex marriage, transgenderism, freedom of expression, euthanasia and stem cell research. It is without a doubt the figures of Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly, indeed provoke much thought into deep biblical and theological issues.

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