

PERSONIFIED WISDOM: CONTEXTS, MEANINGS, THEOLOGY

Gerlinde Baumann

1. INTRODUCTION

Wisdom appears in three Old Testament writings in a personified manner: in Prov 1–9, in Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), and in the book of Wisdom (Wisdom of Solomon).¹ In these texts, Wisdom is portrayed as a person who can speak and act. The word “wisdom” is feminine in Hebrew (Proverbs) and in Greek (Sirach; Wisdom). The personification of Wisdom is also feminine; she is therefore often called “Lady Wisdom.” The expansion of an earlier image of God, dominated by masculine aspects, to include the missing feminine side may help account for this feminine portrayal of Wisdom.² Personified

1. For recent overviews of the biblical wisdom figure, see Christl M. Maier, “Weisheit (Personifikation) (AT),” in *Das wissenschaftliche Bibellexikon im Internet* (2007): <http://www.wibilex.de>; Ilse Müllner, *Das hörende Herz: Weisheit in der hebräischen Bibel* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006), 96–121 (esp. regarding Proverbs); Irmtraud Fischer, *Gotteslehrerinnen: Weise Frauen und Frau Weisheit im Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006), 173–209; Alice M. Sinnott, *The Personification of Wisdom* (SOTSMS; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Martin Neher, *Wesen und Wirken der Weisheit in der Sapientia Salomonis* (BZAW 333; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 18–154; Peter Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 23–38 (incl. Job 28); as well as the articles by Silvia Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House: Studies in the Figure of Sophia in the Bible* (trans. Linda Maloney; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000). Older, but still relevant and readable, are especially Bernhard Lang, *Frau Weisheit: Deutung einer biblischen Gestalt* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1975) (almost only Proverbs); as well as Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 189–228 (also for wisdom theology as a whole).

2. According to Fischer, *Gotteslehrerinnen*, 171, the portrayal of Wisdom next to God demonstrates that postexilic monotheism is forced to be open to nonmasculine images of God: “If there is only one single deity, it must unite everything within itself and integrate all functions of all deities, masculine and feminine, into the image of God.”

Wisdom appears in different social and literary contexts and can be viewed as one of the most fascinating literary creations of the Bible,³ especially in relation to the question of a feminine image of God.

This essay does not include wisdom in Job 28 and in Bar 3:9–4:4 because in these texts wisdom is not personified, but appears as an entity without personal characteristics.⁴ Likewise, this is not the place for more detailed remarks about the image of wisdom outside the Old Testament writings—in other words, in Jewish and Christian postbiblical texts.⁵

In biblical exegesis the consensus is that the image of Wisdom is a poetic personification.⁶ Personification is a subgenre of the poetic form of the metaphor and originates through an interaction between a “source” and a “target.”⁷ The target is personified Wisdom herself. The source cannot be so clearly identified. Theoretically, concrete women (those of flesh and blood) or even God, gods, or goddesses could be sources. Since personified Wisdom is a figure of the divine sphere, she should also be analyzed as such.⁸ For personified Wisdom, however—as with the imagery of God—the reference to the concrete world is a broken one. Therefore, actual women as a source⁹

3. See Sinnott, *Personification*, 177: “Indisputably, Wisdom is the Bible’s most fascinating literary figure.”

4. See, e.g., Marie-Theres Wacker, “Baruch: Mail from Distant Shores,” in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature* (ed. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 531–38, here 533. She also points out that wisdom in Job 28 and in Baruch is confusing, unapproachable, and remains “in terms of syntax and semantics the object of God.” A similar opinion is held by Sinnott, *Personification*, 173–74; she nevertheless treats the texts in her monograph.

5. See, e.g., Maier, “Weisheit,” §§1.1.5. and 2.2.1, with references to further texts and literature.

6. Lang, *Frau Weisheit*, 168–71, was the first to formulate this theory clearly. For recent German feminist-theological studies, see, e.g., Maier, “Weisheit,” §1.1.; Susanne Gorges-Braunwarth, *Frauenbilder—Weisheitsbilder—Gottesbilder in Spr 1–9: Die personifizierte Weisheit im Gottesbild der nachexilischen Zeit* (Exegese in unserer Zeit 9; Münster: LIT, 2002), 92–97; Gerlinde Baumann, *Die Weisheitsgestalt in Proverbien 1–9: Traditionsgeschichtliche und theologische Studien* (FAT 16; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 27–37; as well as Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House*, 26–68, esp. 26–30.

7. Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House*, 26; important impulses from the English discussion were provided primarily by Claudia Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Bible and Literature 11; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1985), 73.

8. See also Gerlinde Baumann, *Love and Violence: Marriage as Metaphor for the Relationship between YHWH and Israel in the Prophetic Books* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003), 31.

9. This position is held primarily by Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House*, 52–68, as

are less likely; instead, we must look to already existing images of the God of Israel as well as those goddesses known in Israel at the time. In order to trace the meaning of personified Wisdom more exactly, these ideas should also be examined.

2. PERSONIFIED WISDOM IN PROVERBS 1–9

2.1. TEXT AND CONTENT

In the book of Proverbs, we find probably the oldest wisdom texts in the Bible; chapters 10–29 likely originate for the most part from the time of the monarchy. They contain mostly wisdom sayings gained from experience about appropriate behavior in different life situations. Chapters 1–9 introduce the book. “Wisdom” is mentioned in almost all of these nine chapters. But not all verses denote *person.fied* Wisdom. Most important are the texts in which she herself speaks: Prov 1:20–33; Prov 8; and Prov 9:1–9; as a person, she also appears in Prov 3:16–17; 4:6, 8–9; 7:4; 9:11.¹⁰

In her first-person speeches, personified Wisdom is positioned at the city gate (Prov 1:20–21; 8:1–3) and thus in a public location in which trading is done and where the local court holds its sessions. In the first speech (Prov 1:22–33) personified Wisdom resembles a prophetess. However, she declares her own message and not the word of YHWH. She warns her audience to heed her words and not to remain in a situation of inexperience. In the second and longest speech in Prov 8, personified Wisdom primarily praises herself. Here she appears at first (Prov 8:4–11) as the bringer of wisdom and knowledge. In Prov 8:12–21, she is described more closely from a number of different aspects: She is the counselor of the powerful; she loves those who love her, and she allows herself to be found by those who seek her; she promises her followers material wealth, and she walks on the path of law and justice. Probably the most well-known passage is the third part of this chapter: In

well as by Christine Roy Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman cf Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1–9 and 31:10–31* (BZAW 304; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001).

10. Regarding personified Wisdom in Prov 1–9, see Christl M. Maier, “Proverbs: How Feminine Wisdom Comes into Being,” in Schottroff and Wacker, *Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 255–72; Baumann, *Weisheitsgestalt*, as well as the English summary of her monograph, “A Figure with Many Facets: The Literary and Theological Functions of Personified Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9,” in *Wisdom and Psalms* (ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole R. Fontaine; FCB 2/2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 44–78; Carole R. Fontaine, “Proverbs,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; 2nd ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 153–60; Bernhard Lang, *Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs: A Hebrew Goddess Redefined* (New York: Pilgrim, 1986); Camp, *Wisdom*.

Prov 8:22–31 personified Wisdom introduces herself as the one who was born before God's creation, and plays as his "favorite" (Heb. חַסֵּד)¹¹ in the presence of God. The book of Proverbs is not any clearer in its description of the relationship between personified Wisdom and God. In the following verses (Prov 8:32–36), personified Wisdom praises those who follow her and threatens those who do not. In Prov 9:1–9, she finally appears as a lady who invites all those who pass by to her banquet in her palace. This text passage corresponds to Prov 9:13–18, a section in which her antagonist, the "strange woman" or "Lady Folly" (see below §2.2.), speaks.

2.2. CONTEXT AND MEANING

Feminist-exegetical research on personified Wisdom still focuses on the book of Proverbs. Most researchers argue that personified Wisdom in Prov 1–9 is to be seen as a poetic personification and not as a hypostasis of God or as an allusion or "citation" of an ancient Near Eastern or ancient Egyptian goddess.¹² There is little disagreement about the argument that the introduction to the book of Proverbs (Prov 1–9), including personified Wisdom, is a creation of members of the urban upper class of the postexilic era (fifth/fourth century BCE). Their situation is not mainly characterized by economic problems, but rather by religious or ideological questions: Who is really Israelite and who is not? Which behavior is proper for this community? Answers to these questions are given with regard to the figure of the "strange woman" in Prov 1–9.¹³ She is the negative antagonist of personified Wisdom. The "strange woman" more strongly exhibits characteristics of concrete women of flesh and blood than personified Wisdom does. Thus in Prov 1–9 there is a constellation in which the negatively classified behavior of actual women in the form of the "strange woman" is juxtaposed with the positive figure of personified Wisdom, who exhibits very few characteristics of concrete women. As a result, some feminist exegetes warn against evaluating personified Wisdom in Prov 1–9 only as positive, perhaps as an important "symbol of connectedness" or even

11. For this interpretation, see Othmar Keel, *Die Weisheit spielt vor Gott: Ein ikonographischer Beitrag zur Bedeutung des m^sahāqāt in Sprüche 8,3cf.* (Fribourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974); cf. Baumann, *Weisheitsgestalt*, 4–41.

12. See the research overview of Gorges-Braunwarth, *Frauenbilder*, 4–64; and Baumann, *Weisheitsgestalt*, 4–41.

13. See especially Christl Maier, *Die 'fremde Frau' in Proverbien 1–9: Eine exegetische und sozialgeschichtliche Studie* (OBO 144; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995); see as well her essay in the current volume.

the “future of feminist spirituality”¹⁴—as this is only one side of the coin, the other side of which devaluates the behavior of actual women.¹⁵ Likewise, personified wisdom may also be interpreted as the “advertiser for the dominant male culture”:¹⁶ she served to press women and men into patriarchal societal structures that made women heavily dependent on their husbands and forced them to adjust to rigid patriarchal standards and morals.

The other question connected to personified Wisdom is whether or how she could have been derived from one of the numerous contemporary goddesses in Israel and its environment.¹⁷

Aspects of goddesses which may have contributed to the image of personified wisdom are: the first-person speech of personified wisdom in Prov 1:22–33 that resembles the first-person speech of the Egyptian Isis; wisdom as giver of life and protection in Prov 3:16–18 as close to the Egyptian goddess Ma’at; wisdom as the tree of life in Prov 3:18 takes up a Mesopotamian motif; Prov 4:6 with wisdom as a lover resembles Ma’at; the first-person speech of personified wisdom in Prov 8:4–36 has parallels in speeches of Isis, the Egyptian deities Heqet and Shu as well as the speech of Pharaoh Ramesses II; wisdom’s portrayal as the power behind the throne in Prov 8:15–16 resembles Ma’at or a Syrian-Canaanite goddess; the motif of wisdom as a lover and loved one in Prov 8:17, 20–21, 30 and 7:4 parallels again Ma’at; the fruit of wisdom in Prov 8:19 takes up Mesopotamian notions; the pre-existence of wisdom in Prov 8:22 can be compared to Ma’at as well as to the Ba’al epic; the creation of the world in Prov 8:24–25 comes close to Ugaritic texts; the playful wisdom in Prov 8:30 has parallels in the Syrian-Canaanite region, as well

14. According to the title and headings in Susan Cady et al., eds., *Sophia: The Future of Feminist Spirituality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

15. See Gerlinde Baumann, “‘Zukunft feministischer Spiritualität’ oder ‘Werbefigur des Patriarchats’? Die Bedeutung der Weisheitsgestalt in Prov 1–9 für die feministisch-theologische Diskussion,” in *Von der Wurzel getragen: Christlich feministische Exegese in Auseinandersetzung mit Antijudaismus* (ed. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker; BibIntS 17; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 135–52.

16. So Fokkeli van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (BibIntS 1; Leiden: Brill, 1993), 58–62, 54; for a similar tone, see Carol A. Newsom, “Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1–9,” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (ed. Peggy L. Day; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 142–60; Mieke Korenhof, “Spr. 8,22–31: Die ‘Weisheit’ scherzt vor Gott,” in *Feministisch gelesen* (ed. Eva R. Schmidt et al.; Stuttgart: Kreuz, 1988), 1:118–26.

17. Sinnott lists further goddesses discussed in current research (*Personification*, 171). Lang, *Wisdom*, 129, sees parallels between personified wisdom and the Sumerian Nisaba as well as the Egyptian Seshat, two scribal goddesses. For an overview of the discussion (until 1994) and the methodical problems of the results to date in religious-historical research, see also Baumann, *Weisheitsgestalt*, 13–27.

as Ma'at, Hathor and the "goddess of play;" Prov 8:31 with wisdom close to humanity again resembles Ma'at.¹⁸

As this list demonstrates, it is Ma'at, the Egyptian goddess of justice and world order who is primarily discussed as a prototype for personified Wisdom.¹⁹ There are, however, a number of reasons that speak against Ma'at as the only "model": For one, the content-based connection between personified wisdom and Ma'at is not close enough to assume that the image of personified wisdom is based on Ma'at; for another, Ma'at has no myth and does not speak herself.²⁰ In addition, there are a number of other goddesses as possible prototypes in the world surrounding Israel.²¹ Therefore it is questionable whether personified Wisdom in Prov 1–9 was derived only from Ma'at and whether Ma'at has to be seen in the strict sense as a "model" for personified Wisdom.

2.3. PERSONIFIED WISDOM AND GOD IN PROVERBS

In Proverbs, the depiction of personified Wisdom is fed primarily by two sources: That Wisdom can be imagined as a feminine figure at all undoubtedly has to do with the fact that in the ancient Near Eastern world of ancient Israel there were a large number of goddesses, to some of whom an enormous amount of power was attributed. As a figure of the heavenly sphere, personified Wisdom certainly integrates facets of ancient Near Eastern goddesses; it is not possible, however, to explicitly identify them.²² It is possible, though, to precisely identify a number of references to religious traditions of ancient Israel that can be found in the image of personified Wisdom as regards content. Primarily, these are references to prophetic texts (mostly Jeremiah) as well as the Priestly creation narrative (Gen 1:1–2:4a).²³ Based on these traditions, a figure is formed that is closely linked to the image of God in postexilic

18. For the source references, see Baumann, *Weisheitsgestalt*, 26–27.

19. For this thesis based on texts, see Christa Kayatz, *Studien zu Prov. 1–9: Eine form- und motivgeschichtliche Untersuchung unter Einbeziehung ägyptischen Vergleichsmaterials* (WMANT 22; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1966), based on iconographic sources, see Keel, "Weisheit." For the Egyptian Ma'at (without reference to biblical wisdom), see Jan Assmann, *Ma'at: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im Alten Ägypten* (Munich: Beck, 1990).

20. For this argument, see Burton L. Mack, *Logos und Sophia: Untersuchungen zur Weisheitstheologie im hellenistischen Judentum* (SUNT 10; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973), 38.

21. See Baumann, *Weisheitsgestalt*, 24–25.

22. In contrast to Silvia Schroer; see her essay in the present volume.

23. See, among others, Baumann, *Weisheitsgestalt*, 145–46; Michaela Bauks and Gerlinde Baumann, "Im Anfang war...? Gen 1,1ff und Prov 8,22–31 im Vergleich," *Biblische*

Israel.²⁴ Personified Wisdom was already present before the creation of the world; she was created by God and is therefore a figure of the divine sphere.²⁵ A number of aspects contribute to the image of God in postexilic Israel: First, the Wisdom figure adds femininity to the divine, not only because *she herself* is a feminine personification but also due to the fact that she was given birth by *God* (Prov 8:24–25). Second, she is a mediator between God and humanity; she delivers to humanity the knowledge of the divine idea of inherent order in creation.²⁶ In this way, personified Wisdom in Proverbs is an extension of or even a breakthrough in ancient Israelite monotheism: When personified Wisdom enters the divine sphere, God is no longer the only being in this sphere. In a more subtle way, personified Wisdom transmits concepts of feminine and masculine behavior, primarily in her comparison to the “strange woman” or “Lady Folly” in Prov 1–9.

Personified Wisdom in Proverbs is also a figure through which the knowledge of the divine as well as human wisdom is to be passed on to the next generation. In the Old Testament, she is the first more-developed feminine figure of the divine sphere that is positively connoted and finds her origins (in parts) in Israel itself. As she was already with God before creation, she knows the deepest secrets of the world. Based on her connection to the “strange woman,” it is questionable whether she could be received as a liberating figure for women in the respective time period.

3. PERSONIFIED WISDOM IN THE BOOK OF SIRACH (ECCLESIASTICUS)

3.1. TEXT AND CONTENT

The book of Sirach (Jesus Ben Sira, Ecclesiasticus) like the book of Proverbs contains individual sayings or groups of sayings with teachings about actual life situations. Other than Proverbs—and for the first time in Israelite wisdom tradition—the book also refers explicitly to historical traditions

Notizen 71 (1994): 24–52; Scott L. Harris, *Proverbs 1–9: A Study of Inner-Biblical Interpretation* (SBLDS 150; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 67–109.

24. Contrary to Yoder's thesis in *Wisdom*, 111. For her, the “woman of strength” in Prov 31:10–31 and personified Wisdom in Prov 1–9 are one and the same figure, based on genuine descriptions of women's life. Yoder does not fully consider the characteristics of personified Wisdom, which bring the figure very close to God.

25. The texts are intentionally vague about the relationship between God and Wisdom. Marie-Theres Wacker formulates rightly that “wisdom literature throughout leaves a certain ‘free space’ between God and wisdom (cf. Prov 8:30!)” (Wacker, “Baruch,” 534).

26. This is especially emphasized by von Rad, *Wisdom*, 144–76, esp. 175, in his formulation of personified Wisdom as a “self-revelation of creation.”

of Israel (primarily in Sir 44:1–50:24).²⁷ Personified Wisdom appears in all parts of Sirach and therefore plays an important role for the entire writing.²⁸ Conspicuously, larger text passages at the beginning, middle, and end of the book are dedicated to her. She appears right in the introduction in Sir 1:1–27. In Sir 24:3–22 (with vv. 1–2 as introduction) she gives a long speech in which she praises herself. This chapter forms the book's center and connects the two halves. In an appendix, personified Wisdom is again praised by the wisdom teacher and author of the book (Sir 51:13–26). Additionally, there are three wisdom poems in the book (Sir 4:11–19; 6:18–37; 14:20–15:10).

In Sir 1:1–27 the author introduces personified Wisdom: As in Prov 8:22–31, she was created before the world, and as in Job 28 she can be perceived through the order of the world. Beyond and before all wisdom, however, is God, and only God is truly wise; he created and conceived Wisdom and confers her to God-fearing men and women. Primarily in Sir 1:10–20, personified Wisdom is closely connected to the “fear of God” (similar to Prov 1:7; 8:13; 9:10; Ps 111:10; Job 28:28). In Sir 1:26, the connection of (personified) Wisdom with divine instruction (Heb., *תורה*; Gk., *νόμος*) is clearly pronounced: “If you desire wisdom, keep the commandments, and the Lord will lavish her upon you” (NRSV).²⁹ This statement is emphasized by the identification of wisdom and torah in Sir 24:23.

Sirach 4:11–19 highlights the love for personified Wisdom: serving her is equivalent to serving God, and whoever loves her will be loved by God (v. 14). In this section (according to the Hebrew text tradition), personified Wisdom herself speaks in five verses. In 4:19, she even warns her followers and threat-

27. See Nuria Calduch-Benages, “The Absence of Named Women from Ben Sirach's Praise of the Ancestors,” in *Rewriting Biblical History: Essays on Chronicles and Ben Sirach in Honor of Pancratius C. Beenijes* (ed. Jeremy Corley and Harm van Grol; Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Studies 7; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 301–17.

28. As far as I know, there is no feminist-theological study dedicated only to personified Wisdom in Sirach. Still recommendable is the monograph by Johannes Marböck, *Weisheit im Wandel: Untersuchungen zur Weisheitstheologie bei Ben Sirach* (2nd ed.; BZAW 272; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999). See also Nuria Calduch-Benages, ed., *El Libro de Ben Sirach (Sirácida o Eclesiástico)* (Reseña Bíblica 41; Estella: Verbo Divino, 2004), esp. 27–36. In feminist exegesis, personified Wisdom in Sirach is treated in overview articles; see Angelika Strotmann, “Sirach (Ecclesiasticus): On the Difficult Relations between Divine Wisdom and Real Women in an Androcentric Document,” in Schottroff and Wacker, *Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 539–54; Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House*, 84–97; see also Ibolya Balla, *Ben Sirach on Family, Gender, and Sexuality* (Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Studies 8; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011).

29. A similar statement can be found in Sir 6:37; see Strotmann, “Sirach (Ecclesiasticus),” 549.

ens them (cf. Prov 1:22–33). On the other hand, Sir 6:18–37 emphasizes the relationship between personified Wisdom and education, that is, the teacher’s judgment or advice. Such instruction is highly praised and is described, among other things, as a precious crown (6:31), which, like wisdom, must be achieved. In Sir 14:20–15:10, personified Wisdom acts like a rich woman who lives in a house, and to whom one should try to be near; in Sir 15, she is compared to a mother, a young bride, or a wife. Whoever approaches her finds happiness and a crown of rejoicing (Sir 15:6). Personified Wisdom is thus portrayed like the girlfriend of a young man, and his approach to her is described in erotic or sexual metaphors.³⁰

In another way, personified Wisdom in Sir 24:1–22 speaks of herself in a style similar to the Hellenistic genre of aretalogy, a form of sacred biography.³¹ Similar to Sir 1, she emphasizes that she was created by God, but then underlines her connections to Israelite history. Like a queen, she wanders through the world and seeks for a place to live, which she then finds with God’s help in Jacob or Israel. She lives in Jerusalem and serves before God like a priestess in the holy tent. She compares herself to different trees that offer their fruits to those who approach them. Sirach 24 is a text in which numerous allusions to Old Testament traditions are found and which proves the high, almost divine position of personified Wisdom. She remains, however, clearly subordinated to God: He created her, he allows her to live in Jerusalem, and she serves him in the cult.

At the end of the book of Sirach, the wisdom teacher once again praises personified Wisdom in Sir 51:13–26. In this passage, the teacher looks back on his life with Wisdom as a companion and also uses erotic metaphors: As a young man, he sought her as he would search for a girlfriend or wife, and he found her. Finally, this hymn to Wisdom aims at elating the students for the wisdom teacher’s “house of instruction” (51:23).

3.2. CONTEXT AND MEANING

The book of Sirach was presumably written in the second century BCE by an educated wise man named Jesus ben Sira who lived in Jerusalem and may have been a priest. His grandson translated the text into Greek. The Greek

30. For the erotic and sexually explicit language in Sirach and the wise man’s relationship to personified Wisdom, see the summary in Balla, *Ben Sira*, 226–28; Balla often notes that the Greek translation of Sirach weakens the erotic content (230).

31. For the aretalogies of Isis, see Silke Petersen, *Brot, Licht und Weinstock: Intertextuelle Analysen johanneischer Ich-bin-Worte* (NovTSup 127; Leiden: Brill, 2008), esp. 184–99.

version³² is the basis for most of the exegetical work on the book of Sirach, although the Hebrew text is older (though it only has survived in fragments).

Compared to the time when Proverbs was written, the overall situation has changed significantly: On the one hand, the issue of “foreignness” in Israel is apparently not so important anymore; on the other hand, Hellenism now significantly influences the culture of Israel. In his book of wisdom, Sirach attempts to connect Israelite and Hellenistic traditions with each other.

Relevant for the interpretation of personified Wisdom are Sirach’s androcentrism and his hostility toward women, as Silvia Schroer points out.³³ The positive representation of personified Wisdom contrasts with the negative representation of actual women; here Sirach partially reiterates the contrast between personified Wisdom and the “strange woman” in Prov 1–9. While Wisdom praises herself in Sir 24, there are numerous verses immediately following in Sir 25–26 that speak quite negatively about women. Here as well, the description of the extremely positive figure of personified Wisdom is coupled with a degradation of concrete women. Other than at the end of Proverbs (31:10–31),³⁴ there is no figure in Sirach that integrates both aspects.

In her interpretation, Angelika Strotmann emphasizes that personified Wisdom in Sirach is based to a large extent on personified Wisdom from Proverbs.³⁵ Both extend an invitation to a meal (Prov 9:1–6; Sir 15:2–3; 24:19–21), speak like a prophetess (Prov 1:20–33; Sir 4:19), and talk about their “fruits” (Prov 8:19; Sir 24:19–21).³⁶ In addition, both are closely bound to the fear of God (Prov 8:13; Sir 1:10–20); they are filled with love for humanity and are loved in return (Prov 8:17, 21; Sir 24:18; 51:19–20). Strotmann also takes a position in the frequently discussed question of whether personified Wisdom in Sirach, in comparison to Proverbs, has a less universalistic profile (i.e., directed toward humanity). Personified Wisdom in Sirach is much more closely connected to Israel, with the fear of God, the torah, and the commandments.³⁷ Strotmann points out (in my opinion correctly)

32. There are two Greek versions, a longer (G II) and a shorter one (G I). In most cases, the shorter one is the basis for modern Bible translations, which is why the reference point in the following is the shorter version.

33. Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House*, 85–89; see also Nuria Calduch-Benages’s essay in this volume.

34. Regarding the “woman of strength,” see in addition to the work of Yoder, *Wisdom*, also Katrin Brockmüller, “Eine Frau der Stärke—wer findet sie?” *Exegetische Analysen und intertextuelle Lektüren zu Spr 31,10–31* (BBB 147; Berlin: Philo, 2004), as well as Tamara Cohn Eskenazi’s essay in this volume, §3.4.

35. Strotmann, “Sirach (Ecclesiasticus),” 539–54, 548.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, 548 and 551–52.

that personified Wisdom in Sirach—compared with Proverbs—is linked to additional aspects of Israelite theology, which are embedded in a larger context, because Sirach strives for a synthesis between Israelite and Hellenistic thought. In some respects, Sirach adopts Hellenistic concepts, while he rejects them in other areas. He writes against a universalistic background in which the message of Israel's God is directed to all peoples. Therefore, the identification with the torah does not represent any limitations for personified Wisdom, but exactly the opposite, namely an expansion. Moreover, the representation of personified Wisdom oscillates between Hellenistic thinking and the closeness to the aretalogies of Egyptian-Hellenistic Isis³⁸ on the one side and—compared to Proverbs—the connection to a larger breadth of Israelite tradition on the other side: Personified Wisdom in the book of Sirach seems to be both—she is unquestionably Israelite, but at the same time connected to Hellenistic thinking.

The latter is due to parallels between personified wisdom, primarily in Sir 24, and the Hellenistic Isis, not only based on the joint literary genre of the aretalogy but also through the polymorphism³⁹ of both figures. The parallels also stretch across individual aspects of her representation. The proposition of Hans Conzelmann that Sir 24:3–6(7) is “nothing other than a practically literal copy of a song to Isis, which is only retouched in one or two places”⁴⁰ has been widely approved in research. According to Conzelmann, personified Wisdom and Isis share many aspects: they both emerge from the mouth of God, wander around the earth in an act of creation, and rule the cosmos. Both figures serve as overseer of the world, goddess of the seas, and ruler of destiny. For other passages from Sir 24, Conzelmann also names the closeness to the law (Sir 24:23) and to the cult (Sir 24:10).⁴¹ Burton L. Mack specifies the parallels between Isis and personified Wisdom with regard to the motif “circulation, descent and search for a dwelling place,” the close

38. For the parallels between Isis and personified Wisdom in Sirach (and in the Wisdom of Solomon), Mack, *Logos*, 38, has already pointed out: “Maat is a mythical figure, but does not have a myth herself; she never speaks in monologues and lacks the sexual characteristics of wisdom. All these features apply to the goddess Isis. ... Because Isis has a myth, she is closely related to the word, and probably also lended wisdom the sexual characteristics.” See also John S. Kloppenborg, “Isis and Sophia in the Book of Wisdom,” *HTR* 75 (1982): 57–84.

39. Maier, “Weisheit,” refers to this feature in §1.2.4.

40. Hans Conzelmann, “Die Mutter der Weisheit,” in *Zeit und Geschichte: Dankesgabe an Rudolf Bultmann zum 80. Geburtstag* (ed. Erich Dinkler; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1964), 225–34, here 228; Mack, *Logos*, 40, shares this opinion.

41. Conzelmann, “Mutter,” 232–33.

relationship to the word, the sexual characteristics, and the overall mythological representation.⁴²

An argument against the close relationship between Isis and personified Wisdom seemed for a long time to be the dating of the Isis aretologies and texts on the Hellenistic Isis to the post-Christian era.⁴³ If one assumes, however, that these texts only mark the end point of a longer development, then the close relationship between personified Wisdom and Isis is quite possible.⁴⁴ In addition, personified Wisdom, with her invitation to refresh her follower with her fruits (Sir 24:19–21), to nourish, and to provide shade (Sir 24:13–22), could have been inspired, according to Schroer, by a Near Eastern tree goddess.⁴⁵ In the tree metaphor in Sir 24:13–22, one can also discern—as with a number of other previously observed aspects—an Israelite tradition, which Schäfer refers to in the following: “Wisdom is like everything beautiful and delightful that has ever been promised in the Bible, like all the famous trees and fragrances, not least like the odor of incense in the Temple.”⁴⁶

3.3. PERSONIFIED WISDOM AND GOD IN SIRACH

Compared to the introduction of Proverbs, how has the relationship between personified Wisdom and God changed two or three centuries later in the book of Sirach? Schroer and Strotmann stake out two opposing positions in German exegesis. In Schroer’s view, personified Wisdom in Sirach, in comparison to Proverbs, is more strongly limited; she is clearly subordinated to the God of Israel and a kind of priestly mediator. The love of Wisdom is limited in two ways: First, it consists mainly of keeping the commandments; second, Wisdom acts only in Israel and in the Jerusalem temple.⁴⁷

Strotmann considers the relationship between personified Wisdom and God in a somewhat different light. She emphasizes texts such as Sir 4:14, in

42. According to Mack, *Logos*, 38–42; the last-named aspect is already noticed by Conzelmann, “Mutter,” 234.

43. According to Lang, *Frau Weisheit*, 152–54.

44. See also Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty*, 38.

45. Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House*, 91–92, points to the Canaanite tree goddess as well as to the Egyptian tree goddess. See her more detailed discussion in “Die Zweiggöttin in Palästina/Israel: Von der Mittelbronze II B-Zeit bis zu Jesus Sirach,” in *Jerusalem: Texte—Bilder—Steine: Zum 100. Geburtstag von Hildi und Othmar Keel-Leu* (ed. Max Küchler and Christoph Uehlinger; NTOA 6; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), 201–25, esp. 218–21, and her article in the present volume (§3.1).

46. Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty*, 31.

47. According to Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House*, 94–95.

which personified Wisdom and God almost merge with each other. She also discovers parallels between the search for God according to Deut 6:5 and the search for wisdom according to Sir 6:26; in the end, both grant the seekers peace (Sir 6:28; Deut 12:9–10).⁴⁸ Gottfried Schimanowski points to further parallels between personified Wisdom in Sirach and God: The “high places” (Sir 24:4a) are not only the residence of Wisdom but also the residence of God; the “throne on a pillar of cloud” (Sir 24:4b) is, according to Exod 13:21; 14:19, also the place where God appears.⁴⁹ The areas of the world named in Sir 24:5–6 are not accessible to humans, but rather only to God—and Wisdom.⁵⁰ When Wisdom in Sir 24:8 lives in Zion and in Sir 24:9 stays there for all eternity, she takes God’s dwelling place in Old Testament tradition.⁵¹ Besides this near identification or equal status of God and personified Wisdom,⁵² there are also texts in Sirach in which personified Wisdom is clearly subordinated to God. For the latter, Strotmann refers to the creation of personified Wisdom by God (Sir 1:1–27; cf. Sir 24:3), Wisdom’s obedience to God’s commands (Sir 24:8–9), and her service before God in the temple (Sir 24:10).⁵³

Personified Wisdom in Sirach thus appears on the one hand as a figure who exhibits characteristics of great independence and high authority and on the other hand as one who is partially subordinated to God. Schäfer summarizes this ambiguity in arguing that personified Wisdom, as a creation of God, is not God, but is “nevertheless God’s representative on earth.”⁵⁴ Her activities in Israel and in the temple do not limit her outreach since Jerusalem is now seen as the center of the world, to which all peoples relate in their faith. Personified Wisdom in Sirach and in Proverbs have in common that they are based on Old Testament traditions and ancient Near Eastern goddesses. In Sirach, however, the links to the Egyptian-Hellenistic Isis are much clearer than those to Ma’at in Prov 1–9. Personified Wisdom in Sirach differs from personified Wisdom in Prov 1–9 through her identification with the torah as well. In addition, there is a stronger polarization in Sirach than in Proverbs between the positive Wisdom figure on the one side, with which the

48. Strotmann, “Sirach (Ecclesiasticus),” 549.

49. See Gottfried Schimanowski, *Weisheit und Messias: Die jüdischen Voraussetzungen der urchristlichen Präexistenzchristologie* (WUNT 17; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985), 50.

50. *Ibid.*, 51–52.

51. *Ibid.*, 54.

52. Strotmann, “Sirach (Ecclesiasticus),” 550, regarding Sir 14–15: “Wisdom seems to be YHWH himself.”

53. *Ibid.*, 551.

54. Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty*, 30.

addressees should cultivate a close relationship, and the negatively depicted concrete women on the other.

4. PERSONIFIED WISDOM IN THE BOOK OF WISDOM (WISDOM OF SOLOMON)

4.1. TEXT AND CONTENT

The book of Wisdom (Sapientia; Wisdom of Solomon) attempts—like the book of Sirach—to create a synthesis of Israelite and Hellenistic thought. The reader is instructed or courted by a single person to turn toward the wisdom of Israel. The book’s speaker is clothed, however, not only in Israelite but also in Hellenistic robes; in Wis 9:7–8 he claims to be King Solomon.

In the book of Wisdom, personified Wisdom plays an even more important role than in Proverbs or in Sirach.⁵⁵ Wisdom is the dominant figure in the first part (Wis 1:1–11:1) and appears at least implicitly in all other parts. The “encomium,” or hymn, on wisdom in Wis 6:22–11:1 with the transitional section 6:12–21 talk explicitly about her.⁵⁶ “Solomon” praises the advantages of wisdom in life, and even asks God for the gift of wisdom (7:7–22a; cf. 8:21–18). This song of praise culminates in a hymn to wisdom, her being, and her works (7:22b–8:1). Wisdom was also at work in Israel’s history (10:1–11:1). Because of these qualities, “Solomon” wants to win her as a bride and spend his life with her (8:2–20).

In these passages, wisdom entails a large variety of aspects, many of which we have already seen in Proverbs and in Sirach. The topic of justice is important in the book of Wisdom (Wis 1:1–15); in addition, personified Wisdom is identified with the power behind the throne (Wis 6:20–21): She is the one who rules and guides the rulers (cf. Prov 8:15–16). Personified Wisdom was already present at the beginning of creation (Wis 6:22), at the creation of the world (Wis 9:9), and knows all of creation, because she is the “master crafts-woman” or “creator” (Gk. *τεχνίτις*; Wis 7:21) of all things. Thus personified Wisdom appears as God’s co-creator. In Wis 9:4, she can be designated as *πάρεδρος*, as the one enthroned beside God. At this point, the book of Wisdom

55. As far as I know, there is no feminist-theological study that focuses only on personified Wisdom in the book of Wisdom. Yet Silvia Schroer dedicates some space to her in “Wisdom: An Example of Jewish Intercultural Theology,” in Schottroff and Wacker, *Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 555–65. The detailed study by Neher, *Wesen*, limits itself to the question of the function and essence of personified Wisdom in the book of Wisdom.

56. See, e.g., Helmut Engel, “Weisheit Salomos,” in *Das wissenschaftliche Bibelllexikon im Internet* (2005): §2.2.3, <http://www.wibilex.de>; Schroer, “Wisdom,” 556–58.

goes one step further than Proverbs and Sirach. However, there are also verses in which personified Wisdom is subordinated to God, who leads her (7:15).

Different from Sirach, personified Wisdom is no longer *compared* to the partner of the person seeking her (Sir 15:2); she *is* now the life partner of “Solomon” (Wis 6:12–21; 8:2, 18). Only those who live with Wisdom will be loved by God (Wis 7:28); as such, the role as mediator between God and humans is even more strongly emphasized. The relationship of personified Wisdom to God and to humans, as Martin Neher has elaborated, is often conveyed by the spirit of God (esp. Wis 1:6; 7:7, 22–23; 9:17).⁵⁷

Personified Wisdom in Wisdom of Solomon differs in some points from Proverbs and Sirach: First, she is portrayed as a historically powerful being who intervenes on behalf of the people (Wis 10:1–11:1). In this role, personified Wisdom can serve as the key to older traditions of Israel.⁵⁸ Second, personified Wisdom is connected to immortality, which “Solomon” hopes to attain through his life partner by making the right decisions and acting properly (Wis 8:13, 17). Third, the profile of personified Wisdom has changed, especially in comparison to Sirach, insofar as the erotic and sexual imagery—even if personified Wisdom is the bride and life partner of “Solomon”—is missing in her description.⁵⁹ Fourth, personified Wisdom does not have her own voice: the book does not present any first-person speeches, and she instead appears only in the speeches of “Solomon.”

4.2. CONTEXT AND MEANING

The book of Wisdom was designed with the help of Hellenistic literary forms and genres, namely in Egyptian Alexandria, probably in the century before or after the beginning of the Common Era. The book presents a fictitious speech of King Solomon that focuses on justice and wisdom. Its author is probably a scribe or wise person who is extremely well-informed about the traditions of Israel and trained in Hellenistic rhetoric.⁶⁰

In contrast to her representation in Proverbs and in Sirach, personified Wisdom in the book of Wisdom has no negative antagonist, neither on a concrete nor a metaphorical level. There are no texts in the book of Wisdom in which women are devalued or negatively portrayed; in any case, the book mentions real women and men only once (Wis 3:12–14). Similar to other

57. See, e.g., Neher, *Wesen*, 233.

58. *Ibid.*, 236.

59. This feature has been pointed out by Jane S. Webster, “Sophia: Engendering Wisdom in Proverbs, Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon,” *JOT 78* (1998): 74–77.

60. For more detail, see Engel, “Weisheit Salomos,” §4.

topics discussed in the book of Wisdom, personified Wisdom also appears indeterminate and vague.

The book of Wisdom was strongly influenced by the Hellenistic context in which it was written. The book attempts to express Israelite wisdom in the rhetorical forms of Hellenistic literature.⁶¹ It is probably addressed to young, Jewish people (more likely men than women) and seeks to offer a synthesis of Old Testament and Hellenistic wisdom.⁶² The book assumes a nonpolemical and fearless stance toward Hellenism, and therefore offers an extended image of God; it does not seem to be a problem that personified Wisdom is placed on God's side as a co-creator sharing God's throne.

As Mack has pointed out, there is further overlapping between the portrayal of personified Wisdom in the book of Wisdom and Isis—in contrast to personified Wisdom in Sirach and in addition to the polymorphism and the genre of aretology: The aspect of light (Wis 6:12; 7:10, 29) like Isis's aspect of the sun goddess; Wisdom is the universal goddess who fills the world (Wis 7:23), a “breath” of God and his purity (Wis 7:25), and the principle of the cosmos, which she renews (Wis 7:27). Further results of Mack are summarized by Schäfer.

Isis is the spouse and sister of the sun god Osiris; even the term *parhedros* is used in her relationship to Serapis, the Hellenistic Osiris. Isis is the goddess of earth and nature, the “female principle of nature” (*to tēs physeōs thēly*), the mother of the cosmos (*mētēr tou kosmou*).⁶³

Schäfer concludes: “It is this peculiar mixture of Platonic, Stoic and Egyptian elements that gives Wisdom/Spirit in Sapiientia Salomonis her distinctive tinge.”⁶⁴

At the time the book of Wisdom was written, Israel's cult in the Jewish communities in Egypt was in competition with the worship of the goddess Isis. It is possible that the book of Wisdom attempts to again bind those Jews who tended toward the worship of Isis or even turned away from Judaism more strongly to the Jewish faith.⁶⁵ In this context, it makes sense that personified Wisdom was portrayed in the image of Isis. With personified

61. For the Greek literary style and its variations, see *ibid.*, §2.2.

62. See *ibid.*, §4; similarly also Neher, *Wesen*, 240.

63. Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty*, 37 with reference to Mack, *Logos*, 66–72.

64. Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty*, 38; from a different perspective, Neher, *Wesen*, 239–40, comes to a similar result: The writer of the Sapiientia had “no specific philosophical basis,” but rather “made use of the philosophical terms common among all educated persons in Alexandria, in order to systematically integrate them into his theological argumentation.”

65. Engel, “Weisheit Salomos,” §4, emphasizes that the book of Wisdom is a piece of

Wisdom, who resembles Isis and is also closely tied to the God of Israel, Judaism would become more attractive.

4.3. PERSONIFIED WISDOM AND GOD IN THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

The relationship between personified Wisdom and God in the book of Wisdom is constructed similarly to that in Sirach. On the one hand, she is almost placed on equal terms with God: “She rules all things full of goodness” (Wis 8:1); she “is the beginning of it all” (7:12); she lives with God, who loves her (8:3); whoever loves her will be loved by God (7:28); she knows his whole creation in all of his works (8:4); she is God’s co-creator (7:21) and is enthroned as *πάρεδρος* at the side of God (9:4). On the other hand, she is also called the “pure effluence from the glory of God” (7:25), and everything that she is comes from God; he is the one who shows the way to wisdom (7:15),⁶⁶ and “Solomon” asks him for the gift of wisdom (7:7; 8:21; 9:4, 10). Sometimes she appears as a personification; for example, when “Solomon” wishes to bring her home as a bride and live together with her (8:2–20). In other passages, by contrast (such as 7:22b–8:1), she is more of an abstract—although very powerful—“being” (cf. Job 28; Bar 3–4). Thus she has the same two sides as personified Wisdom in Sirach: On the one hand, she is placed on the same level as God; on the other hand, she is subordinated to him. Seemingly, the aspect of subordination more likely applies to wisdom as a “being” or “creation,” whereas personified Wisdom more likely has the same position as God. A new aspect here is not only that humans love personified Wisdom but also that God loves her (8:3).⁶⁷ God and personified Wisdom share a number of aspects: They allow themselves to be found; they rescue; they love—especially the people.⁶⁸ In the retrospection to Israelite history in 10:15–21, personified

internal Jewish promotional literature that is designed not to convince or argue, but to win over.

66. According to *ibid.*, in §2.2.3, with reference to Wis 8:2–9 (italics in original): “Not even the shadow of a doubt remains, whether she (like Isis) is also a ‘goddess.’ There is only *one* God and creator of everything, who also gives wisdom, which as his creation (Prov 8:22; Sir 1:4, 9) shares in *his* characteristics and titles.”

67. Schroer, “Wisdom,” 557–58, speaks of Sophia as “the beloved and the companion of God.”

68. Engel, “Weisheit Salomos,” in §2.2.3 (italics in original): “Through the *literary personification* of wisdom, one recognizes that a one-sided or predominantly ‘masculine’ image of God is erroneous.... In the figure of ‘wisdom,’ the author reflects in an original way the loving, personal presence of God with humans and expresses it in the philosophical and educated language of his present time.”

Wisdom acts—compared with the older texts, which are revised here—in the place of God.

Therefore, Isis was a model for personified Wisdom in the book of Wisdom, at least in some aspects and with regard to her authority. Again, personified Wisdom takes on many elements from her forerunners in Proverbs and in Sirach. Her relationship to God vacillates between subordination and equality.⁶⁹

5. SUMMARY

Personified Wisdom in Prov 1–9 is born into the world as a figure who is to lead the reader into the older wisdom of the book of Proverbs (Prov 10–29). She warns the young people to whom she is speaking to turn toward her and not to the “strange woman” who wants to lead them to inappropriate social behavior. But not only with the threats of a prophetess does personified wisdom speak to her public; she also woos them with the information that she was already with God before he created the world and therefore has intimate knowledge of the interrelations of creation and the proper behavior. In Sirach, personified Wisdom is expanded and receives new competencies; she now comes close to the fear of God and is identified with the torah. At the same time, she receives strong erotic-sexual characteristics. In her portrayal, the influence of the Egyptian-Hellenistic Isis is noticeable, which underlines the extent of the power of personified Wisdom. Occasionally she has the same ranking as God. Since God’s sphere of influence now extends to the entire world, this also applies to personified wisdom—she is now also a figure based in Israel and its history but shining out over the entire world, confidently speaking to her listeners. The position of personified Wisdom in the book of Wisdom is even higher: Now she is at the side of God and is partly made equal to him; she is the basis of just actions and was already active in the history of Israel. Yet she does not speak herself anymore. She has become the life partner of the exemplary wise man “King Solomon,” who praises her highly. They have a close relationship that, however, has lost its erotic aspects. In close cohabitation with Wisdom, it is now possible for people like “Solomon” to act justly according to the commandments and thus attain immortality.

69. In my opinion, Schroer neglects the independence of God as well as the passages of the subordination of personified wisdom under God when she says: “Sophia in the book of Wisdom is Israel’s God imaged as woman and goddess” (Schroer, “Wisdom,” 564). On the other hand, Engel in “Weisheit Salomos,” §2.2.3, overlooks the divine characteristics of Wisdom when he completely disputes the aspect of a goddess.

But the joy over this figure, who at least in some instances can be considered a female image of God in the Bible, is not unclouded, because some aspects of personified wisdom have given way to feminist criticism: In all three books, she turns primarily to young men, who are warned about interacting with certain women (Proverbs). The young man should pay more—also sexual-erotic—attention to Wisdom than to problematic, concrete women (Sirach), or they should see their ideal life partner in Wisdom, who can help them to act justly or even attain immortality (Wisdom). Today's female readers of these androcentric texts should not allow themselves to be pushed into the less attractive alternative of either identifying themselves with the male addressees or with the devalued and even demonized women in the texts. Instead they could try to appreciate personified Wisdom mainly by way of her numerous connections to ancient Israelite traditions and her power, which is borrowed from Isis.

Translated from German by Dale J. Provost; revised by Christl M. Maier

