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# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LADY WISDOM:
## A Ricoeurian Synthesis

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> The beauty of metaphors … is that … you cannot control them. It flows. Like water, it will find its level. It will seek new paths.
>
> – Karl Gaspar, CSsR

According to Ricoeur, symbols and metaphors have a certain "logic" which gives rise to meaning. The iconic statement of Ricoeur is: The symbol gives, and what the symbol gives rise to is thought.[1] Symbols interrogate, challenge, address, and ask questions from us. They have a richness which prevents premature closure. The symbols' exploratory function is its contribution to understanding.[2]

"Primary 'spontaneous' symbolic expressions … born in living emotional experiences … lead first to the developed language of myth, then to the elaborated language of gnosis"[3] or, in other words,

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[1]Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (NY: Harper & Row, 1967), 348.

[2]Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 5.

[3]This is how Habel (Norman Habel, "The Symbolism of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9," *Interpretation* 26:2 [April 1972]: 133) summarized Ricoeur's metaphorical process.

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conceptual language. Symbols "rescue feeling and even fear from silence and confusion; they provide a language for avowal, for confession."[4] Symbols and metaphors, which are but the linguistic expressions of symbols, retain the emotional depth and inarticulable mystery of human experience while rational conceptual language is already an abstraction several removes from it and is often reductionistic in its attempt to systematize our experience of reality. McFague speaks of the relationship between metaphorical and conceptual language in this way:

> Conceptual language tends toward univocity, toward clear and concise meanings for ambiguous, multileveled, imagistic language. In this process something is lost and something is gained: richness and multivalency are sacrificed for precision and consistency …. The relationship, however, is symbiotic. Images "feed" concepts; concepts "discipline" images. Images without concepts are blind, concepts without images are sterile …. Images are never free of the need for interpretation by concepts, their critique of competing images, or their demythologizing of literalized models. Concepts are never free of the need for funding by images, the affectional and existential richness of images, and the qualification against conceptual pretensions supplied by the plurality of images.[5]

Because of this, metaphorical language "does not just tolerate interpretation but *demands* it."[6] It is interpretation that uncovers the multiple meanings of symbols and metaphors.[7] In fact, Ricoeur boldly declares: "It is by interpreting that we can hear again."[8] By this he is not referring to

[4]Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 350.

[5]Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 26.

[6]McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 22.

[7]Habel, "Symbolism of Wisdom," 132–33 quoting Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 9, 12.

[8]Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 351.

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allegorization, which in the process of attempting to unmask the image for any hidden meaning renders the image useless afterwards.[9]

Applying to metaphor what Ricoeur said about genres, "[t]he mistaken assumption here would be to take these forms of discourse as simple literary genres [or metaphors] which ought to be neutralized so that we can extract their theological content. They are not a mere rhetorical motif to be eliminated, but a constitutive element."[10] Ricoeur proposed: "What we need is an interpretation that respects the original enigma of the symbols, that lets itself be taught by them, but that, beginning from there, promotes the meaning, forms the meaning in the full responsibility of autonomous thought."[11]

The aim is to bring the incoherent to coherence, not through the first naïvete of pre-critical interpretation but, passing through modern critical thought with its attention to historical and literary questions, to a second naïvete that is restorative and non-reductionistic, one that appreciates the symbol as symbol. By holding together "the immediacy of the symbol and the mediation of thought," it can lead to a "revivification" of conceptual thought.[12]

This requires that metaphorical interpretation not stop with metaphors but move beyond to religious/theological language,

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[9]Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 348. Allegorical interpretation, for example, would treat the bread and wine in Prov 9 as non-literal; Clement of Alexandria, in fact, interpreted it as the celebration of the Eucharist (R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002], 246, 120).

[10]Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 91–92.

[11]Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 349–50.

[12]Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 350–51. McFague (*Metaphorical Theology*, 26) explains: "In a metaphorical theology, there is no suggestion of a hierarchy among metaphors, models, and concepts: concepts are not higher, better, or more necessary than images, or vice versa."

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precisely to avoid taking metaphors and symbols of a particular historical and cultural context and absolutizing them for all times and all contexts.[13] In the end, the whole process is envisioned to lead to better understanding of self and our relationships in the world through post-critical appropriation.[14]

## The Significance of Lady Wisdom for Israel

The "world of the text" of the book of Proverbs is the acquisition of wisdom,[15] the search for meaning and order in life. It is grounded on the belief that God has an orderly design embedded in the cosmos. It remained for other wisdom books like Job and Ecclesiastes to set this quest for meaningfulness in the context of limit-situations such as mystery, suffering, and death. But in the book of Proverbs, the wise proceed by way of the experience of the created world to encounter God as the very source of wisdom.[16] Like a folding fan which has several panels all proceeding from a single source or joint, the metaphors of Wisdom can be viewed as different modes of YHWH's creative and saving involvement with the world that the wise experience.

"The symbol gives rise to thought, thought which proceeds according to the metaphor."[17] In the previous article,[18] the five metaphors for personified wisdom were examined: the street prophet

[13]McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 22.

[14]Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 355–56.

[15]Thomas Dailey, *The Repentant Job: A Ricoeurian Icon for Biblical Theology* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1994), 159.

[16]Dailey, *Repentant Job*, 167–68.

[17]Elizabeth Johnson, "The Symbolic Character of Theological Statements about Mary," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 22:2 (Spring 1985): 327.

[18]Abigail Teh, "Images of Personified Wisdom," *Landas* 22:1 (2008), 103-161.

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(Prov 1 and 8), the bride and lover (Prov 4 and 7), the royal adviser and transcendent figure who is the companion of YHWH (Prov 3 and 8), and the house builder and banquet host (Prov 9). What we find is that the metaphors of personified wisdom connect the pursuit of wisdom to three overlapping levels: personal human experience, Yahwistic religion, and the cosmic-mythological dimension.[19] Because these levels overlap and should not be seen as mutually exclusive, we can note several intersections.

The first level—that of personal human experience—is seen in the metaphors of wisdom as a prophet (Prov 1 and 8), bride and lover (Prov 4 and 7), and house builder and banquet host (Prov 9). These passages lay the reality and responsibility of choice before the individual. In wisdom's world of "binary contrasts,"[20] there is a forced dichotomy, only two choices to choose from, whether it is the way of one's father and mother or the way of the fools; the embrace of one's bride or the embrace of the strange woman; the banquet invitation of Lady Wisdom or that of Lady Folly. In the end, the person alone can decide his/her path and subsequent destiny. The first level of personal human experience is also the focus of texts that predicate the pursuit of wisdom on the individual's desire for fullness of life—chief of which would be long life, well-being, prosperity, honor, harmony. Seeking wisdom will lead to personal gain.

The second level of Yahwistic religion is seen overlapping in the metaphors of wisdom as street prophet (Prov 1 and 8), bride and lover (Prov 4 and 7), royal adviser and companion of YHWH (Prov 8). These metaphors succeed in linking the whole wisdom enterprise to YHWH, with the result that the sayings of the sages, which consist of common-sense observations and reflections from daily life, come to

[19]Habel ("Symbolism of Wisdom," 134–57) identifies these three as overlapping zones or "locales" in life that wisdom impinges on but limits the discussion of symbols to the two ways, two hearts, and two companions.

[20]Habel, "Symbolism of Wisdom," 135.

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be backed up with the authority of YHWH because of the connection to prophetic motifs and hence Israel's covenant. The sense of urgency and inevitability of judgment for wrong choices is communicated through the language of life and death (Prov 1:12, 19; 5:5–6; 7:23, 27; 9:11, 18) which in turn echoes the vocabulary of the covenant call to choose life over death, blessings over curses (Deut 30:15, 19; etc.). The pursuit of wisdom is a matter of life and death, not to be trivialized or considered frivolous or extraneous.

The metaphor of bride and lover (Prov 4 and 7) speaks to both the first and second levels. On the level of personal experience, it functions to communicate the injunction to avoid sexually illicit behavior, and on the level of Yahwistic religion, the warning to avoid the strange woman, historically and symbolically associated with Israel's spiritual apostasy. The metaphor of Wisdom as royal adviser (Prov 8) also speaks to the first two levels. Wisdom, traditionally understood as a divine endowment to Israel's kings, is "democratized" and promised to all who would follow her.[21]

This complex layering reflects what Wells calls the "contextualizing character" of Israel's wisdom literature. Traditionally the wisdom movement that Israel shared with her ancient Near East neighbors found wisdom in the experience of engagement with the world. For them, "[a]ll wisdom is one, and all wisdom, even from beyond Israel, comes from God."[22] Hence, Israel's wisdom writings "do not stress revelation in the specific sense but see knowledge and discovery as an active human enterprise."[23] Wisdom does not consist of "imperatives but intellectual and experiential activity coupled with religious behavior to provide a guide for living well and living properly. Wise behavior is

[21]Similarly, the exilic prophet Second Isaiah democratized the promises of the Davidic covenant to the whole people in Isa. 55:3–5.

[22]Harold Wells, "Trinitarian Feminism: Elizabeth Johnson's Wisdom Christology," *Theology Today* 52:3 (October 1995): 332.

[23]Wells, "Trinitarian Feminism," 332.

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not grounded here in the Mosaic law, but in what may be called spiritual good sense and a sagacious reading of the world and its realities."[24]

The wisdom literature is silent about the distinctives of Israel's faith, such as the exodus, the law, the Sinai covenant and the priestly cultus. These central aspects of Israel's faith, however, are not absent; they are simply assumed and bracketed out,[25] since in this way the sages are able to engage with other important issues and concerns such as everyday spirituality, the limit-situations of innocent suffering and death, the existential meaning of life, all of which are reflected in the wisdom writings of the ancient Near East. This general universal knowledge was placed in interaction with the Torah sometime in the post-exilic period. The authority of the Torah also came to cover wisdom's proverbial sayings and observations of life.

> … an editing process [can be discerned] in which Torah and prophetic materials are sapientialized, that is, nonwisdom traditions are interpreted in terms of wisdom through a process of redaction. In this way wisdom interpretations legitimate the Torah and its authority for a new generation by demonstrating how Torah informs the here-and-now concerns of practical ethical life. On the other hand, Torah remains central and basic; wisdom is grounded in the fundamental authority of the superior canonical Torah traditions, which allows wisdom its own relative authority as a guide to righteousness.[26]

This "intra-canonical process" is parallel to today's interpretive approaches which place other fields of human knowledge, for example, social-scientific analysis and scientific discoveries, in conversation with

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[24]Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 23.

[25]Wells, "Trinitarian Feminism," 332.

[26]Wells, "Trinitarian Feminism," 333 quoting Gerald Sheppard, *Wisdom as Hermeneutical Construct: A Study in the Sapientializing of the Old Testament* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), 118–19, 159–60.

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the Scriptures. Scriptural revelation remains essentially dominant but is in turn enriched by practical worldly wisdom and experience.[27]

## Alternative Symbolic System, Alternative Reality

Something similar happens when personified Wisdom is described in terms borrowed from goddess imagery. This is the third level of the sages' theological reflection—cosmic-mythological.

The metaphors of wisdom as companion of YHWH during creation (Prov 3 and 8) and that of house builder and banquet host (Prov 9) demonstrate extensive use of the metaphors of mythological motifs borrowed from Israel's ANE neighbors. At the same time, with the contrast to personified Folly that ends Prov 9, wisdom, even as it reaches the heights of cosmic symbols, is once more linked to the level of personal human experience: Don't make foolish choices with one's life.

Apart from the clearly cosmic symbolism of Prov 8:22–31, Wisdom's building of a house in Prov 9:1–6 also carries mythological overtones. In the ancient world, the building and maintenance of temples and sanctuaries by the gods and rulers are considered the way to maintain the order of the world and society. Thus in Israel, the tabernacle and Temple were built based on strict compliance with divine instructions. The building of a house imitates this mythical metaphor. Humans are thought to reactualize divine creation when they construct their habitation. The activity of house-building then is normally accompanied by rituals and celebrations "designed to place the structure within the durative order of the cosmos."[28]

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[27]Wells, "Trinitarian Feminism," 333.

[28]Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt: Metaphorical Theology in the Book of Job*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 112 (Sheffield, England: Almond Press, 1991), 39.

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Another mythological metaphor for wisdom which reinforces the transhistorical claim for Israel's wisdom is that of wisdom as "tree of life" (Prov 3:18), part of the common stock of mythological imagery shared by both the ancient Near East and Israel (Gen 2–3; Exod 31:3–5, 7–9).[29] In the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh, a special tree or plant is accorded powers to bring renewal and rejuvenation. It represents fertility, life in all its potency, and everlasting life. It is known in Canaan as a symbol for Asherah and is carved on the pillars at the Temple entrance.[30]

The metaphor claims primordiality for wisdom by her acclamation as "the tree of life." In Gen 2–3, it is the tree that everyone should choose, unlike the choice of Adam and Eve in the Adamic Myth.[31] "Those who travel the way of wisdom will reach the tree of life. The tree of life … was a tangible cultic symbol of eternal vitality and cosmic power located within the temple itself at the navel of the earth."[32] The tree of life is the "cosmic center."[33]

Commonly the borrowing of mythological imagery is seen as polemical. Confronted with competition from attractive female deities of the surrounding culture, wisdom's personification arose as a way of "co-opting or ruling out goddess worship in Israel by attributing to YHWH the very attributes that others were finding in pagan goddesses."[34]

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[29]In the New Testament, the tree of life appears again in the eschatological heavens and earth (Rev 2:7; 22:2, 14, 19).

[30]William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 59–60, 75.

[31]Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 59–60, 75.

[32]Habel, "Symbolism of Wisdom," 151.

[33]Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 59–60.

[34]Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 39, n. 103.

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> The controlling context of meaning remained the Jewish faith, with borrowings being assimilated to that faith, while at the same time through the use of new categories Jewish beliefs about God and God's ways with the world were expressed in a way that matched the religious depth and style of the goddess literature and cult, and counteracted its appeal.[35]

The borrowing of goddess imagery can be seen to serve another important function. In the absence of symbols of the covenant and cult in the wisdom corpus, Israel looked to her ancient Near Eastern neighbors for an alternate symbolic system. The creative adaptation of goddess imagery enabled Israel, drawing on international wisdom, to craft an alternate frame of reference to speak to a wider audience and prove the sustainability and viability of Yahwistic wisdom among competing claims. The cosmic-mythological connection indicates a universality and timelessness in the wisdom movement that go beyond the nation of Israel and beyond their historical experience.

Brueggemann considers this inculturating tendency "a major theological, intellectual achievement" because it "casts the claims of Israel's faith in terms credible to a larger, quite sophisticated intellectual environment that may have regarded the historical-covenantal traditions of ancient Israel as somewhat primitive."[36] Israel's faith proved that it could break out of its strictly Israelite confines and the "sectarian markings of Israel's covenantal tradition" to "accommodate broader intellectual assumptions."[37]

Personified Wisdom thus connects to key resources within Israel's tradition while at the same time re-interpreting other elements to create new ways of thinking, speaking and acting for Israel! The use

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[35]Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Jesus, the Wisdom of God: A Biblical Basis for Non-Androcentric Christology," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 61 (1985): 271.

[36]Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 307.

[37]Brueggemann, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 314, 307.

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of metaphorical language proved crucial for Israel for the development of theological thought.

> … metaphor is not just heuristic or illustrative, but epistemologically necessary if new learning [and change] is to take place … the old framework no longer can encompass our experience and only metaphor—which connects both with what we already know *and* with what we are groping to know—provides the movement that is the distinctive mark of learning [and change].[38]

## Theological Affirmations

Behind the metaphors of personified Wisdom lie the theological meaning and truth claims of the text. These are the constant elements that can be drawn from the diverse metaphors and portrayals of wisdom.

- First, wisdom is a primary source of authority for life, deriving this authority from wisdom's primordial association with YHWH before the creation of the world (Prov 8:22–31). Wisdom antedates the world and the historical experience of Israel, and even the Torah.
- Second, wisdom is embedded in creation so that study of the world and of everyday life yields wisdom (Prov 8:22–31; 3:19–20). "The divine ordering, however, is not easy or obvious. Its observation requires attentiveness, discernment, and a right orientation in order to perceive."[39] The sages proceeded by the collection of data and formulating of hypotheses based on the data of many cases; furthermore, wisdom teachings are subject to change and revision once new data arrives. Brueggemann compares the "scientific method" utilized by the sages with the mode of knowledge through

[38]McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 199, n. 19.

[39]Brueggemann, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 309.

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divine revelation, and concludes that Israel validates both. In this way, faith and reason hold together in wisdom.[40]

> [T]here is an empirical basis to this 'creation theology' that is quite in contrast to the revelatory, 'top-down' mode of disclosure known at Mount Sinai. The fact that the teaching is inductive and established case by case, however, makes the teaching no less formidable theologically, because wisdom asserts that the God who decrees and maintains a particular ordering of reality toward life is a sovereign beyond challenge whose will, purpose, and order cannot be defied or circumvented with impunity.[41]

- Because of this order in creation, non-Israelite people are able to discover wisdom. This is the third theological affirmation. "'The quest for wisdom is a universal quest, not limited to Jews or Christians.'"[42] This wisdom is knowable and teachable to all. As Ricoeur put it,

> Wisdom finds its literary expression in wisdom literature. But wisdom also surpasses every literary genre …. [It] aims at the individual behind the people of the Covenant, and through him, every human being. Wisdom overflows the framework of the Covenant, which is also the framework of the election of Israel and the promise made to Israel.[43]

- Disregarding this "nature of things," this ordering of reality toward life, leads to death.[44] This is so because ultimately wisdom is thoroughly theological. This is the fourth theological affirmation of the metaphors of wisdom. Every aspect of life is referred back

[40]Brueggemann, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 308, 311, 314.

[41]Brueggemann, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 310.

[42]Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs*, Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 33.

[43]Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 85.

[44]Brueggemann, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 308.

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to the rule of God,[45] locating its parameters or boundaries in "the fear of YHWH," which is the beginning, that is, the origin and source of all wisdom as well as its end and goal.[46] Von Rad puts it this way: Israel certainly was aware of the fact that

> the search for knowledge can go wrong, not as a result of individual, erroneous judgments or of mistakes creeping in at different points, but because of one single mistake at the beginning. One becomes competent and expert as far as the orders in life are concerned only if one begins from knowledge about God.[47]

- Fifth, the acquisition of wisdom is both a divine gift as well as a human task. The quest for wisdom takes place in the context of "a drama … charged with conflict"[48] with competing voices and claims vying for supremacy in one's life. Discernment is needed.
- Lastly, the personification of Wisdom indicates that wisdom is primarily a relationship, not a list of do's and don'ts. Wisdom is more than performing or avoiding certain actions. Wisdom itself is ineffable, not a set of rules or laws or even abstract principles, but a relation to YHWH. It can be expressed in, but is not reducible to, laws, rules or principles.

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[45]Brueggemann, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 307.

[46]*Yir'aṯ YHWH* "the fear of the Lord" appears sixteen times in the whole book. It is the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1:7; 9:10) and consists of knowledge of God (2:5), trust and confidence in YHWH (14:26; 29:25) and obedience to God (24:21; here "fear the Lord" is an imperative-direct object construction). It is also equated to love of knowledge and humility to receive instruction (1:29; 15:33) and its opposite, hatred of evil (8:13; 16:6; 22:4). Wisdom is better than earthly treasure (15:16), though she also rewards her followers richly with long life (10:27; 14:27; 19:23), security (19:23; 29:25) and riches and honor (23:17).

[47]Gerhard Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 67–68.

[48]Clifford, *Proverbs*, 32–33.

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As Clifford puts it, the book of Proverbs is "concerned with wisdom as a fundamental option in life rather than specific wise actions. So intense is its focus on wisdom that it reifies and even personalizes it …."[49]

## The Contemporary Significance of Lady Wisdom

"In order to complete the process of interpretation, according to the … hermeneutics of Ricoeur, an 'appropriation' of the truth of a [text] is necessary."[50] The book of Proverbs is the text of a faith-community in their quest for wisdom through concrete human experience. This is the world of the text. The biblical text carries truth-claims addressed to the faith community couched in the language, concepts, and images of the time of writing. The aim of appropriation is to allow these truth-claims to emerge and invite the transformative participation of the contemporary reader.[51]

### The Social Construction of Meaning

Language is a social product, embodying the conventions and ideologies agreed upon by the community using a particular language. At the same time, language constructs meaning, shaping and maintaining the consciousness of the users of that language.[52]

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[49]Clifford, *Proverbs*, 32.

[50]Dailey, *Repentant Job*, 159.

[51]Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999), 180.

[52]Thelma Kintanar, "Textual Analysis," in *Gender-Sensitive & Feminist Methodologies: A Handbook for Health and Social Researchers*, ed. Sylvia Guerrero (Diliman, QC: University of the Philippines Center for Women's Studies, 1999), 250.

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Of the five metaphors examined in chapter 3, it is the twin portrayals of wisdom as a bride and lover and her foil, "the strange woman," that raise the most concern among contemporary women reading Proverbs. The classic Madonna-whore paradigm that these metaphors represent, if not interpreted sensitively, is feared as contributing to the perpetration of gender inequality and stereotyping.

As a social structure, patriarchy looks at all relationships in terms of superiority and inferiority, and achieves social cohesion by means of dominative power. Patriarchy differentiates males and females not as individuals but as members of a social class, according to sexual difference. Females are subjected to the male construct of "femininity," being "defined" by relinquishment of power and the indirect or manipulative exercise of power. What is more insidious is when the power and authority is believed to derive from God's will and is exercised in the name of God. Any insubordination to authority is seen as a direct challenge to God.[53]

"Much of women's self and social image is derived from religious values."[54] Unfortunately Scripture has been used to maintain subjugation and marginalization of women, leading to the internalization of a "false consciousness" by women. The resulting oppressive structures of belief and institutions prevent not only women but also men from becoming fully human. Therefore while accepting that the text reflects the limitations of language and culture of the time of writing, care and exegetical sensitivity must be exercised by those who preach and teach the Scriptures in order to read these texts for our time.

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[53]Karen Bloomquist, "'Let God be God': The Theological Necessity of De-Patriarchalizing God," in *Our Naming of God: Problems and Prospects of God-Talk Today*, ed. Carl Braaten (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989), 47.

[54]Mary John Mananzan, "Woman and Religion," in *Woman and Religion: A Collection of Essays and Personal Histories*, 3rd ed., ed. Mary John Mananzan (Manila: St. Scholastica's College Institute of Women Studies, 1998), 4.

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Language is a powerful tool for ideology and reflects the power relations operative in the society. Garcia-Dungo illustrates this powerfully in her poignant ethnographic study of urban poor women in Manila. The women cope with the tensions and tragedies of spousal abuse and poverty by using "concealing" and "faking" symbols and language to interpret their situation to themselves and to their children. Examples of the women's coping language are: "Lamang talaga sa ginhawa ang kalalakihan," "mababa talaga ang posisyon ng babae sa lalaki," "pagkukunwari," "pagtitimpi," "pagtitiyaga"/"pagtitiis," and "ipasa-Diyos"/"magdasal."[55] Only with such social construction of the meaning of subordination/domination within their families are they able to live under the ever-present reality of psychological and physical abuse.[56]

With the understanding that words are not merely words, the critical reader's task is to open up or "deconstruct" the text by focusing on the "aporias" or impasses of meaning in the text and thus exposing the "oppositional systems (binary, hierarchical oppositions)" underlying it. By showing "how the seemingly authoritative text undercuts it and its own logic," liberating elements may be seen through the inherent contradictions and inconsistencies found in the text itself.[57]

In this section, we will seek to answer this question: What does the femaleness of personified Wisdom contribute to our understanding of wisdom and conversely to our understanding of the female? Before proceeding, it is best to be reminded that "[t]he literal sense has to

[55]"Men really have an easier life than women," "women are lower in status than men," "using pretense," "controlling my emotions," "enduring the suffering," and "leaving it all to God"/"praying" (Nanette Garcia-Dungo, *The Social Construction of Subordination/Domination Among Women in Urban Poor Household* [Diliman, QC: University of the Philippines College of Social Sciences and Philosophy Publications, 1999], 14, 24–27).

[56]Garcia-Dungo, *Social Construction of Subordination/Domination*, 4.

[57]Kintanar, "Textual Analysis," 251.

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be left behind so that the metaphorical sense can emerge; the literal reference must collapse so that the heuristic fiction can work its redescription of reality."[58]

Wisdom is not literally female, and yet to say that the femaleness does not affect the figure is to disregard the "double-back" quality of metaphor. Though difficult, one must hold on to the multivalent and elusive character of metaphors. Only in this way can one fulfill "the [task] of each generation … to appropriate the tradition, to enrich and purify it by living interaction with it, and to transmit it to the next generation."[59] How can believers in the twenty-first century, both female and male, appropriate the metaphors of wisdom in ways that liberate and impart dignity to women's experience and not falsify or dismiss it?

## Deconstructing the Femaleness of Wisdom

According to James J. Paxson, author of the first full-scale study of personification,[60] personifications were almost exclusively female in ancient writings. "In Hellenic, Roman, and much medieval art and allegorical literature, personified abstractions (i.e. virtues, vices, emotions, natural forces, philosophical concepts) were exclusively female."[61] In the West, writers started to use male personifications along with female ones only beginning in the thirteenth century C.E. A famous example is John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) where the overwhelming majority of personified characters are male.[62]

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[58]Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 68.

[59]Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 71.

[60]James J. Paxson, *The Poetics of Personification*, Literature, Culture, Theory Series 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[61]James Paxson, "Personification's Gender," *Rhetorica* 16:2 (Spring 1998): 149.

[62]Paxson, "Personification's Gender," 151.

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Modern scholars have attempted to account for this situation with various theories, the most popular and generally accepted of which is grammatical formalism.[63] The female gender of personification simply reflects the feminine gender of most abstract nouns. Biblical scholar Bernhard Lang agrees. "Languages whose grammatical structures give male or female gender to 'things' invite personification."[64] A case for grammatical gender leading to female personification can be made in the Hebrew language, where abstract nouns can be either masculine or feminine in gender.[65]

Following this, *ḥôkmāh* "wisdom" is grammatically marked as feminine and thus wisdom is personified as a female. This can explain the metaphor of wisdom as a prophet in Prov 1:20–33 and 8:1–4 where the gender of the personification does not affect the meaning. However, gender dominates the metaphor of wisdom as bride and lover in Prov

[63]A second theory offered by literary critics and rhetoricians is that female personification reflected the ancient world's asymmetrical gender relations. Women were virtual blank entities on which could be projected virtue or vice. For example, in late Roman culture, the trivialization of women led to an automatic association between women and "mortal sinners" and other powers that society might fear. The third theory of female personification, called the creativity (or procreativity) theory, is a corollary to the second. As the embodiment of motherhood, women best fit the role when the demand is for symbols of "universal genesis, divine creativity, emanation, marriage, parturition, and nurturing or nursing." Certainly this generative power accounts for the preponderance of goddess figures in the fragile ancient world where life and fertility were always in the balance (Paxson, "Personification's Gender," 157–59).

[64]Lang as quoted by Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 37. Lang cites as examples Job 11:14; Prov 20:1; Psa 96:11–12 and Psa 85:13.

[65]Psalm 85:10–11, 13 is a good example. Nouns marked grammatically masculine like *ḥeseḏ* "steadfast love" (v. 10), *ṣeḏeq* "righteousness" (vv. 10, 11, 13), and *šālôm* "peace" (v. 10) are accompanied by masculine verbs and pronominal antecedents. Only *ĕmeṯ* "faithfulness" (vv. 10, 11) is marked feminine in grammatical gender and uses a feminine imperfect verb. However, no extensive personification takes place with masculine nouns to allow us to make a more definitive conclusion.

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4:5–9 and 7:4–5 as well as the rivalry between Lady Wisdom/faithful wife and the strange woman/Lady Folly.

Feminist critique has consistently maintained that the biblical text is a product of a patriarchal society in which men dominated if not monopolized public discourse. Women have been rendered invisible and their voices silenced. The history of interpretation of the Church has served to perpetuate the biases present in unreflective male readings.

> The result is that women in the biblical text are often marginalized when they are not omitted entirely, pornographically reduced to their sexuality (because they are presented as they are seen by and function for men), demonized (by male projection), or trivialized (as nonparticipants in the spheres of male activity that alone is deemed significant) …. We get the picture of women that men created, which corresponds to the male understanding of women and their place in society at the time of writing of these documents.[66]

Newsom points out that the author/s of Proverbs 1–9 invite the reader to take the posture of a son being taught by his father. Immediately this imposes the authority structure of a patriarchal family as the authority structure for wisdom. The reader is subject to the authority of the father, which is seen as right and fitting and beyond question. In turn, this perpetuates the authority of the father as head of the patriarchal family unit and urges the son to replicate the status quo.[67] Indeed, feminist theology sees divine command models as reinforcing women's subjection to male authority.[68]

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[66]Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 182.

[67]Carol A. Newsom, "Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 149–50; Peggy L. Day, ed., "Introduction," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 6.

[68]Susan Ross, "Women, Beauty and Justice: Moving Beyond Von Balthasar," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 25:1 (2005): 81.

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This is not the only element in the personification of wisdom that demonstrates gender stereotypes. The image of women in Proverbs 1–9 serves as a boundary marker. As Newsom puts it, in a male-dominated and -defined context, the woman is the quintessential other. She serves to identify the boundary and what must be repressed or excluded.[69]

The same description for wicked acts and the same warning against the "other woman" is given against dangerous deceiving men (2:16–19; 2:12–15); sinners in general (1:8–19), and those called "wicked," "evildoers," and "violent" (4:10–19). Yet woman becomes the focal point rather than wicked men because she is a figure of ambivalence, both frightening and attractive, both pleasure and danger.[70] "Her femaleness of course is irreversible, irreducible, always posing threat. The contradiction and dissonance can no more be eliminated than can sexual difference itself."[71]

"Because normative humanity is defined as male, woman is an available symbol of the frontiers."[72] Both Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly symbolize the margins, limit or borderline of the symbolic order. The strange woman/Lady Folly represents the entrance to chaos, death and Sheol; Lady Wisdom symbolizes the entrance to life and heaven.[73]

Day remarks: "Newsom's analysis is a caution to those who wish to embrace the 'positive' figure of female Wisdom, for she, like her antithesis, the strange woman, is the symbolic product of a worldview

[69]Newsom, "Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom," 148.

[70]Newsom, "Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom," 148. The strange woman is described as having "smooth" speech (2:16; 6:24; 7:5, 21) and her lips drip with honey; the inside of her mouth is smoother than oil (5:3).

[71]Newsom, "Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom," 149.

[72]Day, "Introduction," 6–7.

[73]Newsom, "Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom," 156–57.

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wherein the male is normative and central."[74] While at first glance, this characterization may appear positive, it is not. Because women are regarded by men as the most desirable possession, wisdom is portrayed as female. But in real life, women are no more inherently wise or seductive than men.[75] It is the men who prescribe the politically correct demeanor, behavior and sphere of life for the women.

Even the idealization of personified wisdom, if we take it as representative of women, can perpetuate the patriarchal system. "It is widely recognized in women's studies … that idealized female imagery does not always support women's equality. Indeed, the higher the pedestal and the further removed from the life of real women, the more likely such an image may be used to repress through negative comparisons."[76]

In the Filipino psyche, this is the classic Maria Clara syndrome. The good wife in Proverbs 31:10–31 can be seen as a paradoxical picture; while it portrays the woman as multi-talented and capable, she is praised in the end for her ability to enable her husband to have an outstanding reputation in the community.

The negative assessment of the strange woman/adulterer in Proverbs 1–9, if unchallenged, can perpetuate the double-standard in sexual morality and the vilification of women as the reason behind the failure of men. This is unrealistic particularly in contemporary contexts where male infidelity is the more frequent occurrence. Drawing a parallel from the prophet Hosea's use of husband-wife metaphor for God and unfaithful Israel, Yee comments: "'The gender

[74]Day, "Introduction," 7.

[75]Dianne Bergant, *Israel's Wisdom Literature: A Liberation-Critical Reading* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997), 98.

[76]Claudia Camp, "The Female Sage in Ancient Israel and in the Biblical Wisdom Literature," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, eds. John Gammie and Leo Perdue (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 199.

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specific imagery … throws up obstacles for women in listening to God's Word."[77]

Not all feminist scholars take a negative view of the personification of wisdom. Camp sees the figure of personified wisdom as having a literary and social function. The personified figure unites the multi-faceted proverbs collection and is a reflection of the role of women in post-exilic Jewish society.[78] One of Camp's key insights is that in a patrilineal, patrilocal society, women's authority lies in the domestic and informal sphere—raising up and educating the children and the management of the household. Contexts of social ferment where there is a collapse of formal authority, such as in the pre-monarchic and post-exilic periods, lead to the recognition and validation of women's leadership and contributions for the survival of the community.[79]

Others focus on the goddess imagery utilized in Proverbs 8 and 9. Lang goes to the extent of contending that we take Lady Wisdom as a metaphor that justifies embracing a relationship with God as Goddess. Witherington, however, quickly shoots this down, arguing that it flies in the face of the historical evidence itself. "The search for

[77]Gale Yee, "Hosea," in *New Interpreter's Bible* VII, ed. Leander Keck, et al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 232.

[78]Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, Bible and Literature Series 11 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1985), 215.

[79]Camp, "The Female Sage in Ancient Israel," 186–88. In the Scriptures, this is affirmed by texts like Exod 1–2, Judg 4, Sam 14, 20. Exod 1–2 shows us the role of women: the midwives who refused to massacre the infants; the mother and sister of Moses who defy the Pharaoh's decree to hide him in the river; and the Pharaoh's unnamed daughter who adopts Moses. Judg 4 chronicles the leadership of Deborah and the courage of Jael. 2 Sam 14 and 20 give us a glimpse of the work of the wise women of the cities of Tekoa and Abel to call men back to responsible living. Still, while Camp posits an enhancing of the status of Israelite women during the post-exilic period, the attitudes demonstrated by Ezra 9–10 and Nehemiah 10 towards exogamous marriages resulting in forced divorces for Israelite men with non-Israelite wives paint a sobering picture.

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the feminine attributes or traits of God, as they are expressed in the biblical literature is a worthwhile endeavor, but it is not well served by ignoring or dismissing the way the personification of Woman Wisdom is in fact used in its original historical and literary context."[80]

Hadley nuances this view by arguing that the attribution of seemingly divine attributes to Lady Wisdom, while placing her "still very much 'under the thumb' of YHWH," may be seen as "an attempt at satisfying [an] apparent need for the feminine to be represented in the deity."[81] Lady Wisdom meets a vacuum in the religious consciousness of Israel. Much can be made of the willingness of Israel's sages to re-image God (or a transcendent figure who is companion to God) in female imagery.

"When metaphors … become literalized to the point that they exclude other metaphors for the same subject or target domain, particularly in the case of God, they function as idols. Put theologically, if any metaphor, no matter how profound, becomes absolutized, as though it were considered ultimate, idolatry becomes the norm."[82] In this way, Woman Wisdom provides a necessary counterbalance to God perceived as solely male.

Newsom concludes: "Israel's wisdom tradition never examined its patriarchal assumptions."[83] It is that task to which we are called for our present generation—to open the text to conversation with contemporary historical consciousness. The text has a surplus of meaning that engages contemporary believers who, to paraphrase

[80]Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 39.

[81]Judith M. Hadley, "Wisdom and the Goddess," in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton*, ed. John Day, et al. (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 243.

[82]Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 10.

[83]Newsom, "Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom," 159.

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Schneiders, because of their very formation in the Scriptures, have come to see the moral unacceptability of patriarchy.[84]

## Reconstructing the Metaphor

What are we to do with this predominantly male view of woman? Discard the text? Or reinterpret? How do we reinterpret? The challenge is "to find ways of insisting upon the importance of female experience that are appropriate to historical inquiry."[85]

We cannot erase the history of Israel's patriarchal bias against women. But we can move beyond it to read it in ways that adopt a more liberating stance towards women. *In reality, the metaphor of personified wisdom itself is inherently subversive.* The liberating elements need to be uncovered and highlighted. First, the open-endedness of metaphor lends itself to fresh readings in new contexts. Second, just as the figure of women shows ambivalence, metaphors possess a tensive quality of "is"/"is not." Third, not only the metaphors, but wisdom itself has a dialectical stance.

By dialectical is meant that humans are to seek wisdom; at the same time, wisdom is seeking humankind. Wisdom is investigating natural and human phenomena and deducing practical lessons from them; at the same time, wisdom is something that God must reveal if anyone is to know it. Individual proverbs show the dialectical nature of wisdom; each proverb is not a hard and fast rule, but requires appreciation of the right context when it is appropriate to be applied.[86]

### *Wisdom as Partnership: Alternate Paradigm of Response to God*

Proverbs calls for obedience to wisdom's tenets, but this is not blind obedience but one based on reasoned analysis of experience and

[84]Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 176.

[85]Day, "Introduction," 3.

[86]Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 22–23.

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discernment. Implicit in the instruction genre of Proverbs 1–9 is the understanding that the father is precisely preparing the son for the latter's assuming more independence for his life. The voice of *ḥokmôṯ* is an extension of the voice of the father. "Where the father is the authoritative voice in the family, *ḥokmôṯ* is the corresponding public voice."[87] There is an impending transfer of authority to wisdom, whose primary mode of instruction is observation, reason and discernment. Wisdom makes appeals to reason, common sense, reward, sense of order and fittingness, not merely authority for the sake of authority, although admittedly that is also present.

Feminist theologians are uncomfortable with hierarchical divine command models that tend to reinforce women's subjection to male authority. They prefer models that emphasize human partnership, in particular, focusing on women's concrete and creative ways of engagement and participation rather than obedience as the paradigm of response to God.[88] McFague argues for language about God that is not hierarchical, dualistic, and unchanging but highlights mutuality and participation.[89] Ricoeur himself wrote, "It is through participation in wisdom that someone may be said to be wise."[90]

The metaphor of wisdom as companion, someone who accompanies YHWH during creation (Prov 8:22–31) and guides humans along the path to life (Prov 4:5–19, etc.), would be a key input to the paradigm of wisdom as participation and partnership. There is no denial of the appeal to authority of wisdom (Prov 1:20–33), only the recognition that our present context warrants focus on the alternate paradigm. Wisdom is not primarily seen as the path of moral absolutes (although wisdom tenets do not violate the Torah) but motive for following is

[87]Newsom, "Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom," 146.

[88]Ross, "Women, Beauty, and Justice," 81.

[89]McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 2.

[90]Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 88.

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found in the rightness, sense of order, beauty and rhythm that wisdom brings to one's life.

The distinction Bernard Loomer makes between unilateral power vs. relational power is insightful. Unilateral power is the common understanding of power: "'the capacity to influence, guide, adjust, manipulate, shape, control … to advance one's purposes,' and to be affected as little as possible in the process."[91] One's gain in power always results with another's loss of power. In contrast, relational power leads to mutual transformation. It is "the ability both to produce and undergo an effect," since one should not try to exert influence without an appreciation for the situation and person/s one is trying to influence. God exercises both unilateral and relational power. In allowing Abraham and Moses to "bargain" to influence His decision to punish Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19) and the people of Israel (Exod 32–34; Num 13–14), God deals with them using relational power.[92] In the New Testament, Jesus allows his conversation with the Canaanite woman to change his decision (Matt 15:22–28).

Certainly the divine-human partnership is not an equal partnership. There is a qualitative difference when we speak of God in human terms, such as speaking of God and humans as co-creators. Yet the alternative paradigm effects a significant and substantial change in the power structure.

### *Wisdom as Relationship: Alternate Understanding of Wisdom as Subject, not Object*

There are two important implications to the portrayal of wisdom as a personified figure. First, it counteracts the human tendency to objectify wisdom, that is, to equate wisdom with mastery of a collection

[91]Bernard Lee, "The Social Matrix of Religious Obedience," *Review for Religious: A Journal of Catholic Spirituality* 67:3 (2008): 295.

[92]Lee, "The Social Matrix of Religious Obedience," 295, 298.

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of wisdom sayings in a book or even many books. Wisdom cannot be mastered; the exhortation is to seek it for the duration of one's life.

For Israel, wisdom is relationship with God, as expressed in the phrase "The fear of YHWH is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov 1:7; 9:10). Only God knows the way to wisdom (Job 28). Who can ever master relationship, wisdom, or God? Wisdom also entails relationship with the sages and elders who go before those who wish to learn wisdom. As von Rad put it, "Wisdom does not turn towards man in the shape of an 'It', teaching, guidance, salvation or the like, but of a person, a summoning 'I'."[93]

The writings of educator Parker Palmer on relational knowing help to shed insight on this. "Truth has nothing to do with manufacturing a world, keeping it at a distance, manipulating it to suit our needs, or owning it as property. Nor does it mean projecting our psyches on [it]. Rather, truth involves entering a relationship with someone or something genuinely other than us, but with whom we are intimately bound."[94] Far from learning a list of do's and don'ts, wisdom invites engagement, involvement, cultivation, vulnerability in a relationship that is "mutually accountable and transforming … forged of trust and faith in the face of unknowable risks,"[95] dare one say, on the part of both parties—God and human.

Second, wisdom as relationship means humans always need to factor in the inscrutable freedom of God. Even in a book such as Proverbs, traditionally seen as the prime exponent of the strong deed-consequence nexus of conventional wisdom, six proverbs which speak

[93]Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* I: *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (NY: Harper & Row, 1962), 444.

[94]Parker Palmer, *To Know as We are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 31.

[95]Palmer, *To Know as We are Known*, 31.

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about the operation of the freedom of God in human life were identified by von Rad (Prov 16:9; 19:21; 21:2=16:2; 20:24; 21:30–31).[96]

In Brueggemann's words, "[t]hese serve to make wisdom penultimate, for it is YHWH who is ultimate. These teachers produce not a system of moral calculation; rather, they attest to a relationship that is characterized by inscrutability and mystery, but that has immense concrete implications."[97] While the sages claimed "divine authority for the integrity and truth of what they taught (2 Sam 16:23), they normally avoided a dogmatism that made their teachings absolute, unyielding, and unresponsive to the times, specific circumstances, and human experience. They readily admitted there were limits to their knowledge …."[98]

The embodiment of wisdom in Jesus also points to the relational aspect of wisdom. The horizon of the seeker of wisdom must continually be open to new possibilities and creative engagement in the complexity of life.

### *Wisdom as Openness to the Other: Alternate Valuations for Truth*

In a patriarchal context, the woman is the quintessential and irreducible "other." God is the essential "Other" to humans. Wisdom models what it means to be open to the horizon of others. Israel's wisdom authors borrowed material from pagan non-Israelite sources to invigorate their theological reflection. Similarly our task is to utilize non-Christian sources of knowledge, language and symbols to shed light on our continuing quest to understand God and our Christian mission.

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[96]Brueggemann, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 313.

[97]Brueggemann, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 313.

[98]Leo G. Perdue, *Proverbs*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2000), 8.

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The sages' creative adaptation of goddess imagery stands in marked contrast to the early Church's reaction against Gnosticism. Gnosticism allowed the female principle in its concept of the godhead. Without oversimplifying things, an argument could be made that the Church Fathers' reaction against this contributed in some measure to the ecclesiastical patriarchalization that conditions the minds of the Christian community up to today.[99] Contrast the liberating attitudes of Jesus toward women that can be seen in the Gospels. Does this precisely show the danger of failure to acknowledge and theologically adapt contemporary cultural forms, knowledge, and worldviews?

### *Wisdom as Female: Alternate Images and Language for God*

Perhaps Lang and Hadley have a valid point in positing that Lady Wisdom challenges the prevailing male notion of God and affirms the importance of strengthening the association of the feminine element with God. Mananzan points out that archaeology shows that early "religions existed with a goddess as dominant divine image or together with a male God."[100] The Filipino word for God, *Bathala*, consists of *Ba* (*babae* "female"), *Tha* ("light" or "spirit") and *La* (*lalake* "male"). Data from the earliest civilizations in Sumer, Babylon, Egypt, and India show that "the most ancient human image of God was … female," the dominant image being the goddess of fertility.[101] Swidler and Bloomquist concur that the divine was first worshipped as female, with the latter attributing it to the mystery with which the ancients regarded the female ability to bear life, the male role in conception being unknown at that time.[102]

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[99]Mananzan, "Woman and Religion," 7–8.

[100]Mananzan, "Women and Religion," 4–5.

[101]Mananzan, "Women and Religion," 4–5.

[102]Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Women* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 22–23; Bloomquist, "Let God be God," 52.

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The Hebrew Scriptures use many female images for God. God is portrayed as a mother giving birth to Israel (Deut 32:18), in birth pangs (Isa 42:13–14), with a womb (Job 38:28–29; Isa 46:3–4; 63:14–15), nursing (Num 11:12; Isa 49:14–15) and comforting a child (Ps 131:1–2; Isa 66:12–13). God is also portrayed as the mistress of a house (Ps 123:2) who provides and prepares food (Ps 23:5; Exod 16:35; 17:6), a midwife (Ps 22:9), and a seamstress who clothes people (Gen 3:21; Ps 102:26; Matt 6:30). In truth, God has no gender, being freely portrayed in both male and female imagery in the Scriptures. As Murphy succinctly put it: "God is no more female than male"[103]; Swidler calls God "androgynous."[104]

Patriarchal monotheism was correct in its sensitivity to the need of a polemic against pagan goddess worship and the sexual rites that often accompanied it. The problem was the tradition did not absorb the feminine images of God in such a way that would lead to the liberation of the social structures. While not the only factor, when the feminine element in God is lost or underrepresented, this leads to a loss of status for women. A recovery of the feminine image of God can help lead to a "stripping away of women's false consciousness."[105] Camp even calls for a reform in traditional Jewish and Christian worship and the creation of woman-centered worship traditions that would speak more meaningfully to women (and men).[106] This is not to take away from the picture of God we already have but to make the picture more complete.

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[103]Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary XXII (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1998), 286.

[104]Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations*, 35.

[105]Mananzan, "Women and Religion," 14.

[106]Claudia V. Camp, "Woman Wisdom as Root Metaphor: A Theological Consideration," in *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in Honor of Roland E. Murphy*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 58, ed. Kenneth G. Hoglund, et al. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 61.

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The realization that language is socially constructed points us to the need for discernment in the use of language for God. The "false consciousness" of religious language needs to be unmasked and redeemed as well. "'The inherent patriarchalism in the Bible should not be allowed to dominate its message.'"[107] This is as true for other uses of language in Scripture that show the limitations of language, e.g., the Divine Warrior image, God as Father and King.[108] Care must be taken to present a more rounded view of God that reflects the diversity of images and complementing theologies in the Scriptures.

> [D]escriptions of God will reflect the personalities and … sex of the writers. Divine revelation comes via the human personality; it is because human beings are made in God's image that they can speak of God in a way which reflects who they are as human beings. But it is only when we have men and women together that we have the divine image represented, and all this therefore suggests that … *male insights on God which emerge from the Bible have to be complemented by female ones* (italics supplied).[109]

## Hermeneutical Appropriation: The Liberating Potential and Limitations of Metaphor

Camp asked "whether [Lady Wisdom] can function as an authoritative image for theology, and especially for feminist theology today, and if so, what would constitute her gifts and limitations."[110] While she sought the answer in the socio-historical reality of Israel and literary data of women in Israelite society, this study has sought

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[107]Murphy, *Proverbs*, 286.

[108]Murphy, *Proverbs*, 286; McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 145–52.

[109]John Goldingay, "Hosea 1–3, Genesis 1–4 and Masculist Interpretation," in *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 168.

[110]Camp, "Woman Wisdom as Root Metaphor," 47.

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the answer in the nature of the metaphor and the truth-claims of the text itself.

Thus the figure of Lady Wisdom, while admittedly the product of patriarchal forces, can also be a factor for liberation of the text. Since each generation that has inherited the Scripture text is a product of its own *Zeitgeist*, we as well harbor our own biases and oppressive presuppositions. Reading the Scriptures therefore needs to be an occasion for self-examination, self-awareness, confession, and repentance.

"The only access to a relatively unbiased and therefore nonoppressive approach is to become self-aware and explicit about one's social location and the effective historical consciousness to which it has contributed and then to methodically criticize and thereby neutralize as much as possible the ideological effects."[111] In that way, our hermeneutic can become one of restoration, uncovering the liberating potential of the text, instead of stopping prematurely at suspicion only.

Patriarchy is not an "ontological given" but something that emerged in history.[112]

In the end, though Israel never examined its patriarchal assumptions (much like the early Church could not critique the practice of slavery in their society), what keeps it open is the wisdom tradition's commitment to the centrality of discourse and its capacity to embrace dissident voices such as found in Job and Ecclesiastes. The wisdom tradition was the location within Israel where radical challenges could be made against the dominant symbolic order.[113] It was true back then; it continues to be true today.

> "[L]anguage … the medium by which we express what we perceive, shapes perception itself because of the accumulated cultural meanings attached to the words we use …." Words are not just words: they

[111]Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 183.

[112]Bloomquist, "Let God be God," 51.

[113]Newsom, "Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom," 159.

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> are loaded with meanings that are generated by the experiences of individuals in specific social situations …. Words are extremely important because they give definition and meaning to reality. How we see the world and the things in it are to a great extent structured by the types … of words we use.[114]

Yet language is also the way out. Liberation comes in language also. "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits" (Prov 18:21).

A caveat though is in order. Caution must be exercised that in re-languaging God and women's experience, women are not given a "safety valve" to release the pressure of the patriarchal situation while leaving the socio-politico-cultural and religious frameworks unchallenged. Garcia-Dungo points to women's jobs outside the home affording them temporary relief even while the pattern of domination/subordination continues in their marital life.[115] Here the limitation of metaphor as a change agent has to be acknowledged. The creation of an egalitarian structure that will enhance the full humanity of women and men, rather than the preservation of the status quo, must be the continuing task of the Church.

"The importance of the personification of Wisdom cannot be overemphasized. It is an idea that, once introduced into the biblical Wisdom tradition, took on a life of its own and grew in importance in complexity, and in depth as time went on."[116] Personified Wisdom became a way of talking about the central figure of the faith, for Judaism the Torah, and for Christianity, Jesus.[117]

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[114]Garcia-Dungo, *Social Construction of Subordination/Domination*, 27, quoting James Doyle.

[115]Garcia-Dungo, *Social Construction of Subordination/Domination*, 1.

[116]Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 50.

[117]Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 50.

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Even with its inherent limitations and contradictions, it remains a useful and powerful means of communication and theological reflection. Her value today is to point out the problem of the place of women in a patriarchal society.[118] The metaphor of Lady Wisdom continues to stimulate discussion, reflection, and attempts to language our faith in a better way.

Borrowing what Murphy said, "… Lady Wisdom is a divine communication: God's communication, extension of self, to human beings."[119] In that sense, she continues to speak to us today.

[118]Murphy, *Proverbs*, 277.

[119]Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 147.

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