

An Exegetical Exploration of Proverbs 8

A landscape photograph of a mountain range under a teal aurora borealis, reflected in water. The mountains are dark and rugged, with some snow patches. The aurora is a vibrant green and blue, creating a shimmering effect in the sky. The water in the foreground is calm, reflecting the mountains and the aurora.

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Proverbs chapter eight is the principle passage that personifies wisdom as a lady. The passage is placed between the seductive adulterous of chapter seven and the foolish woman of chapter 9:13-18. Interestingly the book of Proverbs closes with an acrostic poem of the ideal wife, (Proverbs 31:10-31). There is a tension found in the male dominance of the proverbs, and their exalting of the female personage. The male is warned of the seductive woman, but the woman is not warned of the seductive man. The Proverbs are addressed to the son and not to a daughter. This dominance is expressed even in the oracle of a mother to her princely son, her words are introduced as; (Proverbs 31:1) *The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him:.* The mother's words are introduced as the words of King Lemuel and she remains nameless. On the other hand the words are the mother's and not King Lemuel's. To the credit of those who formed the collection of the book (and by the inspirational direction of the Spirit) of Proverbs the tension of patriarchal culture with the female personification of wisdom is maintained even to the end of the book by the acrostic poem of the ideal wife.

Any exegetical exploration of the Proverbs must be mindful of the genre of writing as poetic wisdom. As Hebrew poetry the Proverbs are written in parallel lines, which can be synonymous, antithetical, and synthetical. Poetry utilizes the aesthetic nature of language and thought with imagery, metaphor, meter, and other literary devices. The Hebrews greatest contribution to art is found in their poetry and in their narratives.

A poetic analysis of verse 1 reveals the synonymous parallelism of wisdom as understanding, (תְּבוּנָה) which is a feminine singular noun as is wisdom.

Proverbs 8:1

*Does not **wisdom** call,
and does not **understanding** raise her voice?*

Wisdom and understanding are parallel to each other as is call and raise her voice.

This analysis is significant for properly interpreting and translating verse 14.

*I have good advice and sound wisdom;
I have insight, I have strength.*

The word translated insight is the same noun of verse 1 translated as understanding. The preposition *lamed* (לִי) with the 1st common singular suffix is not attached to the word insight, but the word insight is preceded by the 1st common singular pronoun 'I' (אני). Thus the verse translates clearer as;

I have good advice and sound wisdom;

I (am) insight,

I have strength.

According to the poetic analysis of verse 1 the personification of wisdom is synonymous with the personification of understanding or insight, so it is correct to see wisdom refer to her-self as insight. Furthermore strength cannot parallel sound wisdom for they are neither synonymous, nor necessarily synthetical, or antithetical.

Verse 1 is the narrator of the chapter and presents the reader with a rhetorical question, written in poetic form. His question serves to introduce the following verses as a proclamation of wisdom's appearances. In verse 2 Wisdom is found in numerous places taking her stand. In verse 3 the reader is informed of the places from which wisdom cries aloud. ¹She is found at the gates, at the entrance of the portals from whence she cries.

Verse 4 begins the first person speech of woman wisdom. ²Her call is a universal call to all that live; even the simple and the foolish are invited to learn from her. ³Verse 6 opens with the command to hear, the word hear (שִׁמְעוּ) is in the imperative form, the sense is not of invitation but of command.

The personification of the woman wisdom has through the use of reason (verse 1) and language (verse 6a) been exalted to a position of authority from which she can command all of humanity to listen to her discourse.

¹ The *gates of the city* were a place of commerce and discussion, Jeremiah was commanded of Yahweh to stand in the gate of Yahweh's house and proclaim the word of Yahweh, (Jeremiah7:2).

² There is a contrast between the call of Wisdom in chapter 8 and that of the foolish woman in Proverbs 9:13-18, while 9:1-6 is even a more direct contrast to 9:13-17.

³ The Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4 is also in the imperative, the usage in Proverbs 8:6 recalls the reader of this fact.

⁴Wisdom will speak *noble things* (נְגִידִים) what comes from her mouth will be what is right or straight. ⁵Wisdom finds wickedness to be an *abomination* to her lips. Wisdom continues to assert the purity of her words and likens the value of her instruction and knowledge to be above that of silver and gold.

Verse 11 reads better if translated,

For beautiful is wisdom more than jewels,

And all that you may desire cannot compare with her.

Verse 11 wants to compare wisdom with things that are desirable, with jewels. The preposition *mem* (מ) preceding the word jewels is a comparative and supplies the 'more than' or better than, leaving the word *tovah* ('good' or it can mean beautiful contextually) left untranslated. Furthermore verse 11 is no longer a first person speech of wisdom, but reads as a speech provided by the narrator. For the narrator to refer to wisdom as beautiful is in keeping with her personification, and with the comparison of her to jewels and all that could be desired.

Wisdom is found dwelling with 'prudence', that is with forethought, insight, patience. Wisdom defines the fear of Yahweh as hatred of evil. She lists pride, arrogance, and the way of evil, along with perverted speech as vices that she hates. (Verse 14 has been covered at the beginning of the essay).

In verses 15 and 16 Wisdom describes herself as the power through which Kings reign and rulers decree justly. She continues her description of her association with royalty and nobility. In spite of the call for all to hear her, woman wisdom has a touch of aristocracy about

⁴ If the word *nagid* (translated as the word *melek* which means king) is understood as belonging first as a title to Israel's Kings and those with responsibilities in the temple, then the usage here links wisdom both with Kingship and Temple authority, (chapter has wisdom building her temple). The significance of this abstract plural form of *nagid* serves to further establish the authority of wisdom. See Hasel (נְגִיד) TDOT, Volume IX Pp. 192-193, 2. statistics.

⁵ The word *abomination* (תוֹעֵבָה) is another word of significance because its usage is primarily in Yahweh speeches and prophetic speeches. The principle exception to this is the usage of the word by the Egyptians to describe association with the Israelites, (Genesis 43:32). In conclusion wisdom's speech utilizes words which align her with Yahweh.

her. She is the power behind good rulers and just decrees. Perhaps it is the importance of their position for humanity that requires her attention. ⁶There is no movement here to an annulling of the office of King as is expressed in the shaping of the Psalter, where only Yahweh is given the title King after Psalm 89 (excluding references to foreign kings in chapters 135 and 136).

Wisdom's speech shifts now to her rewards for those who love her, (verses 17-21). Wisdom's love is one of reciprocity she loves those who love her and seek her with diligence. She promises riches, wealth, and prosperity to those who dwell with her. She declares her fruit better than gold and silver in verse 19. Verse 19 is reminiscent of verse 10 where she compares the value of her instruction and knowledge as being better than silver and gold. Wisdom walks in the way of righteousness and justice. Wisdom endows those who love her with wealth, filling their treasuries. Once again there is an aristocratic tenor to Wisdom's address. What pauper has a treasury that wisdom might fill it? Further, the word endow comes from the verb *nahal*, which means 'inheritance'.

⁷While wisdom promises this endowment to all who love her, it is apparent that such wealth was reserved for royalty or nobility, and not available to a wise pauper.

Wisdom's divine origin is the subject of 8:22-31. Wisdom is revealed as an essential part of the created order, so essential that she must precede creation. In verse 22 the NRSV translates *qanah* as created, while the NKJV translates *qanah* as possessed. It is significant that the word *bara* 'create' in Genesis is not utilized here. Some would use the passage in Genesis 14:19 to substantiate the translation of *qanah* as creation. However the translation possessor works well for the blessing that Melchizedek pronounces on Abraham. Likewise of the eighty uses of *qanah* in the MT all carry the meaning of buying, acquiring, purchasing or possessing.

⁶ Psalm 89 cannot come to terms with the apparent failure of the Davidic covenant, for there is no King in Israel, David is referred to primarily as servant for the rest of the Psalter, (Yahweh will be addressed as King in Psalm 145). The aristocratic tenor of wisdom in Proverbs 8:15-16 leads one to believe these verses were written prior to the exile.

⁷ See Qohelet 9:13-16 for the story of the wise pauper.

The question of *created* or *possessed* becomes one of philosophical theology. If wisdom was created then she has a starting point. If she has a specific beginning then she is not an attribute of God, rather she is a reality that exists only in God's relation to creation. If wisdom has a starting point then God existed prior to her creation without wisdom. That God possesses wisdom is not a claim that requires argument.

⁸When wisdom is understood as an attribute of God that is revealed in the order of creation, the next step to a metaphorical personification is born of necessity. Wisdom takes on a life of its own as it is witnessed by humanity. Being revealed in the created order and witnessed to by humanity, wisdom must be spoken of in metaphorical terms. *Wisdom as a personified metaphor allows us to communicate wisdom as a way of aligning oneself with God through wisdom, while remaining distant from his person.* The personification allows for wisdom to be separated from God allowing for a distance between God's wisdom and man's. So through use of the metaphor man may partake of wisdom that comes from God without being wise as God. God remains sovereign and is not reduced to a spiritual commodity available through wisdom. Proverbs 8:13 remind the reader to fear Yahweh who hates evil. Wisdom becomes a metaphorical living entity that ultimately delights in humanity, (Proverbs 8:31).

As Proverbs 8:22-31 unfolds poetic discourse on the supremacy of God as creator of heaven and earth, wisdom is there. The reader is drawn back into the creation narrative through use of words. In 8:22 wisdom is at the *beginning* (רֵאשִׁית) of his way. In verse 24 she is found present when there were no *depths* (תְּהוֹמוֹת). Both of these words are found in the first two verses of Genesis. With this similarity of language the author reveals that the author had no trouble using the language of Genesis (and intentionally does so) for this reason, the use of the word *qanah* rather than *bara* is a conscious intentional move. With this in mind the word *qanah* is meant to be understood as *possessed* rather than *created*.

⁹Furthermore, the two words *beginning* and *deep* that are used in the first two verses are purposefully selected in what is believed to be a reference for a rebuttal to ANE ideas of chaos. So, Yahweh is the Lord of chaos and wisdom was there present with him as he brought order to chaos.

⁸ The Apostle Paul agrees that the attributes of God are understood by us through their revealing by the created order, Romans 1:20.

⁹ John E. Hartley, "Genesis," *New International Biblical Commentary*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000) Pp.43 Dr. Hartley also makes reference to the ANE understanding of the waters of chaos as a purposeful motif of the writer.

Wisdom declares, "I was brought forth" (חוללתִי), and her bringing forth came before creation.¹⁰ The word *brought forth* is derived from *hul* and is used in some passages to describe the writhing pain of child-birth. The picture is of wisdom existing prior to the creation, the creation requiring her presence.

Wisdom in verse 31 is pictured as *'delighting in the sons of men'*. Again the tension of patriarchal society is challenged with their own need for the feminine wisdom, further there is an erotic overtone to the preference of wisdom to abide with men in the world. The metaphor has succeeded in distancing God himself from being a direct manifestation of wisdom. God's wisdom remaining superior to anything which man can acquire, yet his wisdom is still available to men through the woman wisdom.

The ideas and language expressed in Proverbs 8:22-31 about creation and God's activity in establishing bounds or limits to the sea, and the establishing of the foundations of the earth are found expressed similarly in Psalm 104:5-9 and Job 38:4-11. It is interesting to note that the great challenge to the wisdom corpus found in the book of Job finds resolve in the tension of faith and experience in God's supremacy over creation, and thus over wisdom as man knows it.

In Proverbs 8:30 Wisdom describes herself with a masculine singular noun, *'master workman'* (אָמֹן). There is one other occurrence of the word *'amon'* where it is used in a context demanding another translation other than a *personal name*, or as a *multitude*. The use of *'amon'* with the article in Jeremiah 52:15 translates as *'artisans'*. There are other texts which support the imagery of Wisdom as a *'master craftsman'*, such as Proverbs 9 where she builds her house, or Exodus 31:106 where the craftsmen of the tabernacle are endowed with wisdom. Such a translation is supportive of wisdom as belonging to those who are skilled in specific trades, reflecting the Hebrew cultures practice of learning a practical trade even if you are a person of wealth or a teacher etc.

As in 8:6 Wisdom has used the imperative form of *'hear'* in verses 32 and 33. Her command is addressed to those whom she calls her sons. They are instructed to hear instruction and be wise.

¹⁰ See Micah 4:10, Isaiah 13:8, 26:17, 66:7, for examples of pain and birth. *Hul* (חול) can be translated as dance, however it refers to a dance of vulgarity (see Judges 21:21), rather than the rejoicing dance (כָּרָךְ) of David in II Samuel 6:14.

Comparison of Psalm 1 with Proverbs 8:34-36.

Psalm 1 begins with, *Happy is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked.*

In Proverbs 8:34 Wisdom says;

Happy is the one (man) who listens to me,

Watching daily at my gates

Waiting beside my doors.

In Psalm 1 the happy man meditates upon the law day and night. In Proverbs 8:34 the man waits at Wisdom's doors daily; meditation upon the law, and waiting upon Wisdom place man in a position of reception. In Psalm 1 the happy man is like a tree planted by streams of water, giving forth fruit. In Proverbs 8:35 the happy man finds favor from Yahweh. In Psalm 1 the wicked are like wheat blown away of the wind, they do not stand in the judgment or in the congregation of the righteous. In Proverbs 8:36 the man who misses Wisdom injures himself. In Psalm 1 the wicked perish. In Proverbs 8:36 those who hate Wisdom love death.

The initial word of Psalm 1 and Proverbs 8:34-36 followed by the synonymous words used for man alerts the reader to the comparison. The passage in Proverbs does not go so far as to make law and Wisdom synonymous, but does place the two alongside each other as part of the process of aligning oneself for the reception of God's favor. However to hate Wisdom is to join the ranks of the wicked of Psalm 1, for both find death.

Final Comments on Wisdom, God, and Humanity in Proverbs 8

In chapter 8 of Proverbs we read a theologically developed metaphor on the personification of wisdom. The using of metaphor provides a tool to communicate what otherwise is a mystery, a mystery whose depths might not be reached even through lengthy dialectical writing. The metaphor simplifies, engaging the imagination through the use of aesthetic language. The wisdom sayings of the later chapters (10-31) have given impetus to a fully developed theology that exalts wisdom beyond the bounds of aphorism. Wisdom as an undeniable part of creation and life has an existence of its own. While the sayings are designed to equip a person with the ability to maneuver successfully

through life, the theology of wisdom becomes a matter of existential thought.

¹¹The purpose for the personification of wisdom must deal with the monotheism of Israel's teachers, and scriptures. Wisdom cannot be presented as a 'diving being', yet must be taught as reaching beyond the bounds of aphorism. Also the metaphorical personification allows Israel's teachers (sages) to recognize wisdom as an attribute of God. Wisdom however issues a call to all humanity, to even the ignorant and simple. The use of the personified metaphor of wisdom allows all to have access to wisdom, while maintaining the sovereign holiness of Yahweh. God in his being is not reduced to a 'force' which can be tapped, his wisdom remains above that which is revealed to man, yet the wisdom that is available came from him.

¹²The personification of wisdom as female allows young men to recognize that in a world where the sexual impulse so easily destroys the young, wisdom is an alternative partner, offering wealth and life. This erotic element of the metaphor does not annul the natural order of life for marriage and family, as Proverbs 31:10-31 aptly communicates as the last words of the book of Proverbs.

It is important to note that Wisdom is not given a name, the only proper name in the entire passage is God's (Yahweh) which is used three times. Wisdom remains nameless, because she is only a personification of a reality. God is exalted in the passage through the use of his name. God's name is found in each of the three major divisions, Wisdom's initial speeches and personification (1-21), her presence prior to and at creation (22-31), her final address (32-36).

Yahweh is to be feared (verse 13), the fear being expressed through the hatred of evil. Yahweh is possessor of wisdom (verse 22), and Yahweh gives favor to those who find wisdom (35). Although Wisdom is present at creation, even prior to creation, she is not attributed with any activity in creation aside from being present, and rejoicing before him. Finally in verse 31 Wisdom is found;

'...rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race'.

¹¹ Note my prior comments on the use of the word 'hear' as in Deuteronomy 6:4 9used three times in Proverbs 8).

¹² Wisdom metaphorically is the partner 'consort' of God.

For humanity the possession of wisdom is an expression of the divine image. ¹³Wisdom is available to all of humanity and her offer for companionship is not limited to those with intellectual gifts. Part and parcel to the exercise of wisdom for humanity is knowledge of Yahweh. Humanity is called to love wisdom, as they are commanded to love God. Humanity finds joy in life lived hearing the instruction of wisdom.

A final note in Psalm 1 in relation to the book of Psalms
and the comparison of Proverbs 8:34-36

Psalm 1 holds a specific place in the shaping of the Psalter. In some older mss Psalm 1 is written in red. ¹⁴Likewise some mss of Acts 13:33 quote the second Psalm and number it as the first. Psalm 1 is understood to be the tone setting and interpretive lens through which the Psalms are to be read. The section in Proverbs 8:34-36 so closely paralleled with Psalm 1 sits conveniently placed to set the tone and be an interpretive lens for the reading of the short proverbial sayings of chapters 10-30.

¹³ See James 1:5, it is apparent that James held to this theology of wisdom's availability to all.

¹⁴ See Bruce Metzger's Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament 2nd edition. See also Gerald Wilson's doctoral dissertation on the shaping of the Psalter.