

"Wise Women" or Wisdom Woman? A Biblical Study of Women's Roles¹

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Scholars remain divided today over the origin and identity of the Wisdom Woman in Prov. 1-9. Many roads run back to her door through mythological,² sapiential,³ apocalyptic,⁴ rabbinic⁵ and early Christian⁶ circles of tradition. Attempts to pursue her prior to the book of Proverbs remain difficult, a problem for which at least four solutions have been proposed.

¹ This is a revision of a paper read to the Hebrew and Cognate Literature section at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, San Francisco, Nov. 21, 1992.

² The myth of the Sybil at Cumae, an "old woman" who speaks in ecstatic utterances, animates pagan (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14.132) and early Christian sources (*Herm. Vis.* 1.2.2-2.4.1). At Nag Hammadi, Sophia appears as a goddess-figure in *Ap. John* 8.20; 9.25-10.19; 23.21-35; 28.11-21; *Hyp. Arch.* 94.29-34; 95.18-31; *Orig. World* 98.13; 112.1-9; *Gos. Eg.* 57.1-4; 69.3; *Eugnostos* 77.4-6 (divine consort); 81.23-83.1; 88.6; *Soph. Jes. Chr.* 101.16; 102.13; 114.15 ("mother of the universe"). For further study, see PHEME PERKINS, "Sophia as Goddess in the Nag Hammadi Codices," *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, Karen King, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

³ See *Sir* 1:4-20; 4:11-19; 6:18-31; 24:1-22; *Wis* 6:12-16; 7:7-14, 25-29; *I* 8:1-21; 9:9-11; 10:1-21. See also *Jdt.* 8:29; 11:20-23. Recent overviews from a Christian perspective appear in M. Goulder, "Sophia in 1 Corinthians," *NTS* 37 (1991): 516-534; and P. Lampe, "Theological Wisdom and the 'Word about the Cross': The Rhetorical Scheme in 1 Cor. 1-4," *Inter* 44 (1990): 111-131.

⁴ See *Sib. Or.* Prologue 30-49; 2.1-5; 3.1-7, 809-829; 7.150-162; 11.315-324; *Herm. Vis.* 2.4.1 (where *he sibylla* becomes *he ekklesia*). At Nag Hammadi, see *1 Apoc. Jas.* 35.7; 36.6-8; *Great Pow.* 44.19-20.

⁵ On the symbolic role of Rachel as "mother" in Israel, see the rabbinic sources cited by Yael Levin, "The Woman of Valor in Jewish Ritual (Prov. 31:1-31)," *Beth Mikra* 31 (1986): 339-347 (Hebrew).

⁶ On the symbolic background to the cult of Mary, see Marina Warner, *Alone of All her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Random House, 1976); and Geoffrey Ashe, *The Virgin* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976).

First, some see an indigenously Hebrew goddess beneath the surface of Prov. 1-9, hypothesizing this goddess to have been a vigorous participant in a quasi-Canaanite pantheon in prehistoric Israel.⁷ More than mere observer at creation, this goddess is herself Co-Creator,⁸ a divine being who, in the words of Samuel Terrien, is no less than "mediatrix" of the divine "presence."⁹ Demythologized of her power by monotheistic Israelites, she now survives in the Hebrew Bible as a shadow of her former self.

Second, some agree with the essentials of this goddess theory but look outside Israel for her origins-usually to Egypt¹⁰ or Mesopotamia.¹¹ Proponents of this school compare the Wisdom Woman in Proverbs to Inanna in Sumer, Ma'at in Egypt, and even Athena in Greece.¹² Muted indications of a polytheistic Yahwism in 5th century Egypt¹³ and 9th century Sinai¹⁴ are

⁷ This is the extreme position of Bernhard Lang, *Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs: An Israelite Goddess Redefined* (New York: Pilgrim, 1986), pp.126-131.

⁸ See Kathleen O'Connor, *The Wisdom Literature* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988), p. 83.

⁹ Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 357.

¹⁰ See H. Donner, "Die religionsgeschichtlichen Ursprünge von Sprüche 8," *Zeitschrift Für Aegyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 82 (1958): 8-18; C. Bauer-Kayatz, *Studien zu Proverbien 1-9* (WMANT 22; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1966); G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), pp. 153-155; J. S. Kloppenborg, "Isis and Sophia in the Book of Wisdom," *HTR* 75 (1982): 57-84.

¹¹ See W. F. Albright, "The Goddess of Life and Wisdom," *American Journal of Semitic Languages* 36 (1919/20): 258-294; *ibid.*, "Some Canaanite-Phoenician Sources of Hebrew Wisdom," *VTSup* 3 (1955): 1-45; G. Boström, *Proverbiastudien: die Weisheit und das fremde Weib in Sprüche 1-9* (Lunds Universitets Arsskrift 30, 3; Lund: Gleerup, 1935).

¹² This and other possible Greek parallels are cited by Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), pp. 153-154.

¹³ Note the compound name 'Anatyahu in A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century BC* (Osnabrock: Otto Zeller; repr. of Oxford: Clarendon, 1923) 44.3. Claudia Camp questions whether the entity designated "precious" to the gods and "exalted" by the "lord of holiness" in the Aramaic version of Ahiqar (Cowley, line 95) is, in fact, the "wisdom" mentioned three lines above it (line 92); but it is difficult to imagine something else as the source for these descriptions; see Claudia Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: Almond, 1985), p. 293.

¹⁴ The Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscription discovered in the Sinai has been translated "To Yahweh of Samaria and his A/asherah." The controversy centers on whether to capitalize "A/asherah." See Z. Meshel, "Did Yahweh Have a Consort?" *BAR* 5/2 (1979): 30; and Saul Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel* (SBLMS 34; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988).

often cited as corroborating evidence.¹⁵ Intramural debates within this camp tend to focus on whether the relationship of this goddess to the Wisdom Woman is organic and close, or inorganic and distant.¹⁶

Third, many believe her merely to be an extension, or "hypostasis" of the one true God, much like the Shekinah, the Metatron, or the Memra of Yahweh.¹⁷ This view represents a continued resistance to radical questions about the plausibility, antiquity, and homogeneity of monotheism in ancient Israel.¹⁸

Fourth, questions about origins are for many today at least subsidiary, and at most irrelevant, to questions of literary structure and semiotic function. Thus the Wisdom Woman is a personification or, more technically, a metaphorical symbol for the wisdom tradition itself, brilliantly conceived and structurally woven into the "book" of Proverbs in order to unify the several anthologies which make up this "book" into a coherent whole.¹⁹

As debates go, this one seems more productive than most. Proponents of the various goddess hypotheses have forced Old Testament scholars to reassess the reality of Israelite religion in both its official **and** its popular forms, and this, at least, is good.²⁰ Recent advances in literary criticism also

¹⁵ See Mark Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities of Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), pp. 145-160; and J. C. de Moor, *The Rise of Yahwism: The Roots of Israelite Monotheism* (Leuven: Leuven University, 1990), pp. 42-100.

¹⁶ For a discussion, see Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992), pp. 179-183.

¹⁷ On Shekinah, see *m. 'Abot* 3:2; *b. Yoma* 9b; *b. Ber.* 6a; *b. B. Bat.* 25a. On Memra, see *m. Sanh.* 6:4. On Me!atron, see *3 Enoch* 1:4; 3:1-2 and *passim*.

¹⁸ See Helmer Ringgren, *Word and Wisdom* (Lund: Haken Ohlssons Boktryckeri, 1947); M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, pp. 153-156. For more recent discussions, see Lang, *Wisdom*, 137-140; Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, pp. 34-36; Frymer-Kensky, *Wake of the Goddesses*, pp. 83-183.

¹⁹ See Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, pp. 71-77, 179-222; and Gale A. Yee, "An Analysis of Prov. 8:22-31 According to Style and Structure," *ZAW* 94 (1982): 58-66; *ibid.*, "I Have Perfumed My Bed with Myrrh": The Foreign Woman Issa zara in Proverbs 1-9," *JSOT* 43 (1989): 53-68.

²⁰ On goddess religion generally, see Susanne Heine, *Christianity and the Goddesses: Systematic Criticism of a Feminist Theology* (London: SCM, 1988); Larry Hurtado, ed., *Goddesses in Religions and Modern Debate* (Univ. of Manitoba Studies in Religion 1; Atlanta: Scholars, 1990). On the need to distinguish carefully between official and popular religion when discussing Israelite culture, see T. J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit* (HSM 39; Atlanta: Scholars, 1989), pp. 5-34.

enable us to read the book of Proverbs as something other than a jumbled assortment of disconnected sentence--statements.²¹

Theologically speaking, the importance of the contemporary debate over women's roles in both church and society makes the study of **all** the biblical texts, not just the New Testament texts attributed to Paul, imperative. The Old Testament has a contribution to make to this discussion, too, a contribution we may choose to ignore only to our peril.²²

In the ancient world "wise women" enact a number of culturally diverse and socially important roles.²³ The prologue to the Sybilline Oracles, for example, lists no less than ten Sybils by name, "wise women" whose roots run deep into the soil of ancient belief and practice.²⁴ Oliver Gurney notes at least thirteen (and perhaps as many as thirty-two) of these specialists by name in the Hittite literature.²⁵

This paper will reflect on the portrayal of actual "wise women" in Anatolia and Israel and the portrayal of Proverbs' Wisdom Woman from an anthropological rather than a mythological, historical, or purely literary perspective. It reopens the comparative question about origins by drawing more attention to the human rather than the divine elements which structure, mediate, and animate their respective environmental matrices.

Three questions will structure the following discussion. First, what functional roles do wise women play in ancient Anatolia, the culture for which we have the most evidence of her activity? Second, what functional roles do wise women play in Israel, the culture with which most of us are most interested? Finally, what affinities, if any, exist between the functional

²¹ Camp's *Wisdom and the Feminine* is a major step forward.

²² For further study of the American social context, see the incisive history of John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

²³ For an introduction to the activities of female magico-religious specialists in the ancient Near East generally, see H. B. Huffmon, "Prophecy in the Ancient Near East," *IDBSup*: 697-700. For the view that "wise women" are indigenous to Asia Minor, not Mesopotamia, see V. Haas and H. J. Thiel, *Die Beschworungsrituale der AllaiturafJ(o)ji und verwandte Texte* (AOAT 31; Kevelaer: Butzon und Bercker, 1978), pp. 22-23.

²⁴ *Sib. Or.* Prologue 30-49.

²⁵ O. R. Gurney, *Some Aspects of Hittite Religion* (Oxford: University Press, 1977), p. 45. For a comprehensive set of transcribed texts about Anatolian wise women, see V. Haas and I. Wegner, *Die Rituale der Beschworerinnen SALSU.GI* (Corpus der Hurritischen Sprachdenkmaler I/5; Roma: Multigrafica Editrice, 1988), pp. 1-4.

roles these specialists play in the real world and the imaginary literary world empowering the Wisdom Woman in Proverbs 1-9?

Wise Woman in Anatolia

The Anatolian "wise woman" enacts a wide variety of roles. Her presence is required at most rites of passage and other unexpected points of crisis (like plague, war, royal illness, or other calamity).²⁶

As **exorcist** she is responsible for freeing clients from the demons of the Netherworld. This is one of her most important roles. The wise woman Allaiturah(h)i of Mukis in northern Syria lists several of these demons by name:

the spell which is called "paralysis"
 the "thing which sticks to the mouth"
 the "fear before the lion,"
 the "terror before the snake."²⁷

As **incantation-reciter** the wise woman is responsible for preserving, interpreting, and applying the myths of antiquity to the needs of real people. Often she accomplishes this by weaving the themes of a particular myth into the fabric of a purification ritual. It is difficult, at times, to tell whether she is talking about the "release" of a god or hero in the imaginary world or the "release" of a suffering client in the real world.²⁸

As **purification priestess** the wise woman is responsible for cleansing clients from impurity, whether it be caused by sin against the gods, by contact with a defiled substance, or by the diabolical spells of an evil sorcerer. This is done by washing clients with water, anointing them with salves, or releasing them from demons through the construction and destruction of homeopathic images.²⁹

Mastigga, a wise woman from Kizzuwatna, uses both animate and inanimate images in a complex ritual to resolve domestic conflict.³⁰ To identify the evil which poisons her clients she takes soft wax and molds it into the shape of human tongues. Then she magically transfers the evil from her clients into these wax images by a series of incantations. After this, she

²⁶ Gurney, *Some Aspects of Hittite Religion*, pp. 44-63; Haas and Wegner, *Die Beschworerinnen*, pp. 1-4.

²⁷ Haas and Thiel, *Die Beschworungsrituale der Allaiturah(h)i*, 104:4'-5'; 146:47-48. Other demons are listed in Haas and Wegner, *Die Beschworerinnen*, 78:19'.

²⁸ Haas and Thiel, *Allaiturah(h)i*, 140.

²⁹ See M. Vieyra, "Le sorcier hittite," in *Le monde du sorcier* (Sources Orientales 7; Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966), pp. 105-106.

³⁰ See ANET 350-351.

burns these contaminated images in fire in order to release her clients from the "evil of the tongue." Finally she brings in a sacrificial animal, makes the disputing parties spit into its mouth, and slaughters the animal to make doubly sure the evil is removed. Thus, by means of both substitutionary and expulsionary magic, the wise woman resolves the dispute.

Two points need to be underlined before the Hebrew tradition is examined. First, the Anatolian wise woman enacts many roles for many reasons, but fundamentally she is a mediator, a culturally recognized expert in the art of conflict resolution. Behind all the rituals, incantation, and divinations, the reason that kings and commoners come to her is their fundamental need to resolve disputes with warring enemies.

Second, homeopathic magic is fundamentally based on the concept of parallelism. If an abstract evil can be transferred into a concrete image of clay or wax, then the action taken to deal with the image can simultaneously deal with the abstract evil which contaminates the image. To destroy, expel, or curse a homeopathic substitute is to destroy, expel, or curse the evil it represents. Parallelism lies at the heart of homeopathic magic.

Wise Women in Israel

The Hebrew Bible preserves four stories in which wise women play major roles in mediating disputes. This paper will focus on one of them. In two of these stories, the mediator in question is expressly called a "wise woman," namely, the "wise woman" of Tekoa in 2 Samuel 14 and the "wise woman" of Abel in 2 Samuel 20.31 In 1 Samuel 25, Abigail enacts the role of "wise mediator" in the dispute between David and Nabal, though she is never called a "wise woman"³²; whereas in 1 Samuel 28 a woman from Endor, familiar with the professional art of necromancy, attempts to resolve a dispute between Saul and Samuel—a difficult task inasmuch as one of the parties to this dispute is already dead.³³

In 2 Samuel 14 the family of David is caught up in a crisis of staggering proportions. Amnon, David's son by Ahinoam, an Ephraimite

³¹ See J. Hoftijzer, "David and the Tekoite Woman," VI 20 (1970): 419-444; C. Camp, "The Wise Women of 2 Samuel: A Role Model of Women in Early Israel?" *CBQ* 43 (1981): 14-29.

³² P. Kyle McCarter thinks the affinities are strong enough to read the story of Abigail intertextually with the story of the Tekoite woman; *2 Samuel* (AB 9; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), p. 345.

³³ Andre Caquot thinks that an Israelite censor has deliberately sanitized 1 Sam. 28 of its "original" homeopathic elements in "La divination dans l'ancien Israel," in A. Caquot and M. Leibovici, eds., *La divination* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1968), p. 100.

woman, has brutally raped Tamar, David's daughter by Maacah, an Aramean princess.³⁴ Tamar's brother, Absalom, has murdered Amnon in retaliation. Three years have passed-uneasy, painful years-in which the conflict between David and Absalom has been allowed to fester.

Joab, David's general, realizes that something has to be done, not only because this conflict has the potential to paralyze a family, but because it has the potential to paralyze a nation. So he does what other leaders do when facing crises like this: He hires a magico-religious specialist, in this case a wise woman from Tekoa, to resolve this conflict.³⁵

A comparative anthropological reading of this text proves fruitful on at least two levels.

First, it is significant that the Tekoite woman chooses to work with a type of literary device Ulrich Simon calls a "juridical parable."³⁶ Parables are constructed to parallel situations in the real world with situations in the imaginary world. Juridical parables specialize in reflecting instances where justice has been grossly miscarried. In 2 Samuel 20, for example, Nathan the prophet uses a juridical parable about a "little ewe lamb" to alert David to Yahweh's anger over the murder of Uriah.³⁷

Like all parables, juridical parables are based on the operative principle of analogical parallelism.³⁸ When those who hear the parable attempt to resolve the conflict created within it, the intent is to effect real change in the real world. To put it another way, the action taken to resolve the imaginary, substitutionary situation has an immediate, operant effect on the world of the real situation. Juridical parables are, in substance, imaginary homeopathic images crafted by professional mediators in order to resolve real conflict in the real world.

³⁴ Phyllis Trible calls this story "the royal rape of Wisdom"; *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), pp. 37-63.

³⁵ R. Whybray argues that this story is about Joab's wisdom, not that of the Tekoite woman (*The Succession Narrative* [Napierville, IL: Allenson, 1968], p. 59). J. Hoftijzer believes her to be a "capable," ordinary woman, yet one of no particular socio-cultural status ("David and the Tekoite Woman": 444). Camp discusses her function in terms of political power in ancient Israelite communities ("Wise Women of 2 Samuel": 14-15).

³⁶ U. Simon, "The Poor Man's Ewe Lamb: An Example of a Juridical Parable," *Bib* 48 (1967): 208.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ See O. Eissfeldt, *Der Maschal im alten Testament* (BZAW 24; Giessen: Topelmann, 1913), pp. 45-71. Haas and Wegner summarily describe the incantations of the Anatolian wise woman as "analogical sayings" (*Die Beschwoererinnen*, 3).

The parable of the Tekoite woman is a classic example of this. Disguised as a mourner, she tells David the story of a family, her family, which has become the victim of tragedy. She is a widow, survived by two sons to carry on the name of her husband. Yet one of her sons has killed his brother in a violent dispute. This in itself is tragic enough; yet the evil unleashed by this violence has begun to attract still more evil. Now the woman's clan is demanding that she surrender her remaining son to the avenger of blood and the canons of tribal justice.

The demands they make are terrifying. First, they demand that the "lifebreath" (Heb. *nepes*) of the living son be handed over as a substitute for the lifebreath of the dead son. Second, they demand the right to "annihilate" her son's lifebreath altogether (and by proxy, that of her husband as well). In other words, they demand that the evil in their midst be removed by both substitutionary and expulsionary means.

To communicate the depth of her dilemma the wise woman uses a revealing metaphor. She describes the clan's demands as an attempt to "quench my coal which is left." Rykle Borger has pointed out that this phrase is similar to an Akkadian phrase which describes a man without a family as one whose "cultic oven as gone out."³⁹ Thus it does not seem coincidental that the Hebrew word for "coal" in this text (*gahélet*) is also found in the Isaianic tradition in a passage mocking the use of cultic "coals" in Babylonian purification rites,⁴⁰ or that the Akkadian word for "cultic oven" is a standard fixture in neo-Assyrian exorcistic ritual.⁴¹ Then, on the level of praxis the Tekoite woman enables David to resolve his conflict by leading him through a series' of careful maneuvers. Like her counterparts in Anatolia, the Tekoite woman's success as a mediator is determined by her ability to secure the attention of and lead a client to the point of decision.

First, she lays out the problem in the real world by constructing a literary homeopathic substitute for it in the imaginary world, namely, the juridical parable about the two sons. David's initial response to this parable is noncommittal. He tells her to go away, weakly promising to look into her problem at a later date. Her response to this brush-off is immediate and

³⁹ Borger is cited in J. Hoftijzer, "David and the Tekoite Woman": 422, n. 2.

⁴⁰ Isa. 47:14.

⁴¹ See E. Reiner, *Surpu: A Collection of Sumerian and Akkadian Incantations* (AFO Beiheft 11; Berlin: Selbstverlag, 1958; repr. Osnabruck: Biblio-Verlag, 1970), p. 23; and G. Meier, *Die assyrische Beschwörungssammlung Maqlu* (AFO Beiheft 2; Berlin: Selbstverlag, 1937; repr. Osnabruck: Biblio-Verlag, 1967), p. 29.

pointed: "*Upon me, my lord O king, be the sin and upon the house of my father, and let the king and his throne be innocent!*"⁴²

This is the first time anyone has mentioned the word "sin," plus the fact that this is the first time that anyone has even implied that "sin" might be at the root of David's conflict. The wise woman carefully introduces the concept of "sin" in the imaginary world because it is far too sensitive a matter to be dealt with in the real world—not yet. Demonstrating her experience, she maneuvers David firmly enough to attract his attention, yet subtly enough to avoid direct confrontation. She does not yet say who might be responsible for this "sin"; she simply notes its existence. Yet by offering to call it down upon herself and her family, she indirectly communicates to David the utter seriousness of his dilemma. The result of her first maneuver is not simply to secure David's attention, but also to raise his consciousness about the unresolved guilt which divides his family.

Accepting, then, her invitation to enter this imaginary world, David responds to her first request with a stereotypical promise of royal assurance: "*If anyone says anything to you, bring him to me and he will never touch you again.*"⁴³ By setting in parallel the Hebrew verbs *dabar* ("to speak") and *naga'* ("to touch, injure") David signals back to her that he, too, understands the relationship between the world of words and the world of politics. He knows that the threatening words of the clan have a certain power to them. Thus he opens the door to the possibility that he might be willing to do something to check this power, though he still refuses to take direct action.

This reaction of David encourages the wise woman to take a final, crucial step. She asks the king to speak a specific kind of word on her behalf: a royal oath, a word with enough power in it to protect her son's lifebreath from the avenger of blood. Finally, David gives in and pronounces this oath of protection in the name of Yahweh.⁴⁴ Thus the Tekoite woman skillfully leads David to decide whether the lifebreath of her last remaining son is more important than the clan's need to expel evil.

Having accomplished this, she moves swiftly to apply David's decision in the imaginary world to the unresolved conflict still plaguing Israel in the real world.

First, she warns David of the consequences of indecision. By refusing to bring back his "banished one" from exile, David prohibits Absalom from enacting his role as crown prince. Indeed, his indecision is fueling a climate

⁴² 2 Sam. 14:9.

⁴³ 2 Sam. 14:10.

⁴⁴ 2 Sam. 14:11.

in which Absalom has become something of a "guilt offering" for Amnon.⁴⁵ David needs to realize how dangerous this course of action is and to make the necessary decision to bring him home.

Second, unless David makes the right decision, havoc and chaos will intensify and his kingdom will be destroyed. Just as the death of the son in the imaginary world leads to disaster, so the death of Absalom in the real world has the same potential. The wise woman warns David of this by means of another revealing metaphor, one which portrays Israel's fate as "water poured out on the earth, so that it cannot be gathered up again."⁴⁶

This metaphor, like her earlier one about the quenching of coals, seems also to have its roots in the technical language of the incantation literature. A close parallel can be found in a description of a mourning ritual at Ugarit. In the legend of Kirtu, Kirtu becomes ill, calls his son Ilhu, and tells him not to mourn for him. This task he wishes to entrust to Thitmanat, because she is well-practiced in putting "her water in the field. ..the issues of her lifebreath on the heights."⁴⁷ Most ritual texts at Ugarit give few details, but death here is in images very similar to those used by the Tekoite woman.

In short, a master mediator is at work in this text. When the wise woman accepts Joab's request to mediate this dispute, when she fashions a juridical parable, when she embellishes the parable with revealing metaphors and potent symbols, when she succeeds in inviting her client to enter this imaginary world and resolves the conflict which has hitherto paralyzed him, she stands squarely in the shadow of other mediators in the ancient Near East. To be sure, there is no trace of actual homeopathic magic in this text, just as there is no trace of such in the story of the encounter between Saul and the woman of Endor. The role of mediator, however, is common to both traditions.

Wise Women and Wisdom Woman

What, therefore, is the nature of the relationship between the roles enacted by wise women in the real world and the Wisdom Woman in Proverbs? Space restrictions prevent presenting a full-blown analysis of Proverbs 1-9 here, but a close reading of the poems in Proverbs 1, 8, and 9

⁴⁵ Reading MT *keasem* in 2 Sam. 14: 13 as *keasem* and translating "by saying this word the king (makes) his banished one like an 'asam by not bringing him back." Other possible translations of this difficult text are discussed by McCarter, *2 Samuel*, pp. 340, 348.

⁴⁶ 2 Sam. 14:14.

⁴⁷ See KTU 1.16.i.34-35, reading *mmh* as "her water."

from an anthropological perspective reveals a character which is complex, composite, and highly stylized.⁴⁸

In Proverbs 1:20-33 the Wisdom Woman is an angry prophet who rails against her audience for rejecting her words and choosing panic, calamity, and anguish in their stead. She does not appear to be in a mediatorial mood. Instead, she is indignant and judgmental, pouring out on her audience language which seems much more at home in the thundering day-of-Yahweh prophecies than the relatively placid world of the scribes.

Another facet of her personality surfaces in Proverbs 8:1-21. Here the Wisdom Woman is in a didactic mood, a cerebral professor who drops serene couplets of wisdom from her lips like polished pearls, dispassionately offering her message and herself to an eager audience of attentive male students.⁴⁹ Proverbs 8:22-36 expands and embellishes this role until the Wisdom Woman towers like a "goddess" over her "devotees." Still, there is no trace of a mediatorial role here.

In the confrontation between the Wisdom Woman and the Foolish Woman in Proverbs 9:1-18, there is a conflict of sorts between entrenched enemies. The Foolish Woman slavishly and diabolically imitates the Wisdom Woman's message and demeanor in a concentrated attempt to lure students away. But nowhere in this poem does the Wisdom Woman attempt to mediate a resolution to the conflict which separates them. Instead, this conflict is portrayed as an ancient, inevitable, and irresolvable dispute between cosmic good and cosmic evil. Only those destined for Sheol fail to recognize it as such.

Conclusion

From a comparative perspective, therefore, there seem to be few genuine affinities between the real world of the wise women and the literary world of the Wisdom Woman.

First, in the real world, wise women in Anatolia and Israel always use some kind of parallelistic technique in order to help clients resolve their conflicts. Whether one is comfortable with calling these techniques

⁴⁸ Claus Westermann see these poems as didactic, abstract, and rather late in *Wurzeln der Weisheit: Die ältesten Sprüche Israels und anderer Völker* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1990), p. 130, conclusions which are all sharply challenged by Michael V. Fox in his review of *Wurzeln der Weisheit* in *JBL* 111 (1992): 532.

⁴⁹ The erotic element is picked up and elaborated by Sirach in *Sir* 51:13-21. For further study, see C. Deutsch, "The Sirach Acrostic: Confession and Exhortation," *ZAW* 94 (1982): 400-409; and R. Murphy, "Wisdom and Eros in Proverbs 1-9," *CBQ* 50(1988): 600-603.

"homeopathic" or not, they are certainly "parallelistic." In the imaginary world of Proverbs 1-9, the Wisdom Woman speaks prophetically, didactically, and majestically to an all-male audience of diplomats and scribes, but there is no parallelism here, no parables-juridical or otherwise, and certainly no trace of homeopathic praxis.

Second, wise women in Anatolia and Israel are cautious and conservative when dealing with evil. As experienced professionals they understand well the need for discretion, indirection, and caution when dealing with complex human disputes, as well as with the unseen forces which were almost universally believed to have caused them. By contrast, the Wisdom Woman is direct and forthright, whether enacting a prophetic role condemning the foolish, a professorial role enlightening the ignorant, or a divine role recounting the mysteries of the universe.

Finally, there seems to be no real crisis at the root of Proverbs 1-9, no thorny conflict, no bloody dispute at the center of this text. Wise women in the real world are professional mediators hired to resolve messy conflicts. Theirs is the world of human ambition and human pride. The Wisdom Woman, on the other hand, is animated by an imaginary world where dispute is marginal and conflict irresolvable. Hers is a world of scribes and sages, not warriors. In her world, "wisdom" seems less a real person than a timeless ideal.

Consequently those who would look to scripture for guidance regarding the role of women in the church today would better be served by looking to the roles wise women play in the real world as well as the imaginary portrait bequeathed us by Israel's scribes in the book of Proverbs. Whether one or the other of these portrayals is primarily responsible for the statements attributed to Paul in Romans 16:1-2, 1 Timothy 2:8-15, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, and 1 Corinthians 14:34-36 is a question which needs to be answered in the light of further study. Hopefully this study will be one which is canonically broad, culturally aware, historically accurate and theologically informed by all the relevant biblical texts, not just those left us from the first century AD.

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