

God's Right-Hand . . . Woman?

Hebrews 1:2 (ESV) tells us that in these “last days” God has spoken to humanity “by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom he created the world” (compare, Col 1:16; 1 Cor 8:6). It’s a familiar doctrine. But in verse 3 there’s something that’s a bit odd: “He [Jesus] is the radiance of the glory of God.” What’s strange about the phrase isn’t its meaning. We get the metaphor. Jesus “shines forth” the glory of God; He is a brilliant reflection of what God is like. What’s odd is where the idea comes from, and how startling it would have been to the Jewish Christians for whom the book of Hebrews was intended.

The word “radiance” (ἀπαύγασμα; *apaugasma*) occurs only here in the New Testament. To figure out what the writer of Hebrews meant, we have to look at his source. The writer is quoting the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, but the Septuagint included books that many Jews and Christians today do not consider part of the biblical canon, but which some in ancient times considered sacred. The phrase from Heb 1:2 comes from one of these books—*Wisdom of Solomon*. How can we be sure? Because the word *apaugasma* is found only one time in the Septuagint: *Wisdom of Solomon* 7:26. Sure, the scarcity of the word is curious, but where’s the surprise? Not only is the word extremely uncommon, but the source of the Heb 1:2 quotation has a *woman* as God’s personified reflection. (Yes, I said *woman*). Welcome to the biblical twilight zone.

Wisdom of Solomon 7:24-26 (NRSV)

- ²⁴ For wisdom is more mobile than any motion;
because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.
- ²⁵ For she is a breath of the power of God,
and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;
therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her.
- ²⁶ For she is a reflection (*apaugasma*) of eternal light,
a spotless mirror of the working of God,
and an image of his goodness.

The Jewish writer of *Wisdom of Solomon* got the idea of personified Wisdom as a woman from the book of Proverbs.¹ While the term most often refers to practical, insightful living according to God’s law, the writer of Proverbs at times portrays Wisdom as a woman (“*her* voice”; compare, Prov 1:20–33; 3:13–16; 4:6; 7:4; 9:1–6). Proverbs 8:1 describes Wisdom speaking to God’s people (“Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice?”). But what is especially remarkable about Wisdom in Prov 8:22–30 (ESV) is that she is described as God’s co-creator:

“The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began ... before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was given birth ... I was there when he [God] set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep ... Then I was the craftsman at his side.”

Wisdom is cast as a woman because the Hebrew word for “wisdom” (*hokmah*) is grammatically feminine. Grammatical gender often has nothing to do with biological gender. In German, for example, the word for “little girl” (*mädchen*) is neuter in gender. Languages use gender as a means to classify nouns. Sometimes this classification device comes through in translation. For example, we refer to ships as female (“she was a fine ship”) or refer to countries as “motherland” or “fatherland”.

The wording here echoes Prov 3:19, where we read, “By wisdom the LORD laid the earth’s foundations; by understanding he set the heavens in place” (compare, Jer 10:12). Wisdom, personified as a woman, is cast as God’s agent of creation in the Old Testament.

How is this consistent with the New Testament teaching about Jesus? We need a little more backdrop to answer that question.

About 250 years before Jesus, Jewish theologians equated the Torah with wisdom mainly because *torah* (תורה) was also a grammatically feminine word in Hebrew and the Torah made one wise. This meant that, to many Jews, the Torah (Wisdom) was divine:

“Wisdom praises herself, and tells of her glory in the midst of her people. In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth, and in the presence of his hosts she tells of her glory: ‘I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and covered the earth like a mist’ All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law that Moses commanded us.” (*Sirach* 24:1-3, 22 NRSV)

“O God of my ancestors and Lord of mercy ... give me the wisdom that sits by your throne ... Send her forth from the holy heavens, and from the throne of your glory send her ... that I may learn what is pleasing to you ... and people were taught what pleases you, and were saved by wisdom.” (*Wisdom of Solomon* 9:1, 4, 10, 18 NRSV)

For these writers, the word spoken by God at the creation in Gen 1:3 was Wisdom—the word of the Torah. Proverbs 8:22 cast this spoken Wisdom as a living divine entity, whose instruction

would later be written down by Moses. Wisdom (Torah) was God's agent of creation and even the Savior for Jewish theology.

The New Testament writers had another view. Paul's description of Jesus as "the Wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24, 30) and God's agent of creation was a theological jolt to Jewish ears. It puts Paul's struggle to articulate the gospel "apart from the law (Torah)" in an entirely new light (Rom 3:21). Defining Wisdom as Jesus was another way for Paul to say that Jesus was indeed the Word of creation, the agent at God's right hand, as John had as well (John 1:1-4). And that also meant that Jesus was Wisdom (Torah), the means of salvation.² In fact, Jesus asserts that he is the fulfillment of Torah (Matt 5:17-20). It was Jesus who radiated God's character to humankind as the bearer of salvation. Along with Paul and John, the author of Hebrews articulated this startling view by calling Jesus "the radiance of the glory of God."

[SIDEBAR: Was the Son of God Created? The Throwdown at Nicea

Proverbs 8 and the identification of Jesus with Wisdom was a controversial issue for the early church. In the debates at the Council of Nicea, those who believed Jesus to be God's first creation sought affirmation in Prov 8:22, where the Lord "brought forth" Wisdom. The phrase "brought forth" is a Hebrew verb (*qanah*; קנה) that can be used for creation (see Psa 139:13 ["you *formed* my inward parts"]; Gen. 14:19, 22 [*creator* of heaven and earth"; some translations have "possessor" which is also possible]). The interpretation of this verb was a factor in the distinction between the "begotten, not made" language of the Nicene Creed. Since Wisdom is a personification of an attribute of God, the key questions are "Was there ever a time when God did not have Wisdom? If so, how then can God be God?" It would be unthinkable to the biblical writer for the God of Israel to *lack* wisdom at some point. Wisdom is eternal since God (with His attributes) is eternal—"brought forth" as the agent of creation.]