

God's Right-Hand Woman

Jesus' role as co-creator with God is a familiar doctrinal idea, since Paul tells us very clearly that all things were created through Jesus (Col. 1:16; 1 Cor. 8:6). How is it, then, that we do not read anything like that in Genesis 1? Did Paul make up the idea? And while we're on this, how is it that the Old Testament has a *female* figure as God's agent of creation? (And yes, I said *female*).

In Proverbs 8:1 the writer describes Wisdom speaking to God's people ("Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice?"). 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 person, namely a woman ("*her* voice"; cp. Prov. 1:20-33; 3:13-16; 4:6; 7:4; 9:1-6). The reason Wisdom is cast as a woman is that the Hebrew word for "wisdom" (*ḥokmah*) is grammatically feminine.¹ But what does this have to do with creation?

In Proverbs 8:22 Wisdom tells us some surprising things about herself (NIV):

"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."

The notion that Wisdom was at God's side in the role of an artisan is important. The wording echoes Prov. 3:19, where we read, "By wisdom the LORD laid the earth's foundations; by understanding he set the heavens in place" (cp. 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 Jesus? We need a little more backdrop to answer that question.

In what we call the Intertestamental period, Wisdom was thought to be the Torah by Jewish theologians, mainly because *torah* was also a grammatically feminine word in Hebrew. This meant that, to many Jews, the Torah (Wisdom) was divine:

¹ Grammatical gender 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, even in English. For example, we commonly refer to ships as women ("she was a fine ship") or refer to countries as "motherland" or "fatherland".

“Wisdom sings her own praises, before her own people she proclaims her glory; in the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth, in the presence of his hosts she declares her worth . . . All this is true of the book of the Most High’s covenant, the law which Moses commanded us. . . .” (*Ben Sira* 24:1-3, 22; NAB)

“God of my fathers, LORD of mercy . . . Give me Wisdom, the attendant at your throne, and reject me not from among your children . . . Send her forth from your holy heavens, and from your glorious throne dispatch her . . . men learned what was your pleasure, and were saved by Wisdom” (*The Book of Wisdom* 9:1, 4, 10, 18; NAB)

For these writers, the word spoken by God at the creation in Genesis 1:3ff. was Wisdom, the Torah, a living divine entity, whose instruction would later be written down by Moses. Wisdom (Torah) was also God’s agent of creation and even the Savior.

In this context, 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. Defining Wisdom as Jesus in this way was another way for Paul to say that the man whom John had described as the eternal Word who had always existed with the Father (John 1:1-3) was indeed the Word of creation. Jesus, not Wisdom (Torah) was the means of salvation.²

² Proverbs 8 and the identification of Jesus with Wisdom was a crucial 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 Proverbs 8:22, where the Lord “brought forth” Wisdom. The phrase “brought forth” is in fact a Hebrew verb (*qanah*) 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 was eternal since God (with his attributes) is eternal, but Wisdom was “brought forth” as the agent of creation.