

Jesus and Sophia:

An examination of how the New Testament uses the motif of Lady Wisdom in Christological passages

Dustin Smith

Introduction

The figure of Sophia has quite a long history in Judaism.¹ It first makes its appearance in the book of Proverbs. Whereas Wisdom in Proverbs 8 emphasizes her own accessibility, the beautiful poem found in Job 28 sees it as quite hidden and difficult to search out. In Ben Sira 24, Sophia searches for a resting place among humanity and finds one in Israel. 1 Baruch follows suit in revealing that God found the inaccessible Lady Wisdom and gave her to Israel in the form of Torah. In the Wisdom of Solomon, Sophia seems to be described as a way of speaking about God's ordering of creation and design for humanity. Yet 1 Enoch 42 speaks of Wisdom finding no place to rest on earth and she finally returns to heaven. The female image of Sophia has obviously had a long and complicated history of functions and relationship with the people of God.

Alongside the evolution of Lady Wisdom is the idea of the Logos, the spoken utterance of God. This concept also has had a long history in both Judaism and the Greco-Roman culture. Its mutation culminates in the theology of Philo of Alexandria and the famous incarnation passage in the prologue of the fourth Gospel.

Unfortunately, when readers of the New Testament come to the various Christological passages in which Jesus is spoken of in terms of Sophia, they are either unaware or badly informed of her history and significance. The texts, being 1 Cor 8.6; Heb 1:3; Col 1; and John 1, are commonly read as literally as possible, which divorces these passages from their poetic heritage of Wisdom explanations. Therefore, if we are to understand how the authors of these texts intended their respected hearers to understand their words, it is absolutely crucial to rediscover the context of Lady Wisdom within Second Temple Judaism. To forget this important step will only continue to result in well-intentioned readers ripping these passages out of

¹ On the subject of Lady Wisdom and wisdom literature in general, see especially Leo Purdue, *Wisdom and Creation – The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), *Wisdom Literature – A Theological History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007); Richard J. Clifford, 'Introduction to Wisdom Literature' in *The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol.5 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) 1-16; Roland E. Murphy, 'Wisdom in the OT', *ABD* 6:920-31; Katharine J. Dell, 'Wisdom in the OT', *NIBD* 5:869-75; Carole R. Fontaine, 'Sophia', *NIBD* 5:356-7; Wilkins, Fohrer, 'Sophia, sophos, sophizo', *TDNT* 7:465-527; Gerald H. Wilson, 'חֵכְמָה' *NIDOTT* 2:130-134.

context, namely, out of a growing understanding of the significance and function of this mysterious Sophia figure.

My argument will consist of first examining in detail how Lady Wisdom has developed from her first appearance in the book of Proverbs to the latest non-biblical source of 1 Enoch. After assessing her development, I will proceed to engage the four texts mentioned with the benefit of the evidence gathered. The goal is to better understand these relevant Christological passages by making a mature attempt at understanding them as their first-century readers most likely would have.

Proverbs

The central passage on the figure of Wisdom is Proverbs 8, although there are important contributions in the chs. 1, 3, 7, and 9. The time of composition of these passages is debated, most rendering a post-exilic date to Proverbs 1-9.² These nine chapters regularly depict Wisdom as an eye-catching and convincing woman in contrast to the corrupting female gods spoken of as prostitutes.³ Ch. 3.19 speaks of how the LORD utilized Wisdom as the vessel ‘by/in the world was founded’ (*b’hokmah*). In typical Hebrew poetic fashion, Wisdom is paralleled with ‘understanding’ here and in other passages within Proverbs.

In ch. 8.22-34 we see that Wisdom is closely identified with Yahweh. She was begotten at the beginning, even before the foundations of the earth were laid. She was an observer of God’s work at creation, and even his *amon*. The meaning of the Hebrew word in 8.30 has puzzled commentators for centuries.⁴ Some translate it as ‘technician’ (in the sense of an architect) while others render it as a ‘child’. She is contrasted with ‘Lady Folly’ in ch. 9 and thereby functioning in a way that provokes the reader to choose between the two personified female figures. Wisdom is within reach of those who seek her, if only they would choose her and heed her words (1.20-33). Wisdom in Proverbs is presented as an intimate of Yahweh, with a privileged position, and an accessible personification to those who truly desire her.

² Leo Perdue, *Proverbs*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 2000) 1; Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998) xx; Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New Haven: Yale University, 2000) 6. On the difficulty of dating the various Proverbs, see discussion in Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, ‘Proverbs’, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, vol.5 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) 20-23.

³ Proverbs 1-9 was most likely written to set the record straight in light of the influence of Mesopotamian goddess of love, Ishtar-Astarte. This, I believe, is the ‘strange woman’ warned about in these nine chapters.

⁴ Most seem to favor the ‘architect/craftsman’ (or is it craftswoman?). See esp. BDB 53; HALOT 1:64; Murphy, *Proverbs*, 48; Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 285-7; I. Cornelius, ‘amon’, *NIDOTT* 1:433-4.

Job

The beautiful poem in Job offers a marked contrast to that of Proverbs, in one important aspect. Whereas Proverbs makes the point of how readily Wisdom can be sought out and found, Job 28.20-24 emphasizes her inaccessibility. Only with great difficulty, and only with God's help, can Wisdom be reached. She is more difficult to obtain than the precious metals found deep within the earth. The ocean deep does not know her and the place of the dead have only heard rumors of her existence. Only God knows where she may be found. Wisdom is continually matched with feminine verbs and even once with the feminine pronoun. Twice is she poetically paralleled with *binah*, 'understanding', following suit with Proverbs.⁵ The culmination of the poem identifies her with the fear of the Lord (28.28): 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.'

Sirach

Ben Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 24 has a good deal in common with Proverbs 8. Lady Wisdom speaks in the assembly of the Most High, praising herself. She came forth from God's mouth and lived in the highest heavens. Then she roamed over all of the earth, looking for a dwelling place among humanity (24.6-12):

Over waves of the sea, over all the earth, and over every people and nation I have held sway. Among all these I sought a resting place; in whose territory should I abide? "Then the Creator of all things gave me a command, and my Creator chose the place for my tent. He said, 'Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance.' Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me, and for all the ages I shall not cease to be. In the holy tent I ministered before him, and so I was established in Zion. Thus in the beloved city he gave me a resting place, and in Jerusalem was my domain. I took root in an honored people, in the portion of the Lord, his heritage.

Here she flourishes, grows, and calls those who desire her to come and eat their fill. She is then identified with God's law, the Torah (v. 23):

All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law that Moses commanded us as an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob.

The image of Wisdom in Sirach is one in which she is accessible, as seen in Proverbs 8, but only to Israel. The rest of the world does not enjoy her presence; it is Israel who possesses her in the

⁵ David J. A. Clines mentions the possibility that ch. 28 might be a later addition to the text and acknowledges the possibility that Job has been subject to expansions at various times (*Job 1-20*, Word Biblical Commentary (Word: Dallas, 1989) lix). Carol A. Newsom argues the same point ('Job', in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, vol.4 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) 325).

form of Torah. One may go so far as to say that the author perhaps understood the Torah as the embodiment of Lady Wisdom.

1 Baruch

The book of 1 Baruch, which is difficult to date but probably from the second century BCE,⁶ also has an important contribution to the development of Wisdom (3.15-4.4). Baruch, in similar fashion to the poem in Job, stresses inaccessibility of Wisdom and the fact that she was not available to the various nations who sought after her (3.20-23). Only God, the one who knows all things and who created them, knows how to find her (3.31-32). But God did indeed find her and gave her to Israel. Like Sirach, 1 Baruch identifies Lady Wisdom with Israel's Torah (3.36-4.1):

He found the whole way to knowledge, and gave her to his servant Jacob, and to Israel, whom he loved. Afterward she appeared on earth and lived with humanity. She is the book of the commandments of God, the law that endures forever. All who hold her fast will live, and those who forsake her will die.

Wisdom of Solomon

The Wisdom of Solomon, which was most likely composed in the 40s CE,⁷ is perhaps the most important book to examine in the development of Sophia. The figure of Wisdom is found primarily in chs. 6-12, but can also implicitly lie behind chs. 13-19. She appears both as a heavenly personification as well as a seductress figure. The writer, in the guise of Solomon, extols the benefits from seeking this figure of Wisdom (chs. 6-7).

Lady Wisdom is closely associated with God within this work, and the relationship is a fascinating one. It is rather interesting that the activities attributed to Wisdom in ch. 10 gradually shift to the activities of God in ch. 11. Wisdom is said to be the 'mother of all things' (7.12) as well as the craftswoman of all (7.22). In 7.15-20 God is declared to be the guide of Wisdom, since he gives knowledge with regard to the cycles of nature and the world. Yet similar

⁶ See discussions on the difficulties of dating in Richard J. Bauckham, 'Baruch, Book of', in *NIDB* 1:403; Doron Mendels, 'Baruch, Book of', in *ABD* 1:620; Anthony J. Saldarini, 'The Book of Baruch', in *The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol.6 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) 931-3.

⁷ I find the arguments of David Winston most compelling. See his *The Wisdom of Solomon*, Anchor Bible Commentary (Garden City: Doubleday & Co, 1979) 20-5. He argues that in 6.1 the 'judges of the ends of the earth' refers to the rulers during the Roman period rather than the Ptolemaic period. He also notes that in 14.17 the reference to 'remote rulers' could refer to either Augustus in 30 BCE or Caligula in 37 CE, both of which ruled Egypt from a distance. Yet 6.3 seems to indicate that Augustus' conquest of Egypt is already in the past. The apocalyptic vision in 5.16-23 best fits during the time of Caligula and the threat of Judaism towards the end of his reign. Winston cites 35 words which are not attested in Greek literature prior to the first century CE.

characteristics are ascribed to Lady Wisdom in 8.5-8. The relationship between God and Wisdom is best expressed in 7.25-26:

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. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness.

This statement seems to indicate that Lady Wisdom is both a product of God as well as a manifestation from God. She not only represents him but also reflects his divine image. This is why the author can make many of the statements about God interchangeable with those concerning Lady Wisdom.

Wisdom continues to be described by the author with various images and metaphors: 'Wisdom is a kindly spirit' (1.6), she is an attribute of God's own words (6.9), she is likened to a woman (6.12-16), is deemed as 'the most sincere desire for instruction' (6.17), is compared to the gems and is radiant like the light (7.8-10, 29), the mother of all good things (7.11), a bride (8.2), and intimate of God (8.3), and a teacher of profound mysteries (8.8). Lady Wisdom is paralleled with the creative word in an important passage for our study (9.1-2):

'O God of my ancestors and Lord of mercy, who have made all things by your word and your wisdom (ἐν λόγῳ σου καὶ τῇ σοφίᾳ σου) you have formed humankind to have dominion over the creatures you have made'

Let there be no mistake about the relationship between Lady Wisdom and God, for the author clearly states (7.15; 8.21; 9.4, 6):

God is the guide, even of Wisdom...I would not possess Wisdom unless God gave her to me...give me the Wisdom that sits by your throne...without the Wisdom that comes from you, the man is regarded as nothing.

For all of the author's vigor and imagery, he has not given the slightest thought of Lady Wisdom as an independent divine being. From start to finish the Wisdom which is spoken of is God's very own Wisdom who signifies God's wise ordering of creation to those who fear him.

1 Enoch

Although the Parables of Enoch (1 Enoch 37-71) are considered to be the latest part of the book composed, most likely around the end of the first century CE, its contribution to our study is still very relevant.⁸ In this work, Wisdom has found no place in which she could dwell. Since she

⁸ Since the Similitudes of Enoch were not discovered among the remains at Qumran, many have dated this section towards the end of the first century CE. See the discussion on the composite nature of the text in E. Isaac's '1 Enoch', in Charlesworth, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* 1:5-7.

was unable to find a dwelling among humanity, she returned to heaven to reside in the midst of the angels. Presumably she is accessible to those who are worthy due to the fact that her abode in the heavens was assigned to her, using the divine passive, but the text is not very clear (42:1-2):

Wisdom found no place where she might dwell; then a dwelling-place was assigned her in the heavens. Wisdom went forth to make her dwelling among the children of men, and found no dwelling-place, Wisdom returned to her place, and took her seat among the angels.

Summary

It should be clear at this juncture that within the Second Temple period the figure of Wisdom was spoken of in a variety of ways. Some authors think that she is available and accessible to those who seek her. Others think that she has been removed from that opportunity due to her return to heaven. Two authors specifically equate Lady Wisdom in the concrete form of the Torah while Proverbs connects her with the fear of the Lord. Some even envision her as a personified temptress or seductress. Many of the writers place her alongside God with the Wisdom of Solomon going so far as to describe her with many of the same attributes and functions as the Creator.

How should such evidence be interpreted, in light of its various nuances? Should Wisdom be understood as an individual female deity?⁹ Or perhaps she is a semi-independent being among the heavenly court? It seems far more prudent to take the language within these sections of wisdom literature as metaphorical or poetical. The various personifications within Hebrew poetry allow the language used of Wisdom to fit in quite well. The authors seemed to have developed the common technique of portraying the relationship between God and humanity with elaborate metaphor.¹⁰

The passages in which Wisdom is used as the means in which God created the world served as hyperbolic avenues for praising God for his wise creations. Both Prov. 3.19 and Wisd. 9.1-2 reveal a poetic mode of speaking about God's actions in ways which are perceptible to readers. By saying that God created the world through Wisdom, the authors would most likely have been heard as depicting God creating in a wise manner, with a wisdom which is evident in his creation. With these considerations in mind, it is time to turn to the passages in the New Testament in which Jesus is spoken of in terms of Lady Wisdom.

⁹ Karl-Josef Kuschel argues vehemently that "Lady Wisdom is not in any way to be called a "goddess"." See his *Born Before All Time? The Dispute over Christ's Origin* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 194.

¹⁰ Gerhard Von Rad is most certainly right when he attempts to define this phenomenon: "Perhaps we catch something of the meaning if we say that by its wondrousness and the wisdom of its design all Creation transcends itself in the direction of God" (*Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper and Row, eng. tr. 1962) 448).

1 Corinthians 8:6

One of the earliest associations of Jesus with Wisdom is found in 1 Corinthians, written within a decade or so after Wisdom of Solomon. In ch. 8 Paul addresses the issue that some of the Corinthians believers felt that it was acceptable to eat meat sacrificed to idols, citing that 'no idol in the world really exists' and that 'there is no God but one (8.4). Paul's response is where we must direct our attention (8.5-6):

For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we through Him.

Although significant detail cannot be given to the ongoing debate as to whether or not Paul has split the *Shema* to include Jesus, our focus now needs to be directed at how Jesus is described.¹¹ In answering the dispute concerning the local gods and lords of Corinthian society, most likely referring to idol and imperial cult worship, Paul declares that there is only one God, the Father, who is the creator. What is striking is that within the same breath, Paul declares that Jesus is the one Lord 'through whom' all things, without the verb 'to-be' supplied. This formulation, of speaking of the one God and the one Lord, closely resembles the ever popular Psalm 110.1 verse, which is the most quoted of the Hebrew Bible by New Testament authors. While the historic *Shema* functioned in a way that declared the one God of Israel over and against the pagan gods, Psalm 110:1 functioned by stating that the risen Lord Jesus has been exalted to the one God's right hand.

Since the issue at hand is how Paul answers the Corinthian dilemma about the appropriateness of eating meat sacrificed to idols, it does not make the most sense to argue that he answers it by stating that Jesus is the means through which God created the cosmos. Rather, if we are correct in identifying Psalm 110:1 as well as Lady Wisdom influences behind Paul's thought, it would seem more natural that the risen Lord Jesus is understood as the clearest expression of Wisdom. She is no longer equated with Torah, as in Sirach and 1 Baruch, for now those who seek her will find her embodied in the risen Lord Jesus. As the passages in Proverbs and Wisdom of Solomon examined above speak of God creating his wise creation through the medium of Wisdom, Paul now understands Jesus, who acting as the soteriological mediator of the new creation, expresses the reality of God's wise influence on creation which was previously reserved for the figure of Wisdom. Or as James Dunn puts it, the function of Jesus

¹¹ Dunn actually changed his mind from a 'yes' answer to a 'no' due to the arguments of his student James McGrath in his book *The Only True God - Early Christian Monotheism in Its Jewish Context* (University of Illinois, 2009).

within the second clause of 8.6 is “the mediating agency through whom all things and believers have effective being.”¹²

Hebrews 1:3

The opening chapter of the book of Hebrews seeks to contrast Jesus from the angels, the first stage of an argument which will continue throughout the document. In doing so, the unknown author makes a statement which seems puzzling to many readers in 1.3:

He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power.

The Greek word translated for ‘radiance’, *apaugasma* is a *hapax legomenon* within the New Testament. However, *apaugasma* is used to describe Lady Wisdom in Wisd. 7.26:

For she is a reflection (*apaugasma*) of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness.

The author of the Wisdom of Solomon, it seems, chose to describe the personified Sophia in a way that reflected the character and goodness, as a spotless mirror perfectly reveals what stands in front of it. The writer of Hebrews takes up this line of thinking as well as its theology and attributes the word *apaugasma* to Jesus when explaining how he is greater than the angels.¹³ Jesus himself perfectly reflects the glory of God in the manner that an obedient son does the will of his father (Heb. 1.2).¹⁴ Dunn straightens the passage out nicely: “we are confronted not with a particular pre-existent divine person...but a way of speaking about God’s interaction with men and things which could use the impersonal imagery of light and stamp/impression as well as the personification ‘Wisdom’”.¹⁵

¹² James D. G. Dunn, *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus? The New Testament Evidence* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2010) 109. See further comments and exegesis in *Christology in the Making*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 179-83.

¹³ Philo also uses *apaugasma* in *Op. Mundi* 146 in discussion about the *logos*; in *Spec. Leg* 4.123 in reference to the spirit of God; and in *Plant* 50 when discussing the splendor emitted from holy objects which were an imitation of the archetypal model.

¹⁴ The Greek word *character*, used to translate ‘exact representation’, is found in the LXX of Lev. 13.28; 2 Macc. 4.10; and 4 Macc. 15.4. Leviticus employs it to describe an imprinted scar left on the skin after a burn. 2 Maccabees uses the term to describe the Hellenistic way of life which Jason impressed upon the people. The author of 4 Maccabees utilizes the term in describing how loving mothers impact their young children. It should fair at this juncture to project that a broad definition of *character* would include the impression left by whomever or whatever originally stamped it, used literally or figuratively.

¹⁵ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 209.

Colossians 1:15-19

The hymn about Christ in Colossians 1 is one of the New Testament's longest tributes to Lady Wisdom. It owes quite a deal to Wisdom of Solomon, which is the strongest expression of how God is metaphorically and allegorically expressed through Wisdom. Paul¹⁶ sees the risen and exalted Jesus as the reality that Wisdom only could describe God's wise action among his creation in symbols. Therefore, it was entirely appropriate for Paul to draw upon and reshape Wisdom motifs in the Colossian hymn (1.15-17):

He is the image of the unseen God, the firstborn of all creation. For in Him all things were created, in the heavens and on earth, seen and unseen, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is preeminent over all things, and in Him all things hold together.

As a reminder, Wisd. 7.26 states that Sophia is 'the image (*eikon*) of God's goodness'. Paul now sees Jesus as the embodiment of what Lady Wisdom was attempting to describe. Being no 'mere-man,' Jesus maintains the role of God's image-bearer, being one who reveals God perfectly to God's creation.¹⁷ Looking at Jesus reveals, in reflection, what the unseen God is like. Although Prov. 8.22, 25 speak of Wisdom as God's firstborn, Paul has reinterpreted this term to refer to the preeminent one of all creation,¹⁸ recognizing the ambiguity of the Greek word *prototokos*.¹⁹

As the head of the new creation and as restored image-bearer (lost by Adam), Jesus is the perfect incarnation of what Wisdom only could point towards in poetic metaphors. This actually concludes with a high christology, seeing Jesus as the incarnation of Wisdom. This is not to say that Jesus *is* Wisdom, per se, but rather to say, what is stated in 1.19 and 2.9, that God's fullness dwells/inhabits the human Jesus. By acting as God's wise expression towards creation and humanity, Jesus brings to visible expression the very purpose and character of God.²⁰ It is not seen in Torah, as in 1 Baruch or in Sirach, rather in the exalted Lord Messiah. To read the Colossian hymn without the lens of Lady Wisdom and all her poetic dynamics fails to do justice to Paul's contribution to the development of God's wise expression.

¹⁶ For the sake of convenience, I will call the author 'Paul', even though there is a large disagreement as to whether the historical Paul penned the letter or if it is pseudonymous.

¹⁷ There may be hints of Adam behind this verse, since he was created in God's *eikon* as well (Gen. 1.26, 27; 5.1 LXX). The role of an image-bearer is certainly present in the vocation given to Adam in Genesis.

¹⁸ The genitive case is used here, denoting that Jesus is a part of the creation which is spoken about. Therefore, he could not be the Creator as some suppose by their reading of 1.16a.

¹⁹ Which could mean either 'first in time' or 'first in rank'.

²⁰ "The two strophes become quite consistent as soon as we realize that throughout the hymn we are not talking about God's creative power per se, nor of Christ per se, but of Christ who Christians came to recognize as the embodiment and definition of that power (= wisdom, fullness)" –Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 193.

John 1

No one passage has contributed more to the understanding, or misunderstanding, of Jesus than the prologue of John's Gospel. Unfortunately, most have failed to realize two important principles: that John was writing in ways that were in continuity with the developing perception of Lady Wisdom within Judaism, and that he has formulated his prologue in a deliberate, poetic chiasm. Note the following structural overview of 1.1-18:

A The word was with God – vv. 1-2

B Creation through word – v. 3

C Received life – v. 4-5

D John the Baptist – vv. 6-8

E Response to incarnation – vv. 9-10

F His own, i.e. Israel – v. 11

G accept the Logos – v. 12a

H become children of God – v. 12b

G¹ believe the Logos – v. 12c

F¹ His own, i.e. believers – v. 13

E¹ Response to incarnation – v. 14

D¹ John the Baptist – v. 15

C¹ Received grace – v. 16

B¹ Grace and truth through Jesus – v. 17

A¹ Only begotten god/son with God – v. 18

Such indications of poetic arrangement should warn us against such a wooden or literal reading. The *logos* is spoken of with the more appropriate masculine pronouns rather than feminine ones which would have been necessary if he chose instead to express Jesus in terms of Lady Wisdom.

John's prologue speaks constantly that the *logos* was the vessel through whom, God's creation came into fruition.²¹ This would not be something new or radical to those steeped in Jewish literature of the time.²² Note the following sample of parallels:

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host.²³

To Him who made the heavens with understanding.²⁴

The LORD by wisdom founded the earth, by understanding He established the heavens. By His knowledge the deeps were broken up.²⁵

By his knowledge everything shall come into existence, and all that does not exist he establishes with his calculations and nothing is done outside of him.²⁶

By the knowledge of the Lord they were distinguished, and he appointed the different seasons and festivals.²⁷

O God of my ancestors and Lord of mercy, who have made all things by your word.²⁸

Worship the God of heaven, who causes the rain and the dew to descend on the earth and does everything upon the earth, and has created everything by his word.²⁹

Even Philo, the Jew who sought to bridge the gap between Judaism and Hellenism with an allegorical interpretation of Torah (and, probably not coincidental, writing his books in the very same time and city that Wisdom of Solomon was produced), portrayed Wisdom in similar fashion:

Wisdom being his mother, through whom the universe arrived at creation.³⁰

Wisdom, by means of which the universe was brought to completion.³¹

Therefore, it seems appropriate to conclude that both Lady Wisdom and the personified *logos* were common ways of expressing, in poetic metaphor, how God created in a wise manner, or through his spoken utterances.³² Since it would not be a stretch to understand spoken words as

²¹ 1.3, 10. The preposition *dia* + the accusative is also employed in 1 Cor. 8.6; Col. 1.17, and Heb. 1.2.

²² Dunn argues that, prior to 1.14, nothing is said in the poem/hymn that would be strange to a Hellenistic Jew familiar with the Jewish reflection of the immanence of God. See his *Did the Early Christians Worship Jesus?* 120.

²³ Psa. 33.6.

²⁴ Psa. 136.5, my translation.

²⁵ Prov. 3:19-20. See also 24:3-4; "By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; and by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches."

²⁶ 1 Qs 11.11, tr. Garcia Martinez.

²⁷ Sirach 33.8, my translation.

²⁸ Wis. 9.1.

²⁹ Jub. 12.4.

³⁰ Philo, *Fug.* 109, with *dia* + gen.

³¹ Philo, *Det. Pot.* 54, again with *dia* + gen.

³² Consider the allusions to God speaking creation into existence in Genesis 1.

the vocal declarations of the wisdom of one's purposes, it is quite appropriate to see how Wisdom and Logos could be invoked to describe similar realities. Just as Paul used images of Wisdom to describe the significance of the exaltation of Jesus, John understands the human Messiah as the wise, logical embodiment of God's interaction with the world. The preexistence of the Logos would not be new as it draws from the similar ideas conveyed in Proverbs 8.

The prologue continues in identifying the *logos* as 'light' and thereby drawing again on Wisdom themes prevalent within Judaism (1.4-5):

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.³³

For she is a reflection of eternal light³⁴

And it is easy otherwise by means of argument to perceive this, since God is the first light, "For the Lord is my light and my Savior," is the language of the Psalms; and not only the light, but he is also the archetypal pattern of every other light, or rather he is more ancient and more sublime than even the archetypal model, though he is spoken of as the model; for the real model was his own most perfect word, the light, and he himself is like to no created thing.³⁵

John would have readers see Jesus as the true expression of God's light within the darkness, and in doing so introducing key themes within his Gospel. Later, John would have Jesus declare that he indeed is the light of the world (8.12; 9.5; 12.46).

John 1.12 is another example of the drawing upon of Wisdom motifs to describe the significance of Jesus:

But as many as received Him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in his name

Note the outstanding similarities in Wisd. 7.27:

in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God

Since the subject of 'friendship' is a common theme in John's Gospel, this parallel is entirely appropriate.³⁶ Jesus, as the incarnation of God's wise intentions, brings together the divine and human relations through friendship.

John 1.14 is one of the climactic exclamation points within the prologue. It is at this juncture that the personified Wisdom/*logos* becomes flesh and 'tabernacles' among humanity. The motif of tabernacling, setting aside the obvious temple allusions, seeks to settle the debate of

³³ Also continued in 1.7, 8, 9; 3.19, 20, 21; 11.9; 12.35, 36.

³⁴ Wisd. 7.26.

³⁵ Philo, *Som* 1.75.

³⁶ John 3.29; 11.11; 15.13, 14, 15; 19.12.

whether or not Wisdom is among God's people. Previously in John 1.11-12 described that the *logos* came to his people, was not received by the world, but the select few who did are labeled as friends. As was seen in the previous Wisdom passages, there was a fundamental debate as to whether or not Wisdom was among humanity. Sirach says that Wisdom is alive and well among Israel while 1 Enoch disagrees and states that she has returned to heaven. John argues, on the contrary, that while the embodiment of Wisdom is indeed among the people of God, most have not accepted her.

Another purpose that 1.14 is attempting to achieve is to settle what it actually is that Wisdom/*logos* is to be identified with in concrete terms. Both 1 Baruch and Sirach clearly equate Wisdom with the Torah, and thus argue that seeking God's instructions found therein is the path to wise living. John modifies this theology in three significant ways. First, he states that it is not Torah that is the reality which Wisdom was made manifest, but rather the human Jesus. Secondly, John 1.17 seeks to place Moses, representing the Torah, on one side of the coin, and Jesus on the other. Therefore, while John may have agreed that prior to Jesus the Torah of Moses was the proper realization of Wisdom's embodiment, she is now to be seen and sought after in the human Jesus. Lastly, John modifies incarnation language used of the Torah and Moses found in Philo:

He (Moses) became the embodiment of the Law and also the logical, divine foreknowledge³⁷

So at once the king (Moses) is indeed the Law's embodiment³⁸

Yet for John it was not Moses that became flesh, on the contrary it was Jesus. And in contrast from Philo, Jesus was not the embodiment of Torah, rather he was the incarnation of God's very utterances and wise intentions. How such a contrast is appropriate in a Gospel which seeks to distinguish Jesus from formative Judaism which follows Moses.

The connection of poetic personifications and incarnational reality became evident in 1.18, where the Son is said to have 'exegetted' the Father. At the final line of the poem/hymn, John attempts to make it clear to his readers that Jesus is the visible, concrete expression of the Father which could only be described in allegories, personifications, and metaphors previously. Since it was common within Judaism to depict God as the one who cannot be seen, the declaration in 1.18 is entirely appropriate. While other attempts were made to reveal God via Wisdom in Torah, John sees the human Jesus as the true poetic explanation of the divine.³⁹

³⁷ Philo, *De Moses* 1.162. The Greek is striking here: αὐτὸς ἐγένετο νόμος ἔμψυχός τε καὶ λογικὸς θεία προνοία.

³⁸ *Ibid* 2.4 (ὡς εὐθύς εἶναι τὸν μὲν βασιλέα νόμον ἔμψυχον).

³⁹ Exod. 33.20; Deut.4.12; Sir. 43.31; Philo, *Post* 168-9; Jos, *War* 7.346.

Conclusion

I have attempted to interpret, persuade, and cite evidence in the endeavor to understand the New Testament Christological references which draw on Wisdom motifs in a better light. In examining the Jewish evidence, we saw that Wisdom was portrayed as God's wise interaction and extension to his creation. There were different ways of expressing Wisdom in these texts, but each of the themes were maintained and modified as time went on. Within the New Testament, we see the continuing of the dialogue concerning the significance, meaning, and application of God's Wisdom. Only now, it is embodied in the human Jesus, giving reality to what was previously only spoken of in poetic allegory.

How does the understanding that Jesus is the embodiment of God's wise intentions affect one's christology? For one, it should seek to see Jesus not in the extremes as a mere human or the opposite end as the creator God. Rather, Jesus is the means in and through whom God has accomplished his plan of salvation for humanity. Jesus is the fullest expression of God able to be set forth, although being fully human. As the mediator, Jesus not only represents God to the world, but also reflects humanity back to God. In doing so, Jesus is the true image and reflection of God, It is correct and necessary to speak of Jesus in terms as the embodiment of God, but only in the sense that Jesus embodies God's poetic Wisdom or *logos*. What must be kept in mind is that the passages in which these terms are discussed are not narratives, intended to be read as woodenly literal as possible. Rather, they are poetic wisdom passages, which need to be treated with the care and attention that wisdom literature is due. Since both Paul and John continued to express Jesus in poetic passages, this hermeneutical mode of reading must indeed be maintained. Readers must stop attempting to understand 1 Cor. 8.6; Col. 1; Heb. 1; and John 1 in strictly literal renderings. If we are to comprehend what those authors meant with their words, we need to take seriously the Wisdom motifs of Judaism which were the proper context for their various expression of the significance of Jesus.