

Proverbs 8 and the Place of Christ in the Trinity

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Introduction: Issues

The history of the interpretation of Proverbs 8 embraces an astonishing array of ancient and modern perspectives on this passage, ranging from the Christological debates of the early Christian centuries to the almost universal rejection of Christological interpretations in recent decades. In this study I survey the gamut of interpretations, revisit the possibility of a Christocentric interpretation in light of recent exegetical insights into the passage, and explore potential implications for understanding the place of Christ in the Trinity. This is not intended to constitute a comprehensive exegesis of Prov 8; rather, I build upon previous exegetical studies and suggest a theological synthesis that favors a Christological reading of the text.

A number of interrelated issues have surfaced from this preliminary research. I will deal with six: (1) the interpretation of “Wisdom” in Prov 8, in light of the history of research; (2) the identity of “Wisdom” in Prov 8, in light of the meaning and referent of the word *’āmôn* (traditionally translated “mastercraftsman”) in v. 30; (3) the significance of the “birth/begetting” and “installment” language in Prov 8; (4) the significance of the “mediator” language of vv. 30–31; (5) the significance of the language of “play” in vv. 30–31; and (6) the relative status between “Wisdom” and Yahweh in Prov 8.

Each of these issues leads naturally to the next in the discussion that follows. First, what is the interpretation of “Wisdom” in Prov 8?

I. The Interpretation of “Wisdom” in Proverbs 8

A. Brief History of Interpretation Until Modern Times.

1. *Early Jewish Interpretations.* Allusions to Prov 8 are found in the Wisdom of Ben Sira (ca. 185 B.C.E.). Sirach 24 imitates 35 lines of Prov 8 and relates how Wisdom left her heavenly abode to dwell with the people of Israel in Zion and now is found in the Torah. The poem on Wisdom in Baruch 3:9–4:4 (date uncertain) likewise identifies Wisdom with Torah. Further allusions to Prov 8 appear in the Wisdom of Solomon (1st cent. B.C.E. or C.E.). Wisdom 8:3 affirms the role of Wisdom in governing the world and alludes to Prov 8:22: “She glorifies her noble birth by living with God, / and the Lord of all loves her.” Wisdom 9:9 contains another allusion to this passage: “With you is wisdom, she who knows your works / and was present when you made the world.” In these early Jewish sources the interpretation of “wisdom” appears to move beyond poetic personification to include some kind of hypostatization.¹

2. *New Testament Allusions to Proverbs 8.* Various NT descriptions of Jesus Christ as Wisdom allude to Prov 8:22–31. These include especially John 1:1–3 (which combines Gen 1:1 with Prov 8:22–23); 1 Cor 1:24, 30; and Heb 1:1–4. The NT writers evidently regarded the “wisdom” of Prov 8 as more than personification; it is hypostatization that finds fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ.² We will return to these NT passages again briefly in our discussion below.

3. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers.* In patristic Christology, Prov 8:22–31 constituted one of the most popular OT passages used with reference to Christ.³ Justin Martyr (d. 166), in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, gave

¹ For further discussion, see, e.g., Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 139–145; and P. W. Skehan, “Structures in Poems on Wisdom: Proverbs 8 and Sirach 24,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41 (1979): 365–379.

² This paper is not the place for exegesis of the relevant NT passages. For brief discussions of the basis of Logos-Wisdom Christology in Prov 8 and other OT passages, see, e.g., Raymond Brown, “Wisdom Motifs,” in *The Gospel According to John, I–XII*, AB 29 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), cxxii–cxxv; George R. Beasley-Murray, “The Origin of the Logos Concept,” *John*, WBC 36 (Waco: Word, 1987), 6–10; George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 237–242; A. van Roon, “The Relation between Christ and the Wisdom of God According to Paul,” *Novum Testamentum* 16 (1974): 207–219; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 4–5; and Williston Walker et al., *A History of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons: 1985), 37–39.

³ See Maurice Dowling, “Proverbs 8:22–31 in the Christology of the Early Fathers,” *Irish Biblical Studies* 24 (June, 2002): 99–117. Dowling, 99, summarizes: “Most Fathers

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Prov 8:22 an (allegorical/typological) christological interpretation, showing that Christ (or the Holy Spirit) was always with the Father and emphasizing the distinction between the Logos and the Father and the priority of the Logos over Creation.⁴

Athenagoras, in his *Supplication for the Christians* (ca. 177),⁵ and Tertullian (ca. 160–220), in his *Against Praxeas*,⁶ follow Justin in identifying Logos (=Wisdom) with the eternal Son of God, but use Prov 8 as part of their two-stage history of the Logos to depict the Logos passing from an “immanent” state in the mind of God to an “expressed” state sent forth for the purpose of creation.

Origen of Alexandria (185–254), in his *De principiis (First Principles)*, clearly understands Wisdom to refer not simply to an impersonal attribute, but to the first-born Son of God. Wisdom is the beginning of God’s ways in the sense that “she contained within herself either the beginnings or forms or species of all creation.”⁷

4. *The Fourth Century Christological Debates and Subsequent Orthodox Christianity.* In the Christological controversies of the fourth century, this passage took on enormous significance. The opposing participants in the debate generally proceeded under the same assumption that wisdom in Prov 8:22–31 was an hypostasis (*hypostatikē*, distinct substance or essence of the Person) of the Son of God. But the Arians used the translation of the LXX (Old Greek) of v. 22 (“The Lord created [*ektise*] me . . .”) as evidence that although the Son of God was divine and existed before the creation of the world, He was not eternal, but rather originated in time and was subordinate to God.

The orthodox view (articulated especially by Eusebius of Caesarea [ca. 260–339]⁸ and Athanasius [300–373]⁹) followed a Greek variant (*ektēsato*, “acquired,” found in some LXX MSS and in Aquila, Symmachus,

assume without question that the OT Wisdom passages speak of the Son (or Word) of God.”

⁴ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho (Dialogus cum Tryphone)* 61.3–5, in *The Ante-Nicean Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Repr. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:227–228). The abbreviation ANF is used hereafter.

⁵ Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christianis* 10.3 (ANF 2:133).

⁶ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas (Adversus Praxean)* 6–7 (ANF 3:9.601–602).

⁷ Origen, *First Principles (De principiis [Peri archōn])* 1.2.2 (ANF 4:246).

⁸ See especially Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel (Praeparatio evangelica)* 7.12.5; 11.14.2–10; and *Demonstration of the Gospel (Demonstratio evangelica)* 5.1.

⁹ See in particular Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians (Orationes contra Arianos)* 2.46, 57–61, 73–77.

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Theodotion, Philo; cf. Vulgate) in v. 22. This verse was translated thus: “The Lord constituted/acquired/possessed [*ektēsato*] me as head of creation . . .” Such a translation was seen to imply both the Son’s co-eternal existence and unique relationship with the Father. Even if the reading of the LXX translation of *ektise* “created” is retained, as by the Arians, orthodox theologians argued that the word “create” in Scripture does not always imply “to bring into being out of nothing,” but may be used metaphorically. They explained *ektise* “created” in Prov 8:22 as referring not to the actual existence, but to the position, or place, of the Son as “head of creation” or at the time of His incarnation.¹⁰

The Council of Nicea in 325 rejected Arius’ subordinationist view of Christ, and Christian orthodoxy never again used the LXX (OG) translation of Prov 8:22 to speak of Trinitarian relations, but rather only the incarnation of the Son. The Christological interpretation was assumed throughout the sweep of Christian history until modern times

5. *The Eighteenth-Nineteenth Centuries.* The Christological interpretation of Prov 8 was still popular among 18th and 19th century conservative commentators. So, e.g., Matthew Henry’s 1710 Commentary states regarding wisdom in Prov 8:22–31:

That it is an intelligent and divine person that here speaks seems very plain, and that it is not meant of a mere essential property of the divine nature, for Wisdom here has personal properties and actions; and that intelligent divine person can be no other than the Son of God himself, to whom the principal things here spoken of wisdom are attributed in other scriptures, and we must explain scripture by itself.¹¹

Charles Bridges’ 1846 *Exposition of Proverbs* comments upon Prov 8:22–31 as follows:

It must be a perverted imagination that can suppose an attribute here. So glorious are the rays of eternal supreme Deity, distinct personality, and essential unity, that the mysterious,

¹⁰ For further discussion, see Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 18A (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 411; and Dowling, 105–117. Dowling not only surveys the views of Eusebius and Athanasius on Prov 8, but treats extensively the allegorical anti-Arian interpretation of this passage by Marcellus of Ancyra, many of whose allegorical interpretations of specific verses were rejected by Eusebius.

¹¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan: Revell, [original, 1710]), 3:835.

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ever-blessed Being—“the Word, who was in the beginning with God, and was God” (John, i.1,2)—now undoubtedly stands before us. Curiously to pry into the mode of his subsistence would be “intruding into those things which we have not seen.” (Col. ii. 18. 1 Tim. vi. 16.) To receive his own revelation of himself is our reverential privilege.¹²

David Thomas, in his 1885 commentary on Proverbs, insists regarding 8:23–31: “Here we must speak of Wisdom as a person, and that person is none other than He who is called the ‘Wisdom of God.’ These verses may be well regarded as His autobiographic sketch. He alone can write His own history, for His existence and experience date back to periods anterior to the creation.”¹³

At the same time, an analysis of Prov 8 is strangely absent from the four-volume *Christology of the Old Testament* by Ernst Hengstenberg, the great 19th century defender of Christian orthodoxy, and a cursory survey of other more recent treatments of Messianic Prophecies of the OT also failed to turn up any reference to Prov 8. The Christological interpretation of this chapter in Proverbs seems to have largely evaporated during the nineteenth century, perhaps in the face of ever-increasing application of historical-critical methodology.

B. Recent Interpretations

In the twentieth century and beyond, the Christological interpretation has been largely abandoned, at least in the major commentaries and scholarly studies. In the biblical scholarship of the last century there have been three main lines of interpretation of Wisdom in Prov 1–9, and more specifically, Prov 8:22–31.

1. Wisdom as a Goddess. A number of interpreters in the last century have argued that the evidence from Prov 8 (in its ANE context) points toward the interpretation of Wisdom in this chapter as the survival of the ancient Near Eastern wisdom goddesses.¹⁴

¹² Charles Bridges, *An Exposition of Proverbs* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959 [original, 1846]), 79.

¹³ David Thomas, *Book of Proverbs: Expository and Homiletical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1982), 95. [Reprint of *The Practical Philosopher*, The Homilistic Library 5 (London: R. D. Dickinson, 1885).]

¹⁴ For surveys of the theories that Lady Wisdom in Prov 1–9 is dependent upon ancient Near Eastern goddess mythology, see especially, Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: Almond, 1985), 23–34; Michael D. Coogan, “The Goddess Wisdom—‘Where Can She Be Found?’” in Ki Baruch Hu: *Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine*, ed. Rob-

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Hermann Gunkel, father of OT Form Criticism, was one of the first to point out that Lady Wisdom in Prov 1–9 had the qualities of a goddess, and he suggested a Mesopotamian mythological background.¹⁵ A seminal article by William F. Albright in 1920 reconstructed the existence of a goddess of life and wisdom, also imaged as the goddess of the vine, which was manifested as Siduri-Sabitu of the Gilgamesh Epic and identified with Ishtar by the Phoenicians. Following Gunkel, Albright argued that Lady Wisdom in Prov 1–9 was too mythological to have originated in Israel and posited a Mesopotamian origin.¹⁶ After the discovery of Canaanite mythological texts at Ugarit, in the 1950's Albright revised his theory and proposed a Canaanite goddess of Wisdom brought forth by the god El as the source of the relationship between Wisdom and Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁷

Other scholars have seen not a Mesopotamian, but an Egyptian background for Lady Wisdom, particularly in the goddesses Isis and Maat. For example, in the late 1960's Christa Bauer-Kayatz set forth the hypothesis that the Egyptian goddess Maat was the ancestor of Lady Wisdom of Prov 1–9, providing numerous parallels between the two.¹⁸ She especially noted the structural/thematic parallels between the self-predication of gods and goddesses in Egyptian literature and the self-predication of Woman Wisdom in Prov 8. Specific parallels with the Egyptian goddess Isis have also been traced by W. L. Knox and others.¹⁹

Other scholars find the province of the Wisdom Goddess of Prov 8 in the land of Israel itself. In his 1986 monograph, *Wisdom and the Book of*

ert Chazan, William W. Hallo, and Lawrence H. Schiffman (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 203–209; and William A. Young, “Wisdom, Nature, and the Feminine: Proverbs 8 in Cross-Cultural Perspective,” *Proceedings of the Central States Society of Biblical Literature and American Schools of Oriental Research* 4 (2001): 221–223.

¹⁵ Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis: Übers. und erklärt. Mit einem Geleitwort von Walter Baumgartner* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck u. Ruprecht, 1969), 1:95.

¹⁶ William F. Albright, “The Goddess of Life and Wisdom,” *American Journal of Semitic Languages* 36 (1919/1920): 258–294 (esp. 285–286).

¹⁷ William F. Albright, “Some Canaanite-Phoenician Sources of Hebrew Wisdom,” in Martin Noth and D. Winton Thomas, *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (VTSup 3; Leiden: Brill, 1955), 1–45.

¹⁸ Christa Bauer-Kayatz, *Studien zu Proverbien 1–9* (WMANT 22; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1966); and idem, *Einführung in die alttestamentliche Weisheit* (BibS(N) 55; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1969). See also, Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (trans. James D. Martin; Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 152–153.

¹⁹ W. L. Knox, “The Divine Wisdom,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 38 (1937): 230–237; cf. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 336–338.

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Proverbs: A Hebrew Goddess Redefined,²⁰ Bernhard Lang postulates that ancient Israelite society was largely polytheistic, worshiping at least one goddess, Astarte (Queen of Heaven), along with Yahweh, and against this background Lady “Wisdom must be understood as another goddess.”²¹ Lang suggests that she was “the divine patroness of the Israelite school system,”²² and in Prov 8 the goddess Wisdom, “watching the Creator fashion the world, is an exalted image of the teacher observing nature and demonstrating to his students the wonders of creation.”²³ Lang insists concerning Wisdom in Prov 8: “While remaining on one level a teacher, she is also a goddess who judges the rulers and dwells in the presence of the creator god.”²⁴

In light of textual and archaeological references to the goddess Asherah in an Israelite setting, still other interpreters would associate the Goddess Wisdom, alluded to in Prov 8, with the Canaanite goddess Asherah, Yahweh’s consort, whose worship was eventually wiped out in ancient Israel and Judah.²⁵

Since the 1980’s, feminist theology, especially in North America, has specifically focused upon the figure of the goddess Wisdom (*hokmâ*) in Israel, including references in Prov 8, exploring the possibilities of this figure becoming the foundation for a new Christian spirituality.²⁶

2. *Wisdom as Poetic Personification.* While modern scholars generally acknowledge that Prov 1–9 (and especially Prov 8) probably reflect

²⁰ Bernhard Lang, *Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs: A Hebrew Goddess Redefined* (New York: Pilgrim, 1986).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²² *Ibid.*, 7.

²³ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁵ See Silvia Schroer, “Weise Frauen und Ratgeberinnen in Israel,” *Biblische Notizen* 51 (1990): 45; Judith M. Hadley, “Yahweh and ‘His Asherah’: Archaeological and Textual Evidence for the Cult of the Goddess,” in Walter Dietrich and Martin A. Klopfenstein, ed., *Ein Gott allein? JHWH-Verehrung und biblischer Monotheismus im Kontext der israelitischen und altorientalischen Religionsgeschichte* (Freiburg: U of Freiburg P; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), 235–268; Coogan, 204.

²⁶ See, e.g., Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 54–61; Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (1985); Susan Cady, Marian Ronan, and Hal Tausig, *Sophia: The Future of Feminist Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986); and Silvia Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House: Studies on the Figure of Sophia in the Bible*, trans. Linda M. Maloney and William McDonough (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2000).

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some ANE mythological understanding of Wisdom as a goddess, many conclude that in its present literary setting within the book of Proverbs, “the personification wisdom in chapter viii is indeed poetic only and not ontological.”²⁷ The goddess mythology has been demythologized, and this passage is to be taken as poetic personification (abstraction made personal for the sake of poetic vividness) of Wisdom, not the identification of another personal deity besides Yahweh or of an hypostasis of an attribute of Yahweh (an actual heavenly being).²⁸

For Gerhard von Rad, Lady Wisdom must be seen within Israel’s historical process of “theologizing” human wisdom; she is the personified “voice of world order” who summons and instructs humans.²⁹ For Lang, after Wisdom loses her status in Israel as a goddess (as Israel moves from polytheism to monotheism), she becomes a “personification of school wisdom or God’s own wisdom.”³⁰ For Claudia Camp, Woman Wisdom is an overarching metaphor of feminine poetic personification, the connecting symbol unifying the whole book of Proverbs, which (in post-exilic times) takes over the role of the king to mediate between divine and human realms.³¹

Some evangelical commentators, while recognizing the immediate context as thoroughly metaphorical (poetic personification), have also suggested that in light of the wider canonical setting, “the personifying of wisdom, far from overshooting the literal truth, was a preparation for its full statement, since the agent of creation was no mere activity of God, but the Son, His eternal Word, Wisdom and Power (see also John 1:1–14; 1 Cor 1:24, 30; Heb 1:1–4).”³²

²⁷ R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, AB 18 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 71. For a survey of the theories that personified Wisdom is dependent upon ancient Near Eastern sources, see especially Camp, 23–34.

²⁸ Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Proverbs of Solomon*, trans. M. G. Easton, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 1:183. So Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 108: “The ‘birth’ of Wisdom is metaphorical and part of a poetic personification.” Cf. Roland Murphy, “Wisdom and Creation,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985): 3–11.

²⁹ Von Rad, 153–166.

³⁰ Lang, 129. See his fuller discussion in pp. 126–146.

³¹ Camp, 283–291.

³² Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1964), 79.

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3. *Hypostatization of Wisdom*. Helmer Ringgren's 1947 monograph, *Word and Wisdom*,³³ represents a major modern attempt to argue for the theory of hypostatization with regard to Wisdom. Ringgren refers to hypostasis in a "wider definition of the term" than the theological sense of "person of the Trinity" (used in the fourth century debates); it is for him "a quasi-personification of certain attributes proper to God, occupying an intermediate position between personalities and abstract beings."³⁴ According to Ringgren's theory, while in other ANE cultures the process of hypostatization led to the addition of another deity to the pantheon, in Israel, with the onset of monotheism, this process was aborted, bringing about a reality less than another deity but more than mere poetic personification. In the Hebrew Bible, the process of hypostatization reached its fullest realization in Prov 8:22–31. In this passage, according to Ringgren, Wisdom is not an "abstraction or a purely poetic personification but a concrete being, self-existent beside God."³⁵ Others who have taken over Ringgren's hypostatization hypothesis include Roger Whybray, who concludes that in Prov 8:22–31, "wisdom is clearly represented as a person in conformity with the context."³⁶

Other interpreters who do not follow Ringgren's hypothesis of the general ANE process of hypostatization nonetheless argue that the depiction of wisdom in Prov 8:22–31 clearly transcends poetic personification. So, e.g., Bauer-Kayatz: "[Wisdom,] which is merely a 'poetic personification' in ch. 3, becomes in 8:22–31 a hypostasis of divine wisdom, an entity with a virtually independent existence. . . ."³⁷

C. A Suggested Interpretation of "Wisdom": A Divine Person

With regard to Wisdom in the book of Proverbs (especially Prov 8:12–36), I have become convinced by those modern studies that identify

³³ See, e.g., Helmer Ringgren, *Word and Wisdom: Studies in the Hypostatization of Divine Qualities and Functions in the Ancient Near East* (Lund: Haken Ohlssons Boktryckeri, 1947).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8 (quoting William O. E. Oesterley and G. H. Box, *The Religion and Worship of the Synagogue*, 2nd rev. ed. [London: Pitman and Sons, 1911], 169, who themselves do not use the term "hypostasis").

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

³⁶ Roger N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9*, SBT 45 (Naperville: Allenson, 1965), 98–104 (citation is p. 99); *idem*, *The Book of Proverbs* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1972), 50–52; and *idem*, "Proverbs VIII 22–31 and Its Supposed Prototypes," in James Crenshaw, ed., *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* (New York: KTAV, 1976), 390–400.

³⁷ Camp, 30, summarizing the view of Christa Bauer-Kayatz, *Studien zu Proverbien 1–9*; cf. Christa Bauer-Kayatz, *Einführung in die alttestamentliche Weisheit*, 70.

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ḥokmâ (“Wisdom”) as an hypostatization for divinity (in the sense of an actual divine person). Especially impressive is the evidence that Wisdom in Proverbs assumes the very prerogatives elsewhere reserved for Yahweh alone in the Hebrew Bible: giver of life and death (Prov 8:35–36)³⁸; source of legitimate government (8:15–16)³⁹; the One who is to be sought after, found, and called (1:28; 8:17)⁴⁰; the one who loves and is to be loved (8:17)⁴¹; the giver of wealth (8:18–21)⁴² and security (1:33)⁴³; and perhaps most significantly, a source of revelation (Prov 8:6–10, 19, 32, 34; 30:3–5).⁴⁴ In Prov 9:1 (cf. 7:6), Wisdom builds herself a temple “as befits a deity of her status . . .”⁴⁵ It is also “quite plausible that the plural construction *ḥkmwt* in Prov 1:20; 9:1 . . . [and elsewhere in Wisdom literature—Prov 14:1; 24:7; Ps 49:4; Sir 4:11; 32(35):16] as a *pluralis intensitatis* may be a conscious parallel construction to *ʾlhym*, as has been proposed.”⁴⁶

In Prov 8, specifically v. 12, Wisdom uses the common rhetorical self-asseverating form of “divine self-praise” (“I am Wisdom”) regularly reserved elsewhere in Scripture and in the ancient Near East for deity: “I am Yahweh your God”; “I am Ishtar of Arbela”; “I am Isis the divine.”⁴⁷ Biblical parallels to this “divine self-praise” with the same grammatical

³⁸ Cf. Prov 10:27; 14:27, and throughout the biblical canon. Elizabeth Achtemeier rightly points out that “No one but God can say ‘He who finds me finds life,’ for God is the source of all life” (*Preaching from the Old Testament* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989], 173).

³⁹ Cf. Num 11:16–17; 1 Sam 2:10; 10:1; 1 Kgs 3:4–15; 10:9; Ps 2:7.

⁴⁰ Cf. 2 Chr 15:2; Hos 5:6; Amos 5:4–6; 8:12; Ezek 8:18; Deut 1:45; 4:29; Judg 10:11–12; Job 35:12; Pss 22:3; 28:1; Isa 1:15; Jer 11:11, 14; 14:12; Mic 3:4; Zech 7:13.

⁴¹ Cf. 1 Kgs 3:3; 1 Sam 2:30; 2 Sam 12:23; Neh 13:26; Isa 48:14.

⁴² Cf. 1 Kgs 3:13; 1 Chr 29:12; 2 Chr 1:12; 17:5.

⁴³ Cf. Lev 25:18, 19; Jer 32:37, etc.

⁴⁴ Cf. Prov 29:18; Pss 19:10; 119:1–2. Achtemeier notes that “Wisdom here has become a source of revelation. . . . Such a view contradicts everything we have heretofore learned about the Old Testament, because the created world has here become a source of revelation” (173–174). Achtemeier points out most of these divine prerogatives assumed by Wisdom, but fails to recognize the implication of the hypostatization of Wisdom.

⁴⁵ Coogan, 203. Does the “seven pillars” of this house allude to the seven days of creation? This is possible, although not certain.

⁴⁶ Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House*, 27.

⁴⁷ This kind of self-predication is also used by kings, who in some sense claim divinity or an intimate connection with the divine: “I am Azitawadda, blessed by Baal”; “I am Kilamuwa son of Hayya.” For analysis of parallels with the Egyptian statements of self-predication on the part of gods and (divine) kings, see the pioneering work of Bauer-Kayatz, *Studien zu Proverbien 1–9*, 76–93.

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structure can be found in Ezek 12:25; 35:12; Zech 10:6; Mal 3:6.⁴⁸ Based upon these precise grammatical parallels, I agree with scholars who argue that the better translation of Prov 8:12 is “I am Wisdom . . .” not “I, wisdom . . .” and that this is a form of “divine self-praise.” From the perspective of genre analysis, I concur with Silvia Schroer that Wisdom “in the book of Proverbs is a divine figure. . . . [who] speaks like a deity, or like the God of Israel.”⁴⁹

Evidence presented by an array of modern exegetes is difficult to ignore, i.e., evidence of “Wisdom’s self-presentation as a divine figure in chapter 8 . . .”⁵⁰ As Schroer puts it, “This important text about *ḥokmâ* [Prov 8:22–31] at the very beginning of creation leaves no doubt that she is a divine figure. She is not a created work, but rather was present before all created things and is an authoritative participant in the creation of the world.”⁵¹

The later intertextual allusions to Prov 8, both by writers of later Judaism and of the NT, seem clearly to have understood this poem as an hypostasis (i.e., an actual divine person) and not just personification.⁵² R. B. Y. Scott restates this point: “These later interpretations of the figure of Wisdom seem to assume that the writer of this poem thought of Wisdom as an hypostasis of Yahweh, that is, as having some kind of independent existence.”⁵³ But what divine person is spoken of in Prov 8? This draws us to the next issue.

⁴⁸ Cf. Samuel L. Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings: A Biblical Theology of Manhood and Womanhood* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 94–95.

⁴⁹ Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House*, 27. Samuel Terrien hesitates to accept the theological consequences of this usage of the rhetorical form of aretology (“divine self-praise”)—that Wisdom here is the hypostatization of God, although in further discussion he acknowledges that “Wisdom portrays herself as the daughter of Yahweh” and that “Godhead was viewed as a collective personality” and that perhaps here, “without falling into a crass polytheism” is a suggestion of “the transpersonality of God” (97).

⁵⁰ Carol A. Newsom, “Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1–9,” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 157.

⁵¹ Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House*, 28.

⁵² We have already noted in our history of interpretation references to early Jewish interpretations and the NT references: Wis 7:22; 8:3, 4, 6; 9:9; John 1:3; Col 1:15–16; and Heb 1:3. See also Philo, *de Sacerdot* 5. Cf. the intertextual linkage also with Job 28, where Wisdom should also be “best understood as personal rather than abstract, and as divine” (Coogan, 207).

⁵³ Scott, 70. However, Scott sees this as part of the mythological language borrowed and adapted by the author of Proverbs in his poetic personification (not hypostatization) of wisdom.

**II. The Identity of Wisdom in Proverbs 8,
in Light of the Word *ʾāmôn* in Proverbs 8:30**

As we have noted above in our review of literature, even before the rise of feminist interpretation, many modern commentators recognized that in this passage Wisdom “addresses men in the tones of a goddess who has been associated with Yahweh in the creation of the world and its inhabitants. . . . Wisdom is presented here *as if* she were a self-conscious divine being, distinct from though subordinate to Yahweh. . . .”⁵⁴

Michael D. Coogan summarizes the current thinking: “There is a scholarly consensus, despite considerable disagreement about the origins and interpretation of the language used, that Wisdom is depicted as a goddess in such texts as Proverbs 1–9. . . .”⁵⁵

I would acknowledge that the language in Prov 8 describes a divine being, and based upon the weight of evidence, would agree with the many scholars who argue that this language goes beyond poetic personification to that of hypostasis (description of an actual divine being). But is this divine being a goddess, a female deity? Obviously, since the gender of the Hebrew word for “wisdom,” *hokmâ*, is feminine, the hypostatization of this attribute of God would naturally take on feminine gender in descriptions of Wisdom’s actions. But is there a hint, perhaps, that this hypostasis of “Wisdom” is not to be ultimately conceived of as feminine? I believe this hint is found in the word *ʾāmôn* found in Prov 8:30.

The precise meaning of this Hebrew word *ʾāmôn* is debated; the traditional and most widely-accepted meaning is “workman/craftsman,” but some (ancient and modern) interpreters suggest the meaning “child, nursling.” Translating as “nursling” or “small child” requires revocalization of the MT from *ʾāmôn* to *ʾāmûn*. Cleon Rogers sets forth strong evidence for retaining the MT and translating as “master workman.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Ibid., 69.

⁵⁵ Coogan, 203.

⁵⁶ See Cleon L. Rogers, III, “The Meaning and Significance of the Hebrew Word *ʾāmôn* in Proverbs 8,30,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 109 (1997): 208–221; cf. Patrick W. Skehan, “Structures in Poems on Wisdom: Proverbs 8 and Sirach 24,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41 [1979]: 365–379; and Delitzsch, 190–193. A third meaning, “trustworthy [friend]” is a further alternative, suggested in the ancient Greek translations of Symmachus and Theodotion. However, this translation seems to be an “etymological deduction” based on the etymology of the root *ʾmn* (which has the root meaning of “firm”) rather than an actual attested meaning of the term. See Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 100–101, for the (related) suggestion that like its probable Akkadian cognate *ummānu*,

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First, Rogers summarizes the lexical evidence for this meaning in the OT and in cognate languages. The Hebrew root occurs elsewhere in the OT as a personal name “Ammon” (Neh 7:59; 1 Kgs 22:26; 1 Chr 3:14; 2 Chr 33:20–25; Jer 1:2; 25:3; cf. another form of the Hebrew name, “Amnon,” 2 Sam 3:2; 13:1; 1 Chr 3:1; 4:20). It is used in Jer 52:15 (though disputed because of the parallel in 2 Kgs 25:11). It is probably a variation of another word *ʾomān*, which in Song 7:2 clearly means “artist.” This same word probably is found in Phoenician (YMMANAI) as a stamp on a brick, and it clearly appears in Aramaic and NW Semitic with the meaning of “architect.” It is also clearly attested in Akkadian, probably related to *ummānu* “workman”—designating a particular class of skilled experts (musicians, skilled craftsmen, sages or scholars).

Rogers also gives evidence that the word *ʾāmôn* is found in later Hebrew with the meaning “craftsman” and shows from the Targum that the Rabbis understood the meaning in Prov 8:30 to be “architect.” Versional support for this meaning is found in the LXX, Vulgate, and Syriac. The MT pointing indicates that the Masoretes understood the word to mean “craftsman,” as does the allusion to this text in the Wisdom of Solomon (7:21).

Rogers points out that such meaning is also supported by the immediate context of Prov 8, in which the emphasis is upon the orderly building and craftsmanship in creation. Compare the words “make” (v. 26), “establish” (v. 27), and “foundation” (v. 29).

Rogers also summarizes evidence for translating *ʾāmôn* as “child” or “nursling” and concludes that this is much weaker. He points out that this translation arises largely because of uneasiness with having wisdom being a “mastercraftsman” and hence, a co-creator with Yahweh. According to this suggestion it would be easy to have a scribal confusion between a *holem* and a *shureq*. Aquila’s translation supports this variant, as does that of some rabbinic exegetes. It parallels the idea of the Egyptian goddess Maat playing as a child before Ra. And this reading is congruent

the term can mean “scribe, sage,” and should be translated thus in Prov 8:22. Clifford suggests that the MT wrongly vocalized the word. Against this view, I find that Clifford makes the Akkadian cognate the final determiner of meaning and ignores the inner-biblical evidence (especially from Cant 7:2) for the meaning of “craftsman.” Even in Akkadian, as Rogers notes, the term *ummānu* can mean “artisan” or “craftsman” as well as “sage, scribe.” I concur with Rogers that the meaning of “craftsman” better comports with the immediate context of Prov 8:30. Clifford seems to make another less-than-natural reading of the text to avoid having Wisdom be a co-creator with Yahweh in a post-exilic monotheistic context.

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with the semantic field of *ʾmn* in the Qal. Finally, it is argued by those supporting the translation of “nursling” that the child imagery fits the context of the “birthing” imagery of vv. 22–24.

In response to the suggestion that one translate *ʾāmôn* as “child” or “nursling,” Rogers points out that Egyptian parallels are far from convincing and should not be the final determiner of meaning. The immediate context of Prov 8: 30–31 is not birth, as in vv. 22–24 (where it is emphasized that wisdom pre-existed the created world), but the ordering of the world, in which context the child imagery would not be appropriate.⁵⁷ The versional evidence of Aquila and some rabbis is apparently another attempt to solve a theological problem, i.e., of having wisdom be a co-creator, rather than the representation of a more original reading. It is easy to see why a scribe would wish to read “infant” instead of “mastercraftsman” out of a concern for monotheism. Thus “the versional evidence would suggest an intentional change as an attempt to solve this perceived theological dilemma. This argument becomes even stronger considering that the word *ʾāmôn* occurs only here. It would be unlikely for the change to occur in the opposite direction.”⁵⁸

While Rogers presents what is to me persuasive evidence that *ʾāmôn* in Prov 8:22 should be translated “master craftsman,” he nonetheless resists applying this term to Wisdom because he contends that (1) this would imply that Wisdom was a (co-) creator and the motif of (co-) creator does not seem applicable to Wisdom; and (2) the term *ʾāmôn* is masculine, and since the antecedent of a word in Hebrew is generally the same gender, one would expect a feminine form of *ʾāmôn* here.

These obstacles need not cause the interpreter to look for a rare (and in my view improbable) grammatical construction (“accusative of state”) in this context to explain the difficulties, as Rogers does, and ascribe the term Mastercraftsman to Yahweh rather than Wisdom.⁵⁹ Instead, the very

⁵⁷ See also the contextual argumentation of Clifford (100) against the meaning of “nursling”: “If Wisdom were a child, the analogy that is drawn between her relationship to God and her relationship to human beings (vv. 30b–31) would not make sense. She has an adult relationship to God and an adult relationship to human beings.”

⁵⁸ Rogers, 218.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 220, translates: “I was close to Him [the Lord in His role as] a master craftsman.” In this case, “the antecedent of the word is not Wisdom, but is the Lord” (221). However, as Rogers points out (220), in the construction that he suggests (an accusative of state, or alternatively, a noun in apposition to the preceding pronominal suffix), the noun is usually either definite or a personal name. Rogers’ reply that we are dealing here with poetry where articles occur inconsistently is not really a sufficient response.

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dissonances that Rogers points out are in my view internal textual indicators that Wisdom is here hypostatized and ultimately refers to another Person within the Godhead. Seen as hypostatization for the Son of God, the grammatical and contextual difficulties disappear: the Son (masculine in gender, as indicated by the masculine “Master Workman”) is indeed Co-Creator with Yahweh.

This inner-textual hint is perhaps reinforced in Prov 30:4 (with possible allusion to Father and Son Co-Creators): “Who has ascended into heaven, or descended? Who has gathered the wind in His fists? Who has bound the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is His name, and what is His Son's name, If you know?”⁶⁰

And such interpretation is further supported by the allusion to Prov 8 in the NT (especially 1 Cor 1:24, 30; Col 1:15–16), as we noted above in our review of literature. Further exploration of these and other possible NT allusions to this passage lies beyond the scope of this paper.

Ultimately, however, I suggest one cannot say that Wisdom in Prov 1–9 is either male or female in gender. A recent penetrating article in *Revue Biblique* by Françoise Mies⁶¹ presents a fascinating thesis. I quote the printed English abstract of the French article:

Personified Wisdom in Pr 9 is [widely] considered as a feminine figure. This interpretation is nevertheless corroborated neither by the study of this chapter nor by the analysis of the other passages of the book presenting Personified Wisdom (1, 20–33; 8), or of the first seven chapters in which the sexual and gendering atmosphere is nevertheless emphasized. However, Wisdom is not masculine. As God, it exceeds all sexual activity.⁶²

Mies’ article has forced me to go back and look at Prov 1–9. Indeed I find the author is correct in pointing out that aside from the feminine gender of the word *ḥokmâ* “wisdom” (and here there is no choice in the Hebrew language, for the word *ḥokmâ* is invariably feminine in gender, and pronouns that refer to *ḥokmâ* must necessarily be feminine), there is simply no indication in the context that “Wisdom” is to be taken as a

⁶⁰ See the NJKV and NASB, which take the pronoun “He” to be God, and (in the NKJV) the word “Son” is capitalized.

⁶¹ Françoise Mies, “‘Dame Sagesse’ en Proverbes 9 une personnification féminine?” *Revue Biblique* 108/2 (2001): 161–183.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 161.

feminine figure! Rather, as Mies forcefully argues, “Wisdom” as a divine being is presented in a neutral way, beyond the polarity of sexuality.⁶³

This description, I maintain, precisely fits the Second Person of the Godhead. Although female imagery is utilized of Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible, and Yahweh is denoted by the masculine “He,” ultimately He is presented as beyond the polarity of sexuality.

But if Prov 8 does refer to Christ, what about the apparent imagery of “birth” in vv. 22–25? Was Arius (and now Jehovah’s Witnesses) right after all? Was there a time before which the Son was not? This takes us to our next issue.

III. Meaning of the “Birth” and “Installment” Language in Prov 8:22–24

The meaning of *qānā* in v. 22 has been debated over the centuries. Does it mean “created” or “possessed”? Derek Kidner points out that “Elsewhere this verb [*qānā*] predominantly means ‘get,’ and hence ‘possess’ (see, e.g., Pr. 4:5, 7, where wisdom is the object, as here.) Of its 84 Old Testament occurrences, only six or seven allow the sense ‘create’ (Gn. 14:19, 22; Ex. 15:16; Dt. 32:6; Pss. 74:2; 139:13; Pr. 8:22), and even these do not require it. The derived nouns still more strongly emphasize possession.”⁶⁴ More recently, parallels with Ugaritic literature have nonetheless swung scholarly opinion in favor of “create” because of the phrase *qnyt ʿelm*, usually translated as “creatress of the gods.” But as C. H. Gordon indicates, the idea of “create” both in Ugaritic literature and the OT parallels is in the specific sense of *parenthood*: “Gn. 4:1 and Pr. 8:22 refer primarily to bearing or begetting children.”⁶⁵ This seems to be the consensus position in recent scholarship.

⁶³ Mies points out, among other things, that unlike references to Lady Folly, which repeatedly use the Hebrew word for “woman” (Prov 9:13; 11:16; 12:4), there is no reference to “the woman Wisdom.” There is thus an asymmetry between Folly and Wisdom. Folly is a clearly depicted as a woman, but there are no uniquely feminine activities described for Wisdom (166–171). In Prov 8, Wisdom speaks in the first person so that one cannot discern any difference between masculine and feminine grammatically (172). Regarding the contention by many scholars that Wisdom erotically “seduces” her hearers in a sexual context with her use of the word “love,” Mies points out that the term “love” throughout the Bible, and in Proverbs in particular, is an expression of polysemy and often does not refer to erotic love (173–174).

⁶⁴ Kidner, *Proverbs*, 79.

⁶⁵ Cited in Kidner, *Proverbs*, 80. Cf. W. A. Irwin, “Where Shall Wisdom Be Found,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80 (1961): 133–142; and R. N. Whybray, “Proverbs 8:22–31 and Its Supposed Prototypes,” *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1965): 504–514.

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For some time I maintained that this phrase must mean “possessed” instead of “begotten.” But the following words in vv. 24–25 leave little doubt that “birth” language is being employed in this passage: “When there were no depths I was brought forth [*hōlālî*]. . . Before the hills, I was brought forth [*hōlālî*].” This term *hōlālî*, from the root *hûl*, in the Polel/Polal can mean “whirl, dance, writhe,” but in this context there is no doubt that it means “be brought forth” (cf. Ps 51:7 and Job 15:7) in the sense of childbirth. Thus, one cannot avoid the language of “birth” in reference to Christ long before His incarnation.

How does the description of “birth” apply to the One we now call the Second Member of the Godhead at the time before the beginning of creation? I suggest that the key is found in the accompanying expression of v. 23: “I have been established/installed [*nsk* III]⁶⁶ from everlasting, from the beginning, before there was ever an earth.”

The language in Prov 8:22–25 for Wisdom’s having been “established/installed” and “brought forth” before the creation of this world, is illuminated by parallel language in Ps 2:6–7, including, significantly, the only other biblical occurrence of the Hebrew word *nsk* III “install.”⁶⁷ Here Yahweh installs the Messianic king using the language of birth (=adoption). Yahweh declares:

⁶⁶ See F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford, 1907), 651.

⁶⁷ Ibid. The existence of a *nsk* III in the Hebrew Bible is rejected by Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm, eds., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 703; the usage of *nsk* in Psa 2:6 is conjectured to be in need of an emendation, to be revocalized as derived from *skk*, meaning “fashion artfully;” the usage in Prov 8:23 is considered to be a *hapax legomenon* of *nsk* II meaning “be woven, shaped.” However, as noted by C. Dohmen, “*נָסַךְ*,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 9:460, with regard to Psa 2:6, “the implicit need for this revocalization . . . is questionable; this text possibly provides evidence for a broader semantic range of *nsk*.” Regarding Prov 8:23, Dohmen sides with O. Plöger (*Sprüche Salomos*, BK 17 [1984], 87), who “keeps the niphāl of *nsk*, translating it ‘be appointed.’” There is no need to follow a conjectured emendation when the Hebrew of the MT makes good sense. Whether one follows BDB in postulating *nsk* III for Psa 2:6 and Prov 8:23, which I find most likely, or suggests that *nsk* I, “to pour out,” has a broader semantic range including, in these two passages of the Hebrew Bible, the meaning “to anoint/install/appoint,” the resulting translation and intertextual linkage of Psa 2:6 and Prov 8:23 is the same. I concur with the majority of modern versions which translate these two passages as indicating the idea of “install,” “appoint,” “anoint [to an office],” “set up,” “establish,” or the like.

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Yet I have installed [*nsk* III] My King
On My holy hill of Zion. (Ps 2:6)

And the Messianic king responds:

I will declare the decree:
The Lord has said to Me,
You are My Son,
Today I have begotten you. (Ps 2:7)

Psalm 2, while probably having a local, historical application to the installation of the Davidic king in OT times, refers ultimately to the Messiah in His incarnation, and vss. 6–7 particularly to His being anointed as King after His resurrection and ascension.⁶⁸

From this intertextual parallel with the usage in Ps 2, it seems clear that Prov 8, like Ps 2, is using reference to “birth” as technical language to describe the formal installation of royalty into a new office. Prov 8 is not speaking of a time before which Wisdom (the pre-incarnate Christ) did not exist; the text is not speaking of His literally being “begotten.” Rather, the passage seems to refer to the time of His installment into His office of Sonship “in the beginning” (which in light of the allusion to the “in the beginning” [using the same Hebrew word] of Gen 1:1, refers to the commencement of creation in the universe).⁶⁹

I conclude that this whole section of Prov 8, suffused with language of begetting, linked to the technical word of installation (*nsk* III), in light of the intertextual parallel to both installation and begetting in Ps 2:6–7, is to be taken as technical terminology for installment into office in Prov 8, as in Ps 2. But what precisely was the office to which the Second Member of the Godhead was installed “in the beginning,” before sin and even before creation of the universe, as described in Prov 8? This leads us to the next section.

⁶⁸ For internal evidence that Psalm 2, including especially vss. 6–7, refers ultimately to the Messiah, see my article, “New Testament Use of the Old Testament,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 5/1 (Spring 1994): 24, 37. Cf. Acts 13:33; Heb 1:5; 5:5.

⁶⁹ See my article, “The Biblical Account of Origins,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14/1 (Spring 2003): 32–34, for evidence that the “beginning” in Gen 1:1 is referring to the beginning of creation in the entire universe, and not just the beginning of creation of this world and its surrounding heavenly spheres.

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IV. The Mediatorial Language of Prov 8:30–31

According to Prov 8:30–31, Wisdom was beside Yahweh at creation, a “Master craftsman [*ʾāmon*]” (masculine) who was “rejoicing [*mēšaḥequet*] always before Him” (Prov 8:30) and at the same time “rejoicing [*mēšaḥequet*] in His inhabited world”—or, more specifically—“with the sons of men” (v. 31). What is described in these verses is nothing less than a role of Wisdom mediating between divinity and humanity (vv. 30b–31).

Numerous recent studies have recognized the mediatorial role of Wisdom in these verses. So, Shirley Wurst: “the text subtly demonstrates that Woman Wisdom is a mediator between creator and creation.”⁷⁰ Again, Samuel Terrien, in his *The Elusive Presence*: “The function of Wisdom is [=as, *sic*] the instrument of rapprochement between God and man is delineated more sharply in . . . Prov. 8:22–31.”⁷¹ As another example, Tikva Frymer-Kensky writes: “Wisdom, beloved lover of men, is also the beloved of God. . . . As the lover of both men and God, she also joins them in her love. . . . In this way, she mediates, in her own way, the gulf between humanity and God.”⁷²

Gale Yee analyzes how the macrostructure of Prov 8 leads to this same conclusion: “This climactic poem of Prov 8 is a highly intricate poetic piece. It is divided into three strophes framed by means of distant antithetical parallelism, while a third is fashioned in a chiasmus. Each stich within the strophes is interlinked by synonymous and antithetical parallelism and repetitions. The whole poem builds structurally to portray Wisdom as the ultimate mediator between God and humanity.”⁷³ Claudia Camp shows this to be the case within the chiastic microstructure of vv. 30–31. “Not only the context of the poem [Prov 8:30–31] but the structure itself [of these two verses] makes the theological point that Wisdom, who was begotten before creation and was present with God during creation, is also the primary link between God and humankind. . . . [O]ne can see the point clearly in the chiastic structure of

⁷⁰ Shirley Wurst, “Woman Wisdom’s Ways: Ecolkinship,” in *The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst, The Earth Bible 3 (Sheffield: Academic P; Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001), 59.

⁷¹ Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: The Heart of Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), 355.

⁷² Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 181.

⁷³ Gale Yee, “An Analysis of Prov 8:22–31 According to Style and Structure,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 94 (1982): 64–65.

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8.30b–31. . . . In this poem, Wisdom is the only link between God and humans.”⁷⁴

Putting together the aspects of the text that we have seen thus far, I suggest that Prov 8 is not indicating a time before which Wisdom (the pre-incarnate Christ) did not exist, but rather refers to the time of Christ’s installment into a new office at the commencement of creation and the particular role to which He is installed as the “Mediator” between an infinite God and His finite creatures.

Is there other biblical evidence for this mediatorial role of the pre-incarnate Son of God? I believe there is.

1. The Word (John 1:1)—“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” A “word” is a go-between between one’s mouth and another’s ear so that communication can take place. The Son of God was such a Word—mediating, facilitating communication between the Godhead and created beings.

2. The depiction of the pre-incarnate Son of God as an Angel (“messenger”) from Yahweh to His creatures. I refer to the many “Angel of the Lord” (*Malʾak Yahweh*) passages in the OT where the context makes clear that the Angel is sent from Yahweh, representing Yahweh, and at the same time *is* Yahweh. See especially: Gen 16:13; 18–19; 22:24; 48:16; Exod 23:20–21; 32–33; Josh 5–6.⁷⁵

3. Related is the mention in Daniel of Michael, “one of the chief princes” (Dan 10:13, 21; 12:1), who is again referred to in Jude 9 and Rev 12:7. In the context of other passages referring to the voice of the “archangel” at the Second Advent (1 Thess 4:15–17, parallel with the “voice” of the Son of God, John 5:28–29), a good case can be made that “Michael,” whose name means “who is like God?” is actually a reference to Christ.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Camp, 272. Camp diagrams the chiasmic structure of these two verses thus:

“I was his delight [*ša’a šu’im*] day after day
playing [*měšaheqet*] before him continually
playing [*měšaheqet*] in his inhabited world
and my delight [*ša’a šu’im*] was with humankind.”

⁷⁵ See the discussion of these passages in, e.g., Ernst Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament and a Commentary on the Messianic Predictions*, trans. Theodor Meyere and James Martin, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1956), 1:115–130; Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1967), 33–34; Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959 [1948]), 86–87.

⁷⁶ See, e.g., Francis D. Nichol et al., *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7 vols. (Washington: Review and Herald, 1978–80), 4:860.

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Is it possible that, perhaps in a council between the members of the Godhead before creation, it was decided that the One we now call the Second Person of the Godhead would at the commencement of creation condescend to partially empty himself (cf. the *kenosis* of Phil 2), to step down (perhaps taking the form of an angel?) to become the Mediator between the infinite God and finite creatures? And that Prov 8 is referring to this installation—this “begetting” of the Son of God—into the office of Mediator between the transcendent God and finite created beings? And that Prov 8 describes the mediatorial role of Wisdom—the pre-incarnate Christ?

Proverbs 8, I suggest, not only describes this role, but gives us an inside look into the attitude of Christ as He engages in the act of creation beside the Father. What is the spirit, the attitude, of the Mediator in Creation? This leads to a fifth issue in this passage.

V. The Theology of “Play” in Prov 8:30–31

According to Prov 8:30, Wisdom was beside Yahweh at creation, a “Master craftsman [*ʿāmon*]” who was “rejoicing [*měśaḥeqet*, lit. playing, sporting, laughing]⁷⁷ always before Him (Prov 8:30).

This term *měśaḥeqet* is a participial form of the root *śḥq*, “to sport, play, laugh.” Here is represented the mood of joyful celebration, pure delight, of the Son with Yahweh, and pure delight, joyful celebration with humanity. This verb *śḥq* is used elsewhere of children “playing” in the streets (Zech 8:5). The Father and the Son are having “the time of their life,” as it were, rejoicing, laughing, playing, as they work together, Co-creators, fashioning this world and its inhabitants. Likewise, the Son is having “the time of His life,” as it were, rejoicing, laughing, sporting with the humans He has created. This description introduces a dynamic into the theology of creation that has long been overlooked—a theology of divine play! Unfortunately, within space constraints, this theology must await further development in a future study. I move now to the last issue, by way of synthesis and implication.

⁷⁷ See also the words “rejoicing” (2x), which are synonyms for “play.” Delitzsch, 192: “Play is in contrast to work, an occupation which has enjoyment in view. But the work, i.e., the occupation, which aims to do something useful, can also become play if it costs no strenuous effort, or if the effort which it costs passes wholly into the background in presence of the pleasure which it yields.”

**VI. The Relative Status between Persons of the
Godhead in Proverbs 8**

Based upon the insights derived from Prov 8, I conclude that it is not possible to posit either an eternal or an economic subordination within the Godhead before Christ's incarnation. As Schroer observes: "it would be false, keeping in mind the whole context of ch. 8, to impute to these texts (vv. 22–31) the notion that Wisdom here is *subordinate* to YHWH. The text avoids any statement that could be read as a clear expression of subordination. *Hokmâ* is a counterpart for YHWH, a divine counterpart."⁷⁸

I suggest that according to Prov 8, at the beginning of creation, we find a situation of equal members of the Godhead as Co-creators. There is no reference to a time before which One of the Members of the Godhead did not exist, nor a reference to the eternal subordination of One Member of the Godhead to Another Member. Rather, there is described a time, before the creation of the universe, when, presumably by mutual consent, one Person of the Godhead is "installed" (*nsk* III) in a role of Mediator. While the Person we call the Father continued to represent the transcendent nature of the Godhead, the Person we know as the Son condescended in divine *kenosis* to represent the immanent aspect of divinity, coming close to His creation, mediating between infinity and finitude, even before sin. This is not a subordination of the Son to the Father, but a voluntary condescension to be installed into a mediatorial role, representing the divine love in an immanent way to His inhabited universe.

Far in the future from this time at the commencement of creation, the incarnation, coming after the entrance of sin into the world, will continue this pattern of *kenosis* by the Son, as He actually takes the nature of humanity and voluntarily becomes subordinate to the Father, obedient even unto death, even the death of a cross (Phil 2:5–11). The incarnation clearly involves the economic (not eternal) subordination of the Son. But that is the subject of another study.

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⁷⁸ Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House*, 28–29.