

This thesis, *Hearing Her Call: A Textual Analysis and Feminist Reading of Wisdom Personified as a Woman in the Book of Proverbs*, includes four chapters, an introduction, and conclusion.

Introduction

Chapter 1: “Turn Toward Wisdom’s Counsel” – Proverbs 1:20-33

Chapter 2: “Acquire Wisdom” – Proverbs 4:1-9

Chapter 3: Wisdom’s Character, Value, and Beginnings in Proverbs 8

Chapter 4: Reading Personified Wisdom through a Feminist Lens

Conclusion

The introduction provides background on wisdom literature and the book of Proverbs, as well as a brief explanation of wisdom as a concept and Wisdom as a character. Chapters 1-3 are further subdivided into a structural outline, annotated translation, and brief analysis of the texts they consider. Chapter 4 introduces the concept of a feminist reading of Wisdom personified as a woman in Proverbs, and is also subdivided into sections. These subdivisions are as follows: “Why a Feminist Reading of Personified Wisdom;” “Acquiring Wisdom;” “Wisdom’s Speeches and Her Position of Authority;” “Wisdom as a Prophet;” “Wisdom and Creation;” and “Wisdom as a Goddess.” Finally, my brief conclusion considers Wisdom’s importance for modern, feminist readers, searching for a role model and example of leadership.

The goal of this thesis was to offer an in depth consideration of sections of Proverbs that present Wisdom personified as a woman, and read these sections through a feminist lens. This thesis contributes to the field by bringing to light a female biblical voice, who might otherwise be lost to Reform Jews, who rarely read or study Proverbs.

HEARING HER CALL:
A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND FEMINIST READING OF
WISDOM PERSONIFIED AS A WOMAN
IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

Sarah Danielle DePaolo

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Introduction

I first met the feminine Wisdom in my second year of rabbinical school in Dr. Aaron Panken's Talmud I course. Ancient texts from the Second Temple period, specifically Ben Sira, make mention of a personified Wisdom, who is both God's confidant as well as humanity's avenue to access our wonder of the divine.¹ The rabbis of Midrash, Talmud, and even the Zohar turn personified Wisdom into a personified Torah. She, too, is God's partner in creation, providing the blueprints for the world and humanity's unique access to the divine.² Wisdom, as חכמה, appears in the Godhead as part of the ten *sephirot*; wisdom is part of the Divine Intellect. Throughout rabbinical school, Wisdom appeared in a variety of classes, like a subtle thread bringing disparate subjects and ideas into closer contact. Ultimately, I was most interested in personified Wisdom's biblical roots.

In Proverbs, there are times when wisdom is an abstract concept, equated with knowledge (דעת) and understanding (בינה), or righteousness (צדק) and justice (משפט).³ Then there are times when the author imbues wisdom with feminine characteristics, and when narrators speak about wisdom as if it was a woman.⁴ Finally, there are times in Proverbs when personified Wisdom⁵ speaks, calling out to the reader to hear her counsel, and follow her ways. In *Smooth Words: Women, Proverbs and Performance in Biblical*

¹ This interpretation is from my classnotes from 7 October 2013.

² See Genesis Rabbah 1.

³ See Proverbs 1:2-3.

⁴ See Proverbs 2:4; 3:13-18 for a few examples of this.

⁵ For the sake of clarity, when I refer to personified Wisdom, I will capitalize it, as befits a named character. When referring to wisdom as a concept, I will not capitalize the word.

Wisdom, Carol Fontaine explains that there is confusion surrounding the subject of “wisdom” in scholarly works about wisdom literature. She writes: “Even for such well-trained scholars, however, there is a decided ambiguity about the subject ‘Wisdom’: does it represent a ‘way of thinking,’ some sort of intellectual tradition, perhaps, or a ‘movement’ championed by a specific social class (urban scribes, for instance), or simply an index of literary forms used in didactic settings? In fact, Wisdom may be understood as all of these things and more.”⁶ She adds that *ḥokmā* in the Hebrew Bible can flow from one overlapping meaning to another, with overlapping lexical meanings assigned to the same word, when it appears in different contexts.

My interest in this topic centers around times when the author of Proverbs presents a personified, female Wisdom. In these sections, Wisdom speaks out to the people, demanding they heed her call. Her language and her rhetoric are undeniably powerful, echoing both the biblical prophets and God, and she identifies herself as the source through which sovereigns rule justly. She even associates herself with creation, thus lending her identity legitimacy. Many scholars also draw connections between Wisdom and goddesses of the Ancient Near East. Fontaine adds: “At the level of ‘character,’ Wisdom...designates that mediating female personification/hypostasy found in Proverbs and elsewhere, who may or may not be the vestigial remains of a scribal goddess retained within the Bible’s patriarchal system of monotheism.”⁷ Some see Wisdom as not only God’s partner in creation, but perhaps God’s partner and

⁶ Carole Fontaine, *Smooth Words: Women, Proverbs and Performance in Biblical Wisdom*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 2.

⁷ Fontaine, *Smooth Words*, 2.

See also Gerlinde Baumann; and Bernhard Lang.

contemporary in all things – a consort for the God of Israel, who was supposed to “work alone.”⁸

In Christian theology, Jesus is associated with wisdom or *Sophia*. Therefore, for Christian feminists, personified Wisdom represents a woman friendly understanding of theology, which might include women’s experiences and female identity.⁹ And not surprisingly, there is pushback from other theologians who call this reading of Wisdom as heresy. As mentioned above, Judaism, in comparison, incorporated Wisdom into later traditions, making her synonymous with Torah in rabbinic literature, or part of the aspects of God in Kabbalah.¹⁰ However, my interest in this project lies in personified Wisdom’s roots in the Bible, and Proverbs specifically. I chose to highlight Wisdom’s words and actions, because I wanted to bring forward a female voice in the Bible, which might otherwise be lost to a Reform Jewish audience, who are rarely exposed to the book of Proverbs.

Wisdom Literature and the Book of Proverbs

Personified Wisdom appears almost exclusively¹¹ in the book of Proverbs.

Though we cannot precisely date all of Proverbs, most scholars agree that the majority of

⁸ See Maxine Hancock and Tikva Fryner-Kensky.

⁹ Fontaine, *Smooth Words*, 3.

See also Silvia Schroer and Christine Roy Yoder.

¹⁰ See Genesis Rabbah 1:2, Bahir 96-115. For more on the basics of *hokmah* in Kabbalah, see “Teachings of the Kabbalists: The Ten Sefirot” in Arthur Green’s *A Guide to the Zohar*.

¹¹ Some scholars suggest that there are a few verses in Job, which one might interpret as presenting a personified version of Wisdom (see Job 28:12, for example).

this “anthology of anthologies,” as Robert Alter calls Proverbs, predates 587 B.C.E.¹² We can trace the roots of Proverbs 10-29 to the first commonwealth, because these chapters refers to the kingship.¹³ Michael Fox, argues that Proverbs 1-9, originated later than the other chapters of Proverbs, because Proverbs 1-9 serves as the introduction to the rest of the collection.¹⁴ Most scholars date the completion of this introductory section to the Persian or early Hellenist periods. Though David Penchansky suggests that all three Hebrew wisdom books (Ecclesiastes, Job, and Proverbs) predate Alexander the Great’s conquest of the Middle East in the fourth century B.C.E., including the beginning of Proverbs.¹⁵ We also know that Ben Sira, from the early second century B.C.E, draws extensively from the introductory section of Proverbs, and therefore chapters 1-9 must predate Ben Sira, as well.¹⁶

We also know little about the social setting and authorship of the book of Proverbs. Penchansky argues that wisdom literature clearly existed as part of some sort of teaching tradition.¹⁷ R. N. Whybray outlines two major theories for authorship of the material in Proverbs. The first imagines the book of Proverbs, or parts of it, as originating from “native Israelite, ‘popular’ proverbs and aphorisms. The other theory argues that the book of Proverbs is a literary work, a product of an “upper class” of

¹² Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 183.

¹³ Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation and Commentary*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 6.

¹⁴ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 6.

¹⁵ David Penchansky, *Understanding Wisdom Literature: Conflict and Dissonance in the Hebrew Text*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 1.

¹⁶ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 6.

¹⁷ Penchansky, *Understanding Wisdom Literature*, 3.

highly educated officials or scribes from the monarchy, which adopted a “wisdom tradition” similar to the rest of the ancient Near Eastern world.¹⁸

Christine Roy Yoder explains that individual proverbs have parallels in wisdom literature of other cultures of the ancient Near East. The genre of father-to-son instruction, in particular, closely resembles the style of wisdom literature from other cultures.¹⁹ She adds: “Israelite sages created analogous wisdom and/or adopted and modified the wisdom of other cultures to teach their community about the ways of wisdom. Their search for knowledge is international and ecumenical in scope.”²⁰

Proverbs, by most accounts, operates as a secular work, as Fox explains: Proverbs “makes no pretense to an origin in divine revelation of inspiration. God is never quoted or addresses. It had no role in the ritual life of Israel, in neither temple nor synagogue... With the exception of a few passages, it treats everyday life, not the grand affairs of state, history, culture, or law.”²¹ Like the other wisdom books in the Jewish canon, Job and Ecclesiastes, Proverbs confronts the realities of life, considering both the beauty and goodness of it, as well as the ugliness and injustice.

Like Job and Ecclesiastes, Proverbs both acknowledges the ambiguities of life, while guiding its audience in how best to navigate life.²² Fox emphasizes that while Proverbs offers the reader counsel, the proverbs, even if they were passed down by sages, are not laws or commandments.²³ Roy Yoder agrees. She writes:

¹⁸ R.N. Whybray, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Proverbs*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 5.

¹⁹ Christine Roy Yoder, *Proverbs*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), xxix.

²⁰ Roy Yoder, *Proverbs*, xxix

²¹ Fox, *Proverbs*, 7.

²² *Ibid.*, 3

²³ *Ibid.*, 3, 7.

Proverbs,” she writes, “strikes many readers as commonplace. It does not appear particularly ‘revelatory,’ namely, received as a word from God. Nor does God ever speak...Rather the book is a compilation of wisdom based on the experiences of ordinary, faithful, people trying to live wisely every day, striving to discern what is right and true for themselves and their community.”²⁴

Proverbs encourages its audience as to how to be a good and decent person, how to make righteous choices in personal and professional affairs, and ultimately how to earn God’s favor and avoid a terrible end.

What most distinguishes Proverbs from its contemporaries in the canon, is its introduction of the concept of wisdom. Fox argues:

Wisdom as conceived in Proverbs as a whole, is not just a set of prepackaged traditional truths or wise teachings. It is the power of the human mind, both in its intellectual faculties and in the knowledge it can gain, hold, and transmit. Wisdom both transcends the individual mind and resides within it. God possesses it and, we are taught, it can be ours as well.²⁵

The broad concept of wisdom in Proverbs is a power that not only God, but humanity, too, can enjoy. Indeed, in many ways, the same can be said of personified Wisdom.

What is Wisdom?

Before going forward, I want to offer a brief explanation of wisdom as both a concept in biblical literature, as well as the personified Wisdom of Proverbs.

Wisdom, or חֵכְמָה is regularly paired with words like בִּינָה (discernment/understanding) or דַּעַת (knowledge), which helps to flesh out its meaning. For instance, God describes Bezalel, whom the Eternal chooses to decorate the sanctuary,

²⁴ Roy Yoder, *Proverbs*, xxx.

²⁵ Fox, *Proverbs*, 3.

as “I have endowed him with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft” (Exodus 31:3).

Similarly, in I Kings 7:14, Hiram, the craftsman from Tyre who came to help with the making of the Temple is also endowed with “with wisdom (אֶת-הַחֵכְמָה), understanding (אֶת-הַתְּוָה), and skill (אֶת-הַדְּעִיּוֹת) for executing all work in bronze.”

We find חֵכְמָה compared items of value (financial and religious), as well as, in Proverbs. For instance, in Proverbs 16:16 we read: קִנְיַת-חֵכְמָה--מָה-וְכַסֵּף וְכִי יִשְׁקֹף וְיִשְׁקֹף וְיִשְׁקֹף וְיִשְׁקֹף – “How much better to acquire wisdom than gold; to acquire understanding is chosen [over] silver.” Here we find חֵכְמָה is preferable to precious metals. Additionally, Proverbs 24:14 compares wisdom to long life: כֹּן, דַּעַת חֵכְמָה--לְנֶפֶשׁ: אִם-מֵצְאָתָּהּ, וְיֵשׁ אֶחָרִית; – “Therefore, know wisdom for yourself, if you find [it], then there will be a future, and your hope will not be cut off.” In 10:31 we find wisdom equated with a righteous mouth - יָדֹב חֵכְמָה - פִּי-צַדִּיק, and in 3:13 it brings happiness to those who find it.

Personified Wisdom embodies the concept of wisdom, and presents them in the form of a woman who speaks to her audience and demands their attention. As Schroer explains in *Wisdom Has Built Her House: Studies on the Figure of Sophia in the Bible*, scholars are still undecided about the exegetical purpose of Wisdom in the Bible. “Is she a hypostasis, a personified voice, the self, revelation of the mystery of creation, or the redefinition of an Israelite goddess? The central question appears to still be unresolved.”²⁶ Throughout my analysis I hope to present many of these understanding of personified Wisdom. Though we cannot say for sure who personified Wisdom is in the

²⁶ Silvia Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House: Studies on the Figure of Sophia in the Bible*, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), Google e-book, 16-17.

Bible, I believe she offers modern readers exciting new ways to think about female voices in biblical literature.

A Note on Gender and Translation

I endeavor to present a gender-neutral translation of the biblical text in my annotated translations and my own analysis of the sections where Wisdom appears. This means that while I intend to stay true to the Hebrew of the Bible, I also want to acknowledge that translation is a powerful tool. I believe that thoughtlessly translating words like אִישׁ, בֶּן, אָב, or אָדָם as “man,” “son,” “father,” or “man” ignores both how these words appear in the Bible and their purpose in the text. In many cases, one can read a term that seems to be gendered as gender neutral by considering its usage throughout the Bible. Furthermore, by translating the Bible with an awareness of gender, one allows for more opportunities of both male and female readers to be able to see themselves in the text.

My awareness of gender in translation is not limited to creating a gender inclusive translation of my specific texts. When appropriate, I also endeavor to use gender neutral language when referring to God. The exception to this rule appears in Proverbs 8, when I translate certain verses that refer to God and God’s actions in the masculine. In this section, I note that female Wisdom’s relationship to the male God is important for the reader to see. Additionally, though I rely heavily on the *NJPS*, and to a lesser extent, the *NRSV* translations for supporting biblical texts, I am careful to change the God language

from these translations to reflect a gender inclusive reading of God. For example, I change all references to YHWH as “Lord” to “Eternal.”²⁷

Finally, my gender inclusive translation of personified Wisdom does not include a gender inclusive reading of personified Wisdom, herself. My goal for this project is to highlight a female voice in the Bible, and to ignore when narrators refer to Wisdom in the feminine, and when Wisdom refers to herself this way, would miss the point of this endeavor.

Overview of Project

My analysis of the biblical roots of personified Wisdom begins with the text. I focused my research and analysis on three sections where the author features Wisdom personified as a woman. I present structural outlines, detailed annotated translations, and my own brief analysis of Proverbs 1:20-33; 4:1-9; and Proverbs 8 in chapters 1-3 of this project. I consulted some of the major commentaries on Proverbs, including works by Fox, Alter, and scholars such as Whybray, Roy Yoder, and Richard J. Clifford, as well as doing a deep textual analysis of the main sections where personified Wisdom appears.

Chapter 1, which focuses on Proverbs 1:20-33, introduces the reader to personified Wisdom, and, in fact, Wisdom introduces herself to the public. She speaks in open plazas and at the crossroads of a bustling town in order to reach her audience; and though she speaks to all people, she focuses her frustration on the simple and fools, who refuse to heed her call. Chapter 2 looks at Proverbs 4:1-9, which, at first blush,

²⁷ For more on this translation choice, please see W. Gunther Plaut’s introduction to the revised edition of *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*.

stylistically resembles other sections of Proverbs 1-9. Proverbs 4 uses the conceit of a parent offering advice to a child, to encourage people to acquire wisdom. Proverbs 4 offers a contrast to Proverbs 1:20-33 and Proverbs 8, which Wisdom, herself, narrates, and gives us insight into how others describe personified Wisdom in comparison to how she speaks of herself. Chapter 3 considers all of Proverbs 8, Wisdom's opus. Though she places herself in a similar locale to that of Proverbs 1:20, in Proverbs 8, Wisdom's focuses instead on her authority, her beginnings, and the excellent results all find from following her sage counsel. Finally, in chapter 4, I add my own feminist analysis of Wisdom. Drawing on influences from Schroer, Claudia V. Camp, Maxine Hancock, Gerlinde Baumann, Bernhard Lang, Carol Newsom, and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, I consider both the ramifications of Wisdom personified as a woman, and the important model she offers to modern, feminist readers of the Bible.

Chapter 1: “Turn Toward Wisdom’s Counsel” - Proverbs 1:20 - 33

Structural Outline of Proverbs 1:20-33

- I. Wisdom’s Call (1:20-22)
 - a. Outside in the streets Wisdom gives her voice. (v. 20)
 - b. Wisdom asks: “How long will fools love simplicity and hate knowledge?”
(vv. 21 - 22)
- II. Wisdom’s Rebuke (1:23–30)
 - a. Accept Wisdom’s counsel. (vv. 23 – 25)
 - b. She delights when your calamity comes. (vv. 26 – 27)
 - c. Wisdom will not answer when fools seek her. (v. 28-30)
- III. Wisdom’s Counsel: Death or Security (1: 31 – 33)
 - a. Those who waste Wisdom’s advice are sated with their own ruin. (v. 31)
 - b. Turn from simplicity and complacency toward security. (vv. 32 – 33)

חָכְמָה וְתוֹרָה בְּיָדָהּ תִּרְנָה

בְּרַחֵם וְתוֹרָה תִּתֵּן וְלֹא

20. Wisdom in the street cries out;

in the plazas she gives [forth] her voice

- חָכְמָה וְתוֹרָה – Wisdom
- חָכְמָה is a feminine noun with a plural ending, and it is paired with תִּרְנָה, a singular verb. In 9:1 we find a second pairing of the seeming plural form of the noun with a feminine, singular verb. Other occurrences of חָכְמָה in Proverbs do not help us to understand this puzzling form. For example, in 14:1 חָכְמָה appears in an adjectival form, and in 24:7 it is paired with רָאמוֹת, a plural verb. R.N. Whybray suggests that there can be no doubt that “the single figure of Wisdom” is meant in this section. The majority of commentators “regard *ḥokmôt* as an intensive plural form emphasizing the honourable or pre-eminent status of Wisdom or the amplitude of the gifts which she confers” (Whybray 45). In contrast, Fox argues that חָכְמָה might be a Phoenician term, or a derivative of Canaanite. He further explains: “It is no help to call *ḥokmôt* a plural of extension and intensity, because there is nothing extended or intense about the wisdom designated by this form. Possibly it is a plural of majesty. Most likely it is a plural form treated as a singular because it refers to a single figure. The plural forms of *bînāh* and *tʿbûnāh* function almost exactly like the respective singular forms, designating both a plurality of sayings and an abstract singular” (Fox 97). Finally, Robert

Alter suggests that the plural form could be indicative of “intensification” or simply an “archaic form” (Alter 196).

- בּוֹרַחַ – in the street
 - Most frequently בּוֹרַחַ is “outside,” but one can find other usages in the biblical text, which indicate “street” or “streets.” For example, in 2 Samuel 1:20:

“Tell it not in Gath, Do not proclaim it in the streets (בּוֹרַחַ) of Ashkelon, Lest the daughters of the Philistine rejoice, Lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult.”²⁸ Though it is in the plural, here we find בּוֹרַחַ as “in the streets.” So, too in Nahum 3:10 – בְּרֹאשׁ שְׂכַל-חַצוֹת; וְעַל-גַּם-הָיָא, לְגִלְגָּל הַלֶּכָּה בְּשָׁבִי--גַּם עַל־לִי הָרַטּוּ, וְ, בְּרֹאשׁ שְׂכַל-חַצוֹת; וְעַל-גַּם-הָיָא, לְגִלְגָּל הַלֶּכָּה בְּשָׁבִי--גַּם עַל־לִי הָרַטּוּ – “Yet even she was exiled, She went into captivity. Her babes, too, were dashed in pieces At every street corner. Lots were cast for her honored men, And all her nobles were bound in chains.”

Here, בְּרֹאשׁ שְׂכַל-חַצוֹת is rendered “at every street.” Ultimately, the setting of this verse places Wisdom in public, and with בּוֹרַחַ parallel to בְּרַחֲבֹתַי, I chose “in the street” as the translation for this phrase, rather than “outside” to emphasize this public setting and the parallel structure of the verse.
- תִּרְנֶנָּה – cries out
 - The rendering of תִּרְנֶנָּה as “cries out” is also unusual, when comparing this root to other uses in the Bible. In *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, this usage appears as the second entry for the root רנן. We usually render the root רנן as “rejoice,” however, by context, it is clear that its usage in this verse is not

²⁸ All translations of biblical verses, which I use for support or reference to explain my own translation are from the 1985 *NJPS* translation, unless otherwise noted.

about rejoicing. The only other appearance of this verb in this form is in Wisdom's second speech in Proverbs 8:3. The conjugation of this verb is also noticeable. תִּרְנָה, is in the third person, feminine, with the “old energetic ending” (*HALOT*). Whybray explains that some commentators read this conjugation as a “rare emphatic form of the qal imperfect feminine of רננ, comparable with the Arabic *modus energicus*” (Whybray 45). We find a similar form in Job, תִּרְנָה אֶשְׁפָּה עָלָיו, which Alter renders as “Over him rattles the quiver, the blade, the javelin, and the spear. / With clamor and clatter he swallows the ground, and ignores the trumpet's sound” (Job 39:23-4). Whybray draws the conclusion that תִּרְנָה is like a “piercing human voice,” like the rattling of tools of war (Whybray 45). We can, therefore, read power in תִּרְנָה, which is tied to a “clamor” louder than a trumpet.

- בָּרַחַּהּ – in the plazas
- Fox renders בָּרַחַּהּ as “in the plazas,” while Robert Alter translates it as “in the squares” (Alter 196). Both translations reflect the sense of it being a wide open space, which relates to the root רחב, or “wide.” While not different understandings of בָּרַחַּהּ, it is worth noting that both translations emphasize the public nature of Wisdom's speech.

בָּרַחַּהּ שֶׁ הִיא זֹת, תִּקְרָא:

בְּפֶתַח שְׁעָרִים בָּעִיר--אֲמָרֶיהָ תֹּאמַר

21. At the head of bustling [crossroads] she calls;

at the entrances of the gates in the city her sayings she says

- בְּרֹאשׁ שׁ הָמָּוֹת - at the head of bustling [crossroads]
- הָמָּה generally means “to make noise, be tumultuous,” as in 1 Kings 1:41, when Joab hears a horn, he asks: “Why is the city in such an uproar (קוֹל־הַקֶּרֶן הַזֶּה)?” So, too, in Isaiah 22:2, the prophet declares: “O you who were full of tumult, You clamorous town (תִּשְׁאוּתוֹ מְלֵאָה עִיר הוֹמָיָה קָרְנָה). You city so gay? Your slain are not the slain of the sword Nor the dead of battle.” Here, הָמָּה is also similar to Psalm 39:7, where the psalmist compares humanity to a “mere shadow; meter futility is his hustle and bustle (אֶפְרָיִם יִהְיֶה כְּצֶלֶם), amassing and not knowing who will gather in.”
- If ראש is “head” and המיות is “bustlings,” then there seems to be a missing word in this phrase. According to Alter, the literal understanding of this phrase is “chief [or head] of the bustlings” (Alter 196). Yet Fox makes a compelling argument for reading הָמָּה as elliptical for “bustling roads” (Fox 98). He suggests that “Wisdom calls from the busiest places. ‘Crossroads’ are literally the ‘head of bustling (roads),’ in other words, the point at the city gate from which the roads fan out into the city” (Fox 98). He emphasizes that *hommiyyot* ‘bustling, noisy’ is in noun form in this phrase, and roads can have a head or beginning. One can imagine an ellipsis in this verse, when considering its parallel structure. In the first cola we find the בְּ prefix preceding a *smichut* phrase, and so too in the second cola (בְּפֶתַח שְׁעָרִים). Yet in the second cola there is also a locational noun (בְּעִיר) to ground the statement, which is missing in the first cola. Fox proposes that *derakim* (roads) or a similar noun is missing from the phrase (Fox 98).

- בָּעִיר – in the city
- Toy suggests that this phrase is superfluous (Toy 23). However, Fox argues that בָּעִיר adds emphasis to the verse, highlighting Wisdom’s speech as both public and powerful (Fox 98).
- אָמְרֶיהָ תֹאמַר – her sayings she says
- Fox offers the more idiomatic: “she speaks her peace” in his commentary for the *Anchor Bible* (Fox 97). Alter, however, renders this phrase as: “says her sayings,” which reverses the order of the Hebrew. I chose to maintain the order the Hebrew with the possessive, plural noun preceding the verb, in order to demonstrate the parallel structure within this verse in the English. In the Hebrew, both cola of this verse begin with the preposition ב preceding a location (the head of a “bustling crossroad,” or the opening of a gate). They each conclude with a verb conjugated in the feminine singular.

עַד-מָתִי, כְּתִיבִים תִּשְׁמַחַ וְ-כְתִיבִי

וְלִצְיָנִים--לִּי וְ, חֶמְדִּי וְ לָהֶם

וּכְסִילִים, יִשְׁנֶן וְ-דָעַת

22. How long, simple ones, will you love simplicity;

And scorners lust scorn;

And fools hate knowledge?

- It is worth noting that Clifford suggests that the second half of this verse is an “early and intrusive addition to the Hebrew text,” and in his translation and commentary, he omits this phrase. He suggests that the first part of verse 23 is the

conclusion to the rhetorical question established in the beginning of verse 22. He renders this as: “How long, O simple ones, will you choose ignorance/ will you turn away at my reproof?” (Clifford 40). Of course, no Jewish translations and commentaries omit this phrase, and I would not suggest that as a solution to a difficulty in the text.

- עַד-מָתַי – How long
 - Though the interrogative phrase עַד-מָתַי indicates a rhetorical question, it is possible to interpret Wisdom’s question as an imperative – a call to action and repentance (Clifford 41). For example, in I Samuel 1:14, Eli asks Hannah: “How long (עַד-מָתַי) will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Sober up!” clearly his question is meant to draw her to the end of his statement – urging her to “sober up.” Similarly, in Psalm 6:4, the psalmist cries out: “My whole being is stricken with terror, while You, Eternal – O, how long (עַד-מָתַי)!” Here, the phrase does not seem to be a rhetorical question at all, but a call to God for deliverance. The only other time this phrase appears in Proverbs, however, it is certainly a rhetorical question: עַד-מָתַי עֲצֹל תִּשְׁכָּב; מָתַי, – “How long will you lie there, lazybones; When will you wake from your sleep?” (6:9).
- פְּתִיִּם – simple ones
 - Of the nineteen times the root פתִי appears in biblical literature, fifteen of those appearances are in the book of Proverbs. Most translations render this root as “simple,” or “thoughtless.” Ultimately פתִי indicates one who does not have wisdom, but who can eventually acquire her. A פתִי can learn, and overcome

his or “simpleness.” In Proverbs 9:4, for example מי-פתי – “who is simple” appears parallel to חסר-לב – “one who lacks understanding” (*NJPS*).

Similarly, in Psalm 19:8 we find: עֲוֹת יְהוָה נֶאֱמָנָה, מְחַכֵּימַת פִּתִּי – “testimony of the Eternal is sure, making wise the simple” (*NJPS*).

- תֹּאמַרְךָ – will you love
 - תֹּאמַרְךָ is in the second person plural, whereas the other verbs in this verse appear in the third person plural. One might interpret this distinction as indicating that Wisdom speaks directly to the פְּתִיִּים, the simple ones, and directs her comments to scorers and fools indirectly. Fox, however, adds that although the language suggests a distinction, non-agreement of person is common in biblical language, and one should, instead, interpret Wisdom’s chastisement as spoken to all fools, regardless of category.
- לִצְיִים – scorers
 - Similar to פתי, לִיץ appears most often in Proverbs, and means “scorn” (DCH). לִיץ clearly has a more negative valence than פתי. For example, in Psalm 1:1 לִצְיִים is paired with both רְשָׁעִים (wicked ones) and חַטָּאִים (sinners). To further distinguish לִיץ from פתי, we find in Proverbs 9:7,8 that a לִיץ is resistant to rebuke, and one who tries to correct a לִיץ will experience shame, and will be disappointed in the results. Furthermore, לִצִּיּוֹן in Isaiah 28:14 is “mockery,” and in Proverbs 29:8 אֲנַפְשֵׁי לֵן are “scoffers,” who inflame a city.
- חָמָּו - lust
 - Boldly, Alter renders this verb as “lust,” which emphasizes the lurid appeal “scorning” for the “scorers,” whereas Fox offers the subtler translation:

“treasure.” It is certainly possible to find examples of both usages for חמד. For example, in Proverbs 21:20 the narrator explains: “Precious treasure and oil (וַצֵּירוֹ נְחֻמִּים וְשֶׁמֶן) are in the house of the wise man.” Yet, considering the context of this verse, other appearances in the biblical text, may offer more descriptive interpretative possibilities. For example, in Exodus 20:13 and 34:24 we find תחמוד as “covet.” *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* categorizes the usage of חמד in this verse as “desire.” In other appearances in Proverbs the root is rendered as both “lust” and “desire.” For example in Proverbs 6:24 the narrator warns the audience away from an evil woman, or the smooth tongue of a forbidden one, and in verse 25 we find: אַל-תִּחְמַד יְפִיָּהּ, בְּלִבְכֶּךָ; וְאַל-תִּקְחֶהּ, בְּעֵפְעָפֶיהָ – “Do not lust for her beauty Or let her captivate you with her eyes.” Similarly, in Isaiah 1:29, the prophet warns rebels and sinners: “Truly, you shall be shamed Because of the terebinths you desired (תִּמְדֶתֶם), And you shall be confounded Because of the gardens you coveted (בְּחִרְתֶּם).” I ultimately chose “lust” for its striking imagery, as well as its closeness to appearances of חמד in Proverbs.

- כְּסִילִים – fools
- Holladay suggests “shameless” or “foolish” for כסיל. Later in Proverbs 9:13, the reader meets אִשַּׁת כְּסִילוֹת or Lady Folly, as she is most commonly referred to, and so I chose “fools” as the translation for כְּסִילִים. Further fleshing out the semantic range for כסיל, we find Jeremiah refer to idol worshipers as יִדְּעָו - “brutish and foolish” (*NJPS*) for they place their faith in idols made of wood (Jer. 10:8). Similarly, in Proverbs we find that a כסיל takes no delight in

understanding (18:2), and those who follow a fool's advice will suffer harm (13:20).

- דַּעַת – knowledge

- דַּעַת can refer to both general knowledge, as well as something more specific.

Proverbs 24:4 contains an example of general knowledge וּבְדַעַת, חֲדָרִים

וְיָקָר וְנָעִים – “And by knowledge, rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches.” For comparison, God explains to Moses that Bezalel is

filled with וּבְכָל-מְלָאכָה, וּבְדַעַת, וּבְתוֹן, וּבְחָכְמָה, רֹחַ אֱלֹהִים – “the spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship”

(Ex. 31:3). This description of Bezalel drives home the fact that דַּעַת can also

be tied to knowledge of the divine, which we see in Numbers 24:16 when

Balaam offers another oracle: “Word of him who hears God's speech, Who

obtains knowledge (וַיִּדְעֵהוּ דַּעַת) from the Most High, And beholds visions from

the Almighty, Prostrate, but with eyes unveiled. Here the prophet can obtain

knowledge through God, and implies a close relationship between Balaam and

God, because Balaam hears God's speech. Therefore, וַיִּדְעֵהוּ דַּעַת is closely

linked to an awareness of the divine. Similarly, in Isaiah 11:1-2, the prophet

explains that the “spirit of the Eternal” (רֹחַ יְהוָה) will “alight” upon a “shoot”

that shall “grow out of the stump of Jesse,” and this “spirit” is a “spirit of

wisdom and insight (וּבִינָה, רֹחַ חָכְמָה), A spirit of counsel and valor (וְרָהּ, רֹחַ עֲזָה וְגִי),

A spirit of devotion and reverence for the Eternal (וְיִרְאָת יְהוָה, רֹחַ דַּעַת).” Here,

דַּעַת is equated with devotion to God, and reverence for the divine.

תָּוּוּ לְ וּכְחַתִּי:

הִנֵּה אֲבִיעָה לָכֶם רוּחִי

וְדִיעָה דְּבָרִי אֲתָכֶם

23. Turn toward my rebuke;

See I will pour out to you my spirit;

I will make known my words to you.

- תָּוּוּ לְ וּכְחַתִּי – turn toward my rebuke
 - The root שׁוּב usually means “turn back,” but when a direct object with the אֶל or ל prepositions follows this verb, it often means to “turn toward.” For example, in 1 Kings 8:33 we find: “Should Your people Israel be routed by an enemy because they have sinned against You, and then turn back to You (וְשׁוּבוּ אֵלַי) and acknowledge Your name, and they offer prayer and supplication to You in this House.” Similarly, in 2 Kings 23:25, the text describes Josiah like no other king, because he “turned back to the Eternal (שָׁב אֶל־יְהוָה) with all his heart and soul and might, in full accord with the Teaching of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.” Similarly, in Jeremiah 4:1, the prophet warns אִם־תָּוּבוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל נָא־יְהוָה אֵלַי, תָּוּבוּ; וְאִם־תִּסְרֹךְ וְצָלַךְ מִפְּנֵי, וְלֹא־תָוֹד – “If you return, O Israel – declares the Eternal – If you return to Me, If you remove your abominations from My presence And do not waver.” According to the *NJPS* translation, the “turning toward” here, is like a “return.”
 - Some commentators find this phrase troubling, while others give it no thought at all. Clifford, for one, reads this phrase as part of the rhetorical question established in verse 22, suggesting that it should be read: “...will you turn

away at my reproof?” (Clifford 40). Whybray also relates this phrase to the verse preceding it; however, he reads it as a response to the question posed in verse 22. He explains: “**How long...simple?** Needs a second line to complete the couplet. This could be provided by the first line of v.23 (**Give heed to my reproof**), leaving the rest of v.23 to form another couplet” (Whybray 46).

Alter, in contrast, sees no difficulty in translating this verse, and does not even bother to offer a footnote explaining his translation choice for this verse. He renders it: “Turn back to my rebuke. / Look I would pour out my spirit to you, / I would make my words known with you.” Finally, Fox simply offers this explanation: “The verb *š-w-b* essentially means to turn back in the direction one came from... It does not necessarily mean ‘return,’ that is ‘move back,’ whether physically or metaphorically” (Fox 99). He goes on to explain that the construction “turn back to” appears in other wisdom literature of the Ancient Near East, and should not be understood as a call for repentance, but a call to attention (Fox 99).

- תוכחת – Fox explains that תוכחת is an “important educational concept in Proverbs” (Fox 99). Indeed, it appears most frequently in Proverbs (sixteen out of its twenty-three appearances in the Bible). In Proverbs, תוכחת is often parallel to מוסר (see Proverbs 3:11 and 5:12 for examples of this), where מוסר is “discipline” and תוכחת is “rebuke.” In 10:17 we find an example of a helpful way to understand this pairing and how both words work together: אִרְחָה לְחַיִּים, שׁוֹמֵר מוֹסֵר; וְעֹזֵב תוֹכַחַת מִתְעַדָּה – “He who follows discipline shows the way of life, But he who ignores reproof leads astray.” Then in 12:1, we find

that the one who “loves discipline loves knowledge (אֱהָב דַּעַת אֱהָב מוֹסֵר),” but one who “spurns reproof (וְיָ וְיָ תוֹכַחַת)” is a brute. Fox offers “reproof” and “chastisement” as alternative translations for תוֹכַחַת, and adds that *tokaḥat* is “expected to be effective.” In keeping with Alter’s translation, I chose “rebuke” as my translation, in order to distinguish it from מוֹסֵר (reproof or discipline), which appears in other parts of wisdom literature. As we see, the two are closely linked in Proverbs in order to illustrate the pedagogical purposes of this biblical book (Alter, 193). *Tokaḥat* does not necessarily imply repentance, but does encourage one to change behavior (Fox 99).

- אֶבְיָעָה לָכֶם רוּחִי – I will pour out my spirit to you
- Fox clarifies that רוּחַ has a range of meanings “including ‘wind,’ ‘breath,’ ‘life-breath,’ and ‘spirit,’” (Fox 100). However, in most cases where the word includes the first person singular possessive, and it refers to a human, one finds רוּחִי translated as “my spirit.” For instance, Job 6:4 contains: “For the arrows of the Almighty are in me; My spirit (רוּחִי) absorbs their poison; God’s terrors are arrayed against me.” Similarly, in Psalm 31:6 the psalmist relies on God for redemption, stating: “Into Your hand I entrust my spirit (בְּיָדְךָ); You redeem, O Eternal, faithful God.” The few times when this is not the case, it is because God is speaking, as opposed to another, as in Genesis 6:3 “The Eternal said, “My breath (רוּחִי) shall not abide in man forever, since he too is flesh; let the days allowed him be one hundred and twenty years.” I chose “my spirit” because Wisdom is not God, though there are times when her language has a divine tone. Additionally, Wisdom is not

equating her breath or the wind with words and a rebuke, but they are a part of her mind or being. Fox adds that “as a constituent of mind, *ruah* is expressed in emotion more than in intellect, and includes feelings, will, faculties, attitudes, and desires” (Fox 100).

- The phrase as a whole is noteworthy. The prophet, Joel, offers this prophecy: “After that I will pour out My spirit on all flesh; Your sons and daughters shall prophesy; Your old men shall dream dreams, And your young men shall see visions. I will even pour out My spirit upon male and female slaves in those days” (Joel 3:1-2). However, in both of these verses prophet uses אָשַׁף instead of אָבִיעָה in Proverbs 1:23. We find a similar situation in Isaiah 44:3, where the prophet declares: “Even as I pour water on thirsty soil, And rain upon dry ground, So will I pour My spirit on your offspring (אֶצְקֶה רוּחִי עַל-וִרְעֶךָ), My blessing upon your posterity.” Here, rather than אָבִיעָה, the verb is אֶצְקֶה. Though not exactly the same phrase, it seems that Proverbs 1:23 alludes to these verses from the prophets.
- וְדִיעָה – make known
 - The root ידע (know/knowledge) here appears in the first person singular future of the הפעיל. Wisdom pours out her spirit in order to make those listening know her words. This phrasing is similar to when Isaiah declares: וְעַתָּה אֲדִיעָה- “And now I will make known to you what I will do to my vineyard...” (5:5).

יָעַן קָרָאתִי, וְתִמָּאֵר;

נָטִיתִי יָדִי, וְאִין מִקְשִׁיב

24. Because I called, and you refused;

I stretched out my hand, and none paid heed.

- יָעַן קָרָאתִי – because I called
 - In Isaiah 65:12 and 66:4 we find the same construction. In both cases, the prophet promises retribution because the people refuse to answer, after hearing the prophet's call.
- תִּמָּאֵר – you refused
 - This is a *piel* verb, in the second person plural. In a similar instance, the root מָאֵן appears in Jeremiah 3:3 – וַיִּמָּנְעוּ רַב־בָּיִם, וּמִלְקוֹשׁ לֹא הָיָה; וּמִצָּחַ אִשָּׁה זֹנָה הָיָה לָהּ, – “And when showers were withheld And the late rains did not come, You had the brazenness of a street woman, You refused to be ashamed.” Here, the people refused to heed the warnings of God, even when the rains did not come, demonstrating a certain obstinate nature associated with מָאֵן. Similarly, in Isaiah 1:20, the prophet warns: “But if you refuse (וְאִם־תִּמָּאֲנִי) and disobey, You will be devoured *by* the sword. -- For it was the Eternal who spoke.”
- נָטִיתִי יָדִי – I stretched out my hand
 - The pairing of the root נָטָה and יָד appears frequently in biblical literature. Often it is God who stretches forth a divine hand as a sign of power or punishment. For example, in Exodus 7:15 God declares “And Egyptians shall know that I am the Eternal עַל־מִצְרַיִם אֶת־יָדִי – when I stretch forth my

hand upon Egypt.” In Ezekiel 16:27 the connection between “stretching forth God’s hand” and a punishment is even more clear. There we find: וְהִנֵּה נְטִיתִי יְהוָה – “Behold, I have stretched out My hand over you, and have diminished your allowance, and delivered you to the will of them that hate you.” Yet it is quite clear that in this situation, Wisdom stretches forth her hand as a way to entreat people to hear her rebuke and follow her ways. The Medieval commentator Radaq connects Wisdom’s offer in this verse to God’s offer to the people in Isaiah 65:2: “I spread out my hands (פִּרְשֵׁתִי יָדַי) all the day to rebellious people.”

- Fox highlights the fact that only God, angels, Moses, and Joshua make the gesture of stretching forth a hand as a symbol of a weapon or divine power (Fox 100). Though Wisdom offers it as more entreat than threat, it is worth noting that in this scene Wisdom performs a traditionally male, and a traditionally divine gesture.

וְתִפֹּךְ יָדְךָ כָּל-עֲצָתִי;

וְלֹא-אֶבִיתֶם, וְכַחֲתִי, לֹא אֶבִיתֶם

25. But you tossed aside all my counsel;

And my rebuke you did not accept.

- תִּפֹּךְ יָדְךָ – you tossed aside
- Alter explains that this verb appears elsewhere (see Leviticus 10:6; 13:45; 21:10), and refers to “unbinding hair,” so he understands it as putting things in disarray (Alter 197). He therefore translates תִּפֹּךְ עֵינַי as “flung aside.” Fox also

acknowledges the places where פָּרַע suggests unbinding of hair, but suggests that its other appearances in Proverbs (see 8:33, 13:18, 15:32) intimate at a meaning closer to “ignore” or “toss aside” (Fox 100). For example, Proverbs 4:15 we read: פָּרַע וְאַל-תַּעֲבֹר - וְ; שָׁטָה מֵעָלָיו וְעָבַר – “Avoid it; do not pass through it; Turn away from it; pass it by.” Though repetitive, we find פָּרַע parallel to “turn away from it” and paired with “do not pass through it,” emphasizing the root’s relationship to “avoiding.” Similarly, in Ezekiel 24:14 we find a usage closer to “relent” or “let go.” The prophet prophesies: “I the Eternal have spoken: It shall come to pass and I will do it. I will not refrain or spare or relent (לֹא-אֶפְרָע וְלֹא-אֶחָס וְלֹא אֶנְחָם). You shall be punished according to your ways and your deeds -- declares the Lord GOD.” Ultimately, I chose “tossed aside” to reflect both the chaos of “unbound hair,” but also implies the idea of “ignore.” Fox emphasizes the fact that Wisdom seems most offended by the fact that her counsel is being ignored. “They have slighted her dignity,” he adds (Fox 100).

- לֹא אָבִיתָם – you did not accept
- The root אָבָה can suggest both something that one “accepts” or one “wants,” or “to be willing” (*DCH*). In Isaiah 1:19 – “If, then, you agree (אִם-תֵּחָבֶן) and give heed (שָׁמַעְתֶּם), You will eat the good things of the earth.” אָבָה paired with שמע in this verse highlights its relationship to “agree” and “obey.” The psalmist of 81:12 also pairs these two roots together: וְלֹא-שָׁמַע עַמִּי לִי וְ; – “But My people would not listen to Me, Israel would not obey Me.” The context of this verse implies that the people rejected

Wisdom's counsel. Therefore, I chose "accept," for אבה, to further highlight this rejection.

גם-אני, באיִדְכֶם אֶשְׂחֶק;

אֶלְעֵג, כְּבֹא פִּחְדְּכֶם

26. Also I, in your calamity, I shall delight;

I will mock when your fear comes.

- גם-אני – Also I
 - On גם - Fox suggests that this word applies to Wisdom's laughing later in the verse rather than "downfall" (איִד), which precedes it (Fox 100).
- באיִדְכֶם – your calamity
 - The threat of calamity (איִד) appears frequently in the biblical text, and it is closely tied to sin against God. For example, in Deuteronomy 32:35, God threatens the Israelites with vengeance when their feet "shall slip," כִּי קָ וּבַ יּוֹם – "for the day of their calamity is near." Similarly, Jeremiah prophesies the איִד (calamity or downfall) of Moab, for its spoiled ways (Jeremiah 48:15-6).
- אֶשְׂחֶק – I shall delight
 - שחק often implies "laugh," or "amuse" (*HALOT*). We find a similar construction to this verse in Psalm 52. The psalmist declares: "The righteous shall see, and fear, וְעָלְיוּ יִשְׁחָ וְיִרְאוּ (and laugh at him)" (52:8). In Proverbs, Wisdom's delight is bitter. She laughs at the people's calamity.
- אֶלְעֵג – I will mock

- This is the only instance in biblical literature, where the root לעג is conjugated in the first person. Yet, in other instances, it also implies “mocking.” For example, in II Kings 19 and Isaiah 37, Isaiah describes Senachrib’s military failure as the “virgin daughter of Israel” לַעֲגָה לְךָ (mocking you). Similarly, in Psalm 2:4 “the one enthroned in heaven” (יִלְעַג) mocks those who try to collaborate against the Eternal.

בָּבֶלָה כְּשֹׂאָה (, וְאֵהָ, פְּחָדְכֶם

וְאִידְכֶם, כִּי וּפָה יִאָּתֶה

בָּבֶלָה עֲלֵיכֶם צָרָה וְיִקָּה

27. When your fear comes like a tempest,

And your calamity like a storm arrives,

When trouble and torment come upon you.

- וְאֵהָ – like a tempest
- There are some versions of כְּשֹׂאָה, which vocalize it as כְּשֹׁאָה, and others which vocalize it as וְאֵהָ, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* vocalizes the word as “*ch’shoah*,” though with the Hebrew lettering: כְּשֹׂאָה. In this case, it is a question of the “*qere*” and “*ktiv*.” The Masoretic text vocalizes this word as וְאֵהָ, and so, for the purposes of this analysis I will focus my efforts there. כְּשֹׂאָה only appears once in the biblical text – here in verse 27 – and, therefore some biblical lexicons (*HALOT* for one) tie וְאֵהָ to כְּשֹׁאָה. *HALOT* categorizes וְאֵהָ as a “devastating storm,” comparing it to other usages, such as Ezekiel 38:9 - “And You shall ascend, you shall come like a storm (כְּשֹׁאָה)

like a cloud to cover the land.” Then, in Zephaniah 1:15 – “That day shall be a day of wrath, A day of trouble and distress, A day of calamity and desolation (יָמֵי שָׁחַ וְיָמֵי זָחָה), A day of darkness and deep gloom, A day of densest clouds.” In both cases the word is paired with others about clouds and darkness, indicating a connection to a storm. There are other usages, though, which imply “ruin,” as well. In Isaiah 47:11, for example, we find “Evil is coming upon you Which you will not know how to charm away; Disaster is falling upon you Which you will not be able to appease; Coming upon you suddenly Is ruin (שָׁחַ) which you know nothing.”

- In this verse, כְּשֶׁאוֹר is paired with יָמֵי (storm), which supports a reading of כְּשֶׁאוֹר as “like a storm.” In order to differentiate both words, but also emphasize the disastrous effects of שָׁחַ, I rendered זָחָה as “like a tempest.”
- יָאֵתָה – arrives
 - In the parallel structure of this verse we find the first two cola create a chiasm, where יָאֵתָה is paired with בָּבֶא. There is a similar pairing in Deuteronomy 33:2, when Moses blesses the people: “The Eternal came from Sinai (מִסִּינַי) ... God came from the myriads (מֵרֵבֶבֶת).” In order to differentiate יָאֵתָה from בָּבֶא, which appears two other times in this verse, I translate יָאֵתָה as “arrives,” a synonym of “comes.”
- צָרָה וְיָקָה – trouble and torment
 - Both Alter and Fox offer translations meant to reflect the alliteration in *tzarah v’tzukah*. Fox offers “trouble and torment.” Alter, however, renders this phrase as “straits and distress,” because the “st” sounds in both words are

closer to the Hebrew. I prefer the alliteration of “trouble and torment” to highlight the matching **צ** nouns in this part of the verse.

אֲזִי יִקְרְאוּנִי, וְלֹא אֶעֱנֶה;

יִשְׁתַּחֲרֻנִּי, וְלֹא יִמְצְאוּנִי

28. Then they will call me, but I will not answer;

They will seek me, but they will not find me.

- יִקְרְאוּנִי – they will call me
 - The root קרא appears frequently in biblical literature, and is closely tied to calling to God for help or salvation. For example, in Isaiah 65:24, the prophet depicts a time when the people יִקְרֶוּ (will call), and before they do, God will answer. Like the psalmists calling out to God, Wisdom describes the people calling out to her. For instance, in Psalm 17:6, “I call on You; You will answer me (אֶגִּידֶּךָ, קִיֵּיתָעֲנֵנִי), God; turn Your ear to me, hear what I say.” Similarly, in Psalm 18 the narrator called on the Eternal (אֶקְרָא יְהוָה) (v. 4), and God hears the call of distress (בְּצַר־לִי אֶקְרָא יְהוָה) (v. 7).
 - Here we also notice a shift in Wisdom’s language, from the second person plural, to the third person plural. She now speaks to the public again, rather than only those who refuse her sage counsel.
- וְלֹא אֶעֱנֶה – I will not answer
 - The most frequent use of the root ענה translates to “reply” or “answer.” There is often an assumed relationship between קרא and ענה, which, of course, we find here in this verse. What distinguishes ענה in this verse from other

appearances in the Bible is that the verb is conjugated in the first person singular. In Isaiah 65:12, for instance, God destines the people to slaughter and the sword, because: “when I called, you did not answer (יַעַן קָרָאתִי וְלֹא יַעֲנִיתֶם), When I spoke you would not listen.” We find examples of the first person and ענה most often in Job (9:15; 13:22; 19:7; 32:17; 40:5), where Job answers God’s call, and sporadically in the prophets (Hosea 2:23; Zechariah 13:9) where God answers the people. Later, in Isaiah 65:24, God promises to responds to the people’s call: “Before they pray (טָרַם יִקְרָא), I will answer (וְאֲנִי אֶעֱנֶה); While they are still speaking, I will respond.” Note the push and pull between קרא and ענה here, as well. When one calls out, one expects an answer. For instance, in Job 9:15 we find a similar construction. Job fears that though he is righteous, he cannot answer God’s call, (אִם-צְדִיקָתִי, לֹא אֶעֱנֶה), and even if he called and God answered, he might not believe it (אִם-קָרָאתִי (וַיַּעֲנֵנִי לֹא-אֶאֱמִין). Wisdom claims, though people might call out to her, she will not answer.

- יִשְׁחַרְנֵנִי – they will seek me
- We can compare יִשְׁחַרְנֵנִי in Proverbs 1:28 to Isaiah 26:9: “With my soul, I have desired You in the night, Indeed, my spirit within me seeks you (אֶשְׁחַרְךָ) earnestly.” Similar to Wisdom’s promise that in the people’s calamity, they will “seek her,” in Hosea 5:15 the prophet foretells a time when the House of Judah will “realize their guilt, and in their distress, they will seek Me and beg for My favor (בְּצָר לָהֶם יִשְׁחַרְנֵנִי).” Though the people seek God in their distress, they receive no assurance that God will respond. In Psalm 63:2 we find a

similar “seeking.” We read: “God, You are my God; I search for You (אֲשַׁתְּרָךְ), my soul thirsts for You, my body yearns for You, as a parched and thirsty land that has no water.” Though there is no expression of distress or disaster in this verse, the psalmist use of אֲשַׁתְּרָךְ emphasizes the desperate nature of this searching.

תַּחַת כִּי-שָׁן יוֹ דָּעַת;

וַיִּרְאֵת יְהוָה, לֹא בָחַרוּ

29. Because they hated knowledge,

And fear of the Eternal, they chose not.

- תַּחַת כִּי – Because
 - *HALOT* explains that the pairing of תַּחַת and כִּי can best be understood as “for the reason that.” In Deuteronomy 4:37 we also find כִּי אָהַב אֶת-אֲבוֹתֶיךָ – “And because [God] loved your fathers.” Moreover, Joshua 1:9 and in I Chronicles 28:20 contain a similar construction, where a promise or assurance is guaranteed “because of” (כִּי תַחַת) God’s protection or presence.
- וַיִּרְאֵת יְהוָה – fear of the Eternal
 - Though not one of Wisdom’s declarations, in Proverbs 1:7 we read: יִרְאֵת יְהוָה, – “Fear of the Eternal is the beginning of knowledge.” Indeed, the concept of “fear of the Eternal” is prevalent throughout all of Proverbs. In 2:5 יִרְאֵת יְהוָה is tied to knowledge of God; in 8:13 Wisdom, herself, explains that יִרְאֵת יְהוָה is “to hate evil.” Later, in 9:10 יִרְאֵת יְהוָה is “the beginning of wisdom,” and in 15:33 it is “instruction of wisdom.” In 10:27 and 14:27 “fear

of the Eternal” prolongs one’s days and is a “source of life;” while in 19:23 it is for “life.” Finally, in 22:4 יְרָצַת יְהוָה is a reward for “humility” and a praiseworthy quality in a woman of valor (31:30). By comparison, Isaiah 33:6 pairs “wisdom (חכמה) and devotion (דעת),” as Zions’s triumph, and “Reverence for the Eternal (יִרְאֵת יְהוָה) that was her treasure.” The prophet promises that these attributes are a sign of salvation.

לֹא-אֶזְכֹּר לְעֵצָתִי;

נָאֵו, כָּל- וְכִהְיִי

30. They refused my counsel;

They spurned all my rebuke.

- נָאֵו – they spurned.
- The root נָאֵו in the *qal* form has the sense of “despise” or “spurn” (*HALOT*). In Deuteronomy 32:19, God “spurned” (נִינָאֵו) because of the provocations of the people. So too, in Jeremiah 14:21, the prophet objects to God: “Do not despise us (אַל-תִּנָּאֵו) for the sake of Your name.”

וַיֹּאכְלוּ, מִפְּרִי דִרְכָּם;

וּמִמַּעֲצֹתֵיהֶם יִשְׂבְּעוּ

31. They ate of the fruit of their way;

And from their own devices they were sated.

- יֵאָכְלוּ – they ate
 - Frequently, אָכַל literally means “eat,” yet there are also times when the root can also be understood metaphorically. For instance, the prophet Ezekiel foresees a time when famine and pestilence will “devour” (יֵאָכְלוּ) inhabitants of a city. Additionally, in Genesis 31:40 Jacob pleads with Laban: “And so I was, in the day drought consumed me (אֶכְלָנִי), and the frost by night.”
- דָּרְכָם - their way
 - Though דָּרַךְ sometimes implies a physical path or way, it can also indicate a personal manner, custom, or behavior (*HALOT*). In Jeremiah 10:2, the Eternal proclaims to the people: “Do not learn the way of the nations (אֶל-דְּרֹכָי) (הַ גוֹיִם).” So, too in Isaiah 55:7: “Let the wicked forsake his way (יַעֲזֹב רִשְׁעוֹ (דָּרְוֹ).”
- וּמִמַּעֲצֹתֵיהֶם – and from their own devices
 - Similar to the עֲצָה (advice) that Wisdom offers, מוֹעֵצָה is “advice” or “counsel,” yet it can also indicate “plan” or “device.” The psalmist declares: “Hold them guilty, O God, let them fall by their own devices (מִמַּעֲצֵי וְתִיָּהֶם)” (Psalm 5:11). Likewise, in Micah 6:16 the prophet announces: “For you have kept the statutes of Omri and all the works of the house of Ahab, and you have followed their counsels (בְּמַעֲצֵי וְתָם)” (*NRSV*).
- יִשְׂבֹּרוּ – they were sated
 - *HALOT* categorizes this usage of שָׂבַע as “to get enough of,” tying it to Job 19:22 – “Why do you persecute me like God, and are not satisfied (לֹא

with my flesh,” and Ecclesiastes 6:3 “If a man begets a hundred children, and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul does not have enough (לֹא-תִשְׂבַּע) of good.”

כִּי מְּ וּבִת פְּתִימִים תִּהְיֶינָה
וְשִׁלּוֹת כְּסִילִים תֵּאָבְדֶּה

32. The waywardness of the simple ones will kill them,

And the complacency of fools will lead them to ruin.

- מְּ וּבִת - waywardness
 - From the root משוב, משובה implies a turning away. It is often translated as “apostasy” or “backsliding.” Fox, however, argues that משובה indicates a “tendency to turn away, namely from right behavior” (Fox 103). For example, Jeremiah 8:5 asks: “Why is this people – Jerusalem – rebellious (שׁוֹבְבָה), With a persistent rebellion (מְשֻׁבָּה)? They cling to deceit, They refuse to return (לְשׁוּב).” שׁוּב appears three times in this one verse, meaning both “rebel” and “return.” Jeremiah 2:19 also accuses its audience of evil actions, and warns of repercussions: “Your wickedness will punish you, and your apostasies (וּמִשְׁבָּה וְחִיָּה) will convict you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Eternal your God” (NRSV). Though Wisdom, calls out to the people to turn back to her rebuke, the simple have a “wayward” tendency, and so they will turn away from the right behavior. Fox goes on to explain that *mēšubāh* is an “attitude” or “disposition,” not necessarily an action. For example, in Jeremiah 3:22 משובה is an experience, which God can

heal: “Turn back (שׁוּבוּ), O rebellious children (וּבְנֵי־רִבָּה), I will heal your afflictions (מִכָּל־יָסוּרֵיכֶם)! ‘Here we are, we come to You, For You, O Eternal, are our God.’”

- וְשִׁלּוֹת קְסִילִים – and complacency
- The word שלוה is often translated as “calm,” “serene,” or “ease.” For example, in Psalm 122:7 it is parallel to שלום (peace). Yet, there can be a sharpness to שלוה, as well. Ezekiel 16:49 declares: הִנֵּה-זֶה הָיָה, עֲוֹן סְדֹם – “Behold, this was the iniquity of your sister, Sodom, pride, fullness of bread, and careless ease.” So, too in this verse. This שלוה is not about “ease” or “peace.” Alter translates the noun as “smugness,” suggesting a sense of unearned self-satisfaction. However, I prefer Fox’s “complacency,” which both hints at the idea of “ease,” but with a sharp critique at the fools who take things too “easily.” They have left the world unexamined and face a dangerous complacency.
- תִּצְבְּרוּם – will lead them to ruin
- The verb אבד in the *piel* form is usually rendered as “destroy.” Most translations choose the more familiar translation of the verb, translating it as: “will destroy them.” *HALOT*, however, suggests that we can understand the usage in this verse as closer to “to ruin” or “to lead to disaster.” In keeping with the theme of “waywardness” established in the first cola of this verse, I translated תִּצְבְּרוּם as “lead them to ruin.”

33. But one who listens to me will dwell securely,

And be tranquil from fear of harm.

- וְשָׁמַע לִי – but one who listens to me
 - This will not be the last time that Wisdom promises goodness to those who listen to her; in Proverbs 8:34, she assures happiness to those who listen to her. In Job we find this phrase, but it is Job who calls out to those listening to his tale of woe to heed his warning (Job 15:17; 31:35; 33:31; 34:34). Perhaps most telling, though, is in Psalm 81:14-5, where the psalmist gives voice to God’s call: וְעַמִּי, שְׁמָעָה לִי – “Oh that my people, would hearken to me, that Israel would walk in My ways! / I would soon subdue their enemies, and turn my hand against their adversaries.” Wisdom, like God, promises safety and security to those who listen to her.
- יִשְׁכֹּן-בְּטָחָה - will dwell securely
 - Fox emphasizes that בְּטָחָה indicates “both inner and outer security” (Fox 103). The pairing of the root שָׁכַן “dwell” and בְּטָחָה “safe” or “secure” appears several times in biblical literature. For example, in Deuteronomy 33 this phrase appears twice: first in v. 12, describing God’s promise to the tribe of Benjamin: “May the beloved of the Eternal dwell in safety (יִשְׁכֹּן לְבָטָחָה) by God,” then in v. 28: “So Israel dwells in security (וַיִּשְׁכֹּן יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּטָחָה), the fountain of Jacob alone, in a land of grain and wine.” These verses indicate that to “dwell securely” is a sign of God’s favor. In Jeremiah, the prophet

foresees a time when Israel (Jeremiah 23:6) and Jerusalem (Jeremiah 33:16) will dwell in safety (ישכן לבטח). In both verses, this phrase is parallel to the promise that Judah will be saved (תושע). Here, we find both promise of redemption, and proof of divine preference the phrase: ישכן-בטח (dwell securely).

- וְשָׁנָן – and be tranquil
 - In Jeremiah שָׁנָן appears paired with שקט (quiet) and אין מחריד (without fear/trembling) – indicating a sense of both physical and internal ease (Jeremiah 30:10; 46:27). Fox translates שָׁנָן as “secure” (Fox 96), while Longman renders it as: “be at rest” (Longman 40). Alter’s translation of “tranquil,” however, encompasses both a sense of physical security, as well as a sense of internal ease, which I wanted to reflect in my own translation.
- מִפְּחַד רָעָה – from fear of harm
 - Some translators render רעה “evil.” Whybray, for example, who translates the word as “evil,” explains that we should not understand “evil” to be an ethical judgment, but rather indicates “harm” or “misfortune” (Whybray 49). Fox and Alter, then, choose “harm” for their translations to underscore their understanding of the text.

Analysis of Proverbs 1:20-33

In Proverbs 1:20-33 readers first meet personified Wisdom, and in this meeting, she is a woman of power and authority. She not only speaks with authoritative language, drawing comparisons to the prophetic, but she speaks from a location of power. She crafts her call carefully, directing her message to all of humanity, and warns those who ignore her voice.

Personified Wisdom's first introduction to her audience in Proverbs 1:20-33 is noteworthy, first and foremost, because of its location of power. Wisdom stands in public ("in the streets;" "in the plazas;" "at bustling [crossroads];" and the "entrances of the gates of the city"), crying out, to reach her audience (Proverbs 1:20-21). Fox and Alter both remind readers that these places are not only public, but locations of power and commerce. The gates of the city, the plazas, the crossroads are where the ancient Israelites did business and held court – they are locations of political and economic authority.²⁹

Her location is not the only thing that Wisdom uses to demonstrate her power and authority. Wisdom employs powerful language and rhetorical tools to make her case. For example, in Proverbs 1:22, Wisdom asks: "How long, simple ones, will you love simplicity; And scorners lust scorn; and fools hate knowledge?" Her use of the rhetorical question *עַד-כָּתִי* ("how long") adds emphasis and catches the listener's attention. Like the psalmist of Psalm 6:4, who calls out: "My whole being is stricken with terror, while You, Eternal – O, how long (*עַד-כָּתִי*)!" Wisdom's use of *עַד-כָּתִי* demands that the "simple ones," "scorners," and "fools" hear her warning.

²⁹ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 97; Alter, *The Wisdom Books*, 196.

Furthermore, Fox draws connections between Wisdom's language and that of the prophets. For instance, in 1:32 Wisdom declares: "The waywardness (וַיִּבְרַח) of the simple ones will kill them, and the complacency of fools will lead them to ruin." Her use of וַיִּבְרַח draws inner-biblical connections to the prophet Jeremiah, who uses the repetition of the root ויברח and ויבֹרַח as a rhetorical tool (see Jeremiah 2:19; 3:22; and 8:5). This repetition cleverly catches the attention of a listening audience.³⁰

Structurally, Wisdom's speech in Proverbs 1:20-33 also calls the listener to attention. Fox, for one, notes that verses 24 and 28 are the inverse of each other.³¹ In Proverbs 1:24 Wisdom proclaims: "Because I called, and you refused; I stretched out my hand and none paid heed." Whereas in Proverbs 1:28 she states: "Then they will call me, but I will not answer; they will seek me, but they will not find me." The shift from verse 24 to verse 28 demonstrates Wisdom's frustration with her audience, and verse 28 marks a change in her speech. Fox calls Proverbs 1:28-32 "the fate of the foolish," because in it Wisdom threatens those who spurn her counsel, and promises them a terrible fate.³²

In this introductory passage, Wisdom presents herself to the world as a woman of power, with little patience for those who waste her precious advice. She calls her listeners from a location of power, and uses language of authority. Her tools and rhetoric recall the style of the prophets, and are meant to catch her listener's attention and lend her message even more authority. Wisdom shares her message in public, to best reach her audience, but she will not respond to those who ignore her call.

³⁰ Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20: A New Translation and Commentary*, (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 321-2.

³¹ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 101.

³² Ibid.

Chapter 2: “Acquire Wisdom” - Proverbs 4:1-9

Structural Outline of Proverbs 4:1-9

- I. The Parent’s Discipline: Children Learn My Teachings (4:1-4)³³
 - a. The parent gives the children good instructions (vv. 1-2)
 - b. From one generation to the next - a tender speech on how to live (vv. 3-4)
- II. A Father’s Lesson: Acquire Wisdom for a Crown of Glory (vv. 5-9)
 - a. The father commands: Children acquire wisdom. (vv. 5-7)
 - b. Children must cherish Wisdom, and she will reward you. (vv. 8-9)

³³ This outline is based closely on Fox’s structural analysis of Proverbs 4.

Annotated Translation of Proverbs 4:1-9

שְׁמָעוּ בָנִים מוֹסֵר אָב

וְהִקְשִׁיחוּ לְדַעַת בִּינָה

1. Listen, children, to the discipline of a parent;

And heed to know discernment

- שְׁמָעוּ בָנִים - Listen, children
 - The root שמע is frequently paired with בנים or בן in Proverbs. Proverbs 1:8, 4:10, 5:7, 7:24, 8:32, 23:19 also contain this pairing. In Proverbs 1:8, for example, we read: “My son, heed (שְׁמָע בְּנִי) the discipline of your father, And do not forsake the instruction of your father.” Similarly, the narrator urges “my son,” to “listen” in order to get wisdom and direct his heart along the proper path.
 - Though בנים often means “sons,” there are also places in the Bible when the word refers to “children” in general. For example, in Genesis 3:16, God promises the woman severe “pangs in childbearing; In pain shall you bear children (בְּנֵי).” Similarly, God forbids the Israelites from bowing down to sculptured images, “For I the Eternal your God am an impassioned God, visiting guilt (עֲוֹן אָבֹת) of the parents upon the children (עַל־בְּנֵי)” (Exodus 20:5). This usage also appears in poetic verse from the Bible. In Psalm 103:13, the psalmist compares a parent’s relationship to God’s relationship with humanity. “As a father has compassion for his children (עַל־בְּנֵי), so the Eternal has compassion for those who fear Him.”

- Even when not paired with בָּנִים or בֵּן, שֹׁמֵעַ indicates the ideal way to learn. For instance, in Proverbs 21:28 we find לֹנֶצֶחַ יִדְבָּר וְאִישׁ שׁוֹמֵעַ, לְנֻצָּח יִדְבָּר – “A false witness will perish, but a man who listens, will speak successfully.”
Listening comes with great reward. Similarly, in Proverbs 25:12 we find one whose ear listens (שׁוֹמֵעַ עַל-אָזְנוֹ) equated with an ornament of gold (נָזֶם זָהָב, וְחֶלֶי-).
(כֶּתֶם).
- מוֹסֵר – discipline
 - מוֹסֵר, and its root יָסַר, also appear frequently in the Book of Proverbs, and often in the same verse as בֵּן. In Proverbs 13:24 and 23:13 we see elements of the punishing nature of מוֹסֵר, a potentially violent discipline that parents can use with their children. In 13:24: we read “One who withholds his rod hates his son, but the one who loves him, disciplines him early.” And again in 23:13 we find מוֹסֵר paired with שֵׁבֶט (rod). We also find examples of מוֹסֵר as a way to teach a lesson. For example, in Proverbs 1:2, מוֹסֵר appears with דַּעַת, חִכְמָה, בִּינָה, all of which indicate the word’s relation to teaching and gaining knowledge. We see that מוֹסֵר is not only a lesson, nor punishment. מוֹסֵר is discipline, which teaches children how to improve their lives.
- אָב – parent
 - Like אָבִים, אָבִית can mean “father” or “parent.” In Exodus 10:6, for one, God warns Pharaoh of an incoming plague of locusts: “They shall fill your houses, and the houses of all your officials and of all the Egyptians-- something that neither your parents (אֲבוֹתֶיךָ) nor your grandparents (אֲבוֹתֵי אֲבוֹתֶיךָ) have seen.” Similarly, in Daniel 11:24, אֲבוֹתֵינוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ means “predecessors.” Proverbs

For understanding words of discernment (לְהַבִּין אִמְרֵי בִינָה).” In 1:2 לְדַעַת is parallel to לְהַבִּין, and demonstrates the close relationship between “knowledge” and “understanding” in Proverbs.

- בִּינָה – discernment
- Translators disagree on how to translate this word. In *NJPS*, for example, in some verses the translators render בִּינָה as “understanding,” and in others places they render בִּינָה as “discernment.” Alter prefers “discernment” for בִּינָה in his translations (see Alter 193, 208, 230). Fox, however, prefers “understanding” for בִּינָה (see Fox 53, 171). Though “understanding” and “discernment” are technically synonyms, in modern usage “understanding” evokes words like “sympathy” and “compassion” before “intellect,” or “judgment. For that reason, I will render בִּינָה as “discernment” in my translations.

כִּי לָקַח טוֹב נָתַתִּי

לָכֶם תְּוֹרָתִי אֶל־תַּעֲזֹבוּ

2. For good instruction I gave to you;

My teaching, do not forsake.

- לָקַח - instruction
- לָקַח appears in several places in the Bible, nearly all of them in the Book of Proverbs. Besides Proverbs 4:2, Proverbs 1:5, 9:9, 16:21, 16:23 also contains the word לָקַח as “instruction,” or “teaching,” and in 7:21, the word is marked as לִקְחָהּ. לָקַח frequently appears with the verb יָסַף, implying that it is

something that one can gain or increase. For example, in Proverbs 9:9 we find: “Instruct a wise man, and he will grow wiser; Teach a righteous man, and he will gain in learning (לָקַח וְיִסְרֹף).” Then in Chapter 16 we find two very similar verses (21 and 23) with someone “wise of heart,” who is able to increase his לָקַח, and add it to his lips. Yet, when לָקַח appears outside of Proverbs helps illustrate the word’s meaning. In Isaiah 29:24 we find: וְגִבִּים, “and those who grumble will accept instruction.” Similarly, in Deuteronomy 32:2, לָקַח appears with the first person possessive “my” as לִקְחִי, “May my discourse (לִקְחִי) come down as the rain, My speech distill as the dew, Like showers on young growth, Like droplets on the grass.” Even-Shoshan also interprets לָקַח as תורה (teaching) or למוד (learning/study).

- תִּוְרָתִי - my teaching
- *HALOT* contains a specific section for תורה in a non-theological context, for it often precedes Moses, or God – indicating the laws and commandments given at Sinai to the Israelites. See for example, Deuteronomy 17:11: “You shall act in accordance with the instructions (הַ וְרָה) given you and the ruling handed down to you; you must not deviate from the verdict that they announce to you either to the right or to the left.” However, in the Book of Proverbs, תורה often relates to “teaching” or “instruction.” In Proverbs 1:8, for example, we find the parallel structure of תוֹרַת אִמִּי , וְאֵל-תַּט , וְיִסְרֹף אֲבִיךָ; – “Listen, my son, to the discipline of your father, and do not forsake the instruction of your mother.” תוֹרַת אִמִּי is paired with וְיִסְרֹף אֲבִיךָ, indicating that תורה is close to מוסר. Later, in 3:1 the narrator tells his son יִצְרָאֵל לְבָדְךָ, בְּנִי, תוֹרָתִי אֶל-תִּשְׁכַּח וּמִצְוֹתַי, מוֹסֵר. Later, in 3:1 the narrator tells his son

- “My son, do not forget my teaching, But let your mind retain my commandments,” which indicates that תורה as “teaching,” is also parallel to “commandments.” Similarly, in Proverbs 7:2 we find: שְׁמַר מִצְוֹתַי וְחַיָּה; וְדַרְתִּי, - “Keep my commandments and live, and my teaching as the pupil of your eye.” The pairing of דַּרְתִּי with לִקְחָה (instruction) also illustrates the meaning of תורה as “teaching.” The narrator offers these children, not only “good instruction,” but “my teaching.”

- אֶל-תַּעֲזֹב י - do not forsake
- The root עזב means, at its simplest, “to leave,” and it is certainly possible to translate אֶל-תַּעֲזֹב י as “do not leave.” Yet, a more nuanced reading of the line is “do not forsake,” because it also encompasses the idea of “deserting” or “abandoning.” We also find this reading of עזב in Deuteronomy 29:24, “They shall say, ‘Because they forsook (עָזַב י) the covenant of the Eternal, the God of their ancestors” as well as in I Kings 19:10, 14 where Elijah describes the Children of Israel forsaking (עָזַב י) their special covenant with God. Considering these other verses, there is a sense that עזב not only indicates “abandoning” or “forsaking,” but also suggests that the listener might waste something precious, if he or she does י. תַּעֲזֹב.

כִּי־בֵן הָיִיתִי לְאָבִי

בֶּן יָחִיד לִפְנֵי אִמִּי

3. For once I was a child to my father,

Tender, and the only one before my mother.

- רַךְ - tender
- Even-Shoshan renders רַךְ as “not hard,” “young, still,” “comfortable,” or “pleasant.” We find the idea of רַךְ as “tender,” especially in Genesis 18:7 where Abraham takes a calf “tender and good” (רַךְ וְטוֹב) for a servant to dress and prepare for his angelic guests. In Ezekiel 17:22, we read: “Then I in turn will take and set *in the ground a slip* from the lofty top of the cedar; I will pluck a tender twig from the tip of its crown, and I will plant it on a tall, towering mountain (מֶרֶץ שֶׁ יֵן וְתִיּוֹ, רֶךְ אֶקְטֹף, וְשָׁמַלְתִּי אֹנִי, עַל הַר-גְּבוּהַ וְתֹלַד).” The prophet contrasts the “tender twig” with the “tall, towering mountain,” to describe God’s plans for redemption. In order to fill out the semantic range, we also have Proverbs 15:1 – מַעֲנֶה-רֶךְ, יָשִׁיב חֶמַּךְ; וְדֹבַר-עֶצֶב, יַעֲלֶה-אָף – “A gentle answer will turn away wrath, but a hurtful word provokes anger.” Ultimately, רַךְ is the opposite of harsh words or wrath, and so I rendered it “tender.”
- יָחִיד – and the only one
- Perhaps the most famous usage of the word יָחִיד for Jews is in Genesis 22, the Binding of Isaac, where it appears three times. In verses 2, 12, and 16, Isaac is Abraham’s יָחִיד – “your only one.” The repetition forces the reader to see Isaac’s value to Abraham, and emphasizes the sacrifice Abraham will make for God. Interestingly, *HALOT* organizes this usage of יָחִיד with instances in Prophets describing mourning an only child. In Jeremiah 6:26, for example, “My poor people, put on sackcloth and strew dust on yourselves! Mourn, as for an only child (יָחִיד); Wail bitterly, for suddenly the destroyer is coming upon us.” Also, Amos 8:10 declares: וְשָׁמַתִּיהָ כְּאֶבֶל יָחִיד – “and I will make it as

mourning for an only son.” We see that יָחִיד represents a beloved and precious child.

וַיְרַנֵּי בִנְאָמָר לִי
יְתִמְדִּדְכִּרִי לִבִּי
שָׁמַר מִצְוֹתַי וְתָהִיָּה

4. He taught me and said to me,

**“May your mind hold fast my words,
and keep my commandments, and live.**

- וַיְרַנֵּי - he taught me
 - וַיְרַנֵּי has the same root as תורה, and is the הפעיל form of the root – “teach.” In Ezekiel 44:23 we find, וְדַעַם, וְרָא, וְדַעַם לֵט וְרָא; וְדַעַם לֵט וְרָא לֵט וְרָא – “And they will teach my people between holy and profane; and inform them what is unclean and clean.” Furthermore, in Judges 13:8 we find the root conjugated with a direct object, much like Proverbs 4:4 - “and teach us (וְרַנֵּי) what we will do for the child who will be born.” Additionally, Job 6:24 offers: “Teach me (הוֹרִנֵנִי) and I will be silent, and cause me to discern how I have strayed.” Here וְרַנֵּי is paired with בִּינָה, closely tying the two roots (teach and discernment/understanding) together.
- יְתִמְדִּדְכִּרִי – hold fast
 - We find this root, תִּמַּךְ, in multiple locations throughout biblical literature. In Proverbs 11:16 and 29:23 it has the sense of “obtain” (*HALOT*). In Proverbs 31:19, יְתִמְדִּדְכִּרִי indicates “grasp,” when paired with “palms: “She sets her hand

(כַּפֵּיהָ תָמַן) to the distaff; Her fingers work the spindle (וְאֶצְבָּהּ שֶׁלֹתָהּ).”

Similarly, Psalm 17:5 states: “My steps hold fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped.” בַּל-גֵּן וְ בַל-גֵּן; וְתַךְ, פָּעַמִּי parallels תָמַן (“have not slipped”) in this verse, and the comparison illustrates its meaning as a verb for “hold” or “hold fast.”

- לִבְךָ - your mind
- The word לֵב (“heart”) in biblical literature often has a more idiomatic understanding as “mind” or “inner self.” In Genesis 6:5, the לֵב has thoughts and intent: “The Eternal saw how great was the wickedness of humanity on earth, and the intent of the thoughts of his heart (וְכָל-יִצְרָן מִחֲשַׁבְתּוֹ לֵב) was only evil all the time.” Indeed, *NJPS* renders this phrase as “every plan devised by his mind,” drawing the connection between לֵב and “mind” even closer. In Deuteronomy 29:3 we find a similar idea. “Yet to this day the Eternal has not given you a mind to understand (לֵב לְדַעַת) or eyes to see or ears to hear.” The Hebrew is literally “a heart to know,” but the translator chose the more idiomatically correct “mind” for modern readers who are more familiar with the idea of a mind understanding or thinking, not a heart. Therefore, I chose to render לִבְךָ as “your mind,” which relates more closely to the biblical understanding of לֵב as a place of knowledge.
- מִצְוֹתַי - my commandments
- While מצוה is often paired with תורה or teaching, מצוה in this verse is part of a separate category. These are not God’s commandments or God’s Torah, as in Deuteronomy 5:10, where God promises kindness to the thousandth

5. Acquire wisdom, acquire discernment;

Do not forget, and do not turn from the words of my mouth.

- קנה - acquire
- The root קנה hints at both “acquire,” “gain,” and often “buy.” For example, in Genesis the word appears several times to describe the field, and cave of Machpelah, where the matriarchs and patriarchs (except Rachel) are buried. In 25:10, Isaac and Ishmael bury their father in the cave of Machpelah, which is in “the field, which Abraham purchased from the children of Het (הֶשְׁדָּה)” (אֲשֶׁר-קָנָה אַבְרָהָם, מֵאֵת בְּנֵי-חֵת). Then in 49:30 Jacob asks his sons to return him to Canaan, and bury him in “the cave which is in the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre, in the land of Canaan, the field that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite for a burial site (מֵאֵת עֶפְרָן הַחִתִּי-)” (אֲשֶׁר קָנָה אַבְרָהָם אֶת-הַשְּׂדֶה, מֵאֵת עֶפְרָן הַחִתִּי-).” In these verses קנה is paired with אחוזה (possession), which highlights קנה’s relationship to “acquire.”
- The idea of acquiring knowledge, discernment, or wisdom appears throughout Proverbs. In Proverbs 23:23 the narrator instructs the reader: אֲמִת קנה, וְאַל- (אֲמִת קנה, וְאַל- – “Acquire truth, and do not sell; wisdom, and discipline, and discernment.” Comparing קנה with תמכר (sell) indicates that these broad concepts (truth, discipline, or discernment) are things that one can gain, and indeed that they have monetary value. They are goods, which can

be acquired or sold. In addition, in 18:18 contains: **לֵב נָ אֵן, יִקְנֶה-דָּעַת; וְאִזָּן** – “The discerning mind acquires knowledge; and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge.” More specifically, to acquire wisdom appears four times in Proverbs, twice in Chapter 4 (in this verse and in 7), and again in 16:16, and 17:16.

- **חָכְמָה** - wisdom
 - This is a feminine noun, which the narrator will treat almost like a person, later in this section.
- **אַל-תִּשְׁכַּח** – do not forget
 - Perhaps most helpful in understanding the meaning of **שָׁכַח** is in comparison to its opposite, **זָכַר**. In Genesis 40:23 we read **וַיִּשְׁכַּחְהוּ אֶת-יוֹסֵף, וְלֹא-יִזְכֹּר** – “But the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.” Similarly, in Job 24:20 **וְדָל-יִזְכֹּר וְרִמָּה וְרָחֵם, מִתּוֹ יִשְׁכַּח וְעוֹלָה; יִשְׁכַּח יֶחֱסֵם, וְרִמָּה וְרָחֵם, מִתּוֹ יִשְׁכַּח** – “The womb will forget him, may he be sweet to the worms; may he be no longer remembered; and unrighteousness is broken like a tree.” Frequently in biblical literature, we find the idea of “forgetting God.” In Deuteronomy 32:18, for instance, “You neglected the Rock, who gave birth you, and you forgot (וְתִשְׁכַּח) God, who bore you.” Yet, in the book of Proverbs, one seems to most frequently forget the good teachings taught, like Proverbs 31:5 **פֶּן-יִשְׁתֶּה, וְיִשְׁכַּח מִחֻקֵּי; וְיִשְׁתֶּה, דִּין כָּל-בְּנֵי-עֹנִי** – “Lest one drink and forget that which was decreed; and pervert justice for all who are afflicted.”

- וְאַל-תֵּחָט – and do not turn
- The root נטה can have the sense of both “stretch,” “send,” or “turn.” Yet, when the verb precedes the preposition “from” (מן) its meaning is more close to “turn from.” We find this structure in Numbers 20:21 וַיִּמָּאֵן אֱזָוָם, נָתַן אֶת-נִתְּנוֹתָם – “So Edom would not let Israel cross their territory, and Israel turned away from them,” and again in Numbers 22:23 וַתֵּחָט וְהָאֵסוֹן – “and the donkey turned from the path and walked to the field.” This structure appears in Psalm 44:19 וְלֹא-נָּא וְגַם אֵין לָנוּ; וְנִתְּנוֹתָנוּ, וְנִתְּנוֹתָנוּ – “Our hearts have not gone astray, nor have our feet swerved from your path.”

אַל-תַּעֲזֹבָהּ וְתִשְׁמְרָהּ

אֶהְיֶה וְתִצָּרְךָ

6. Do not forsake her, and she will guard you;

Love her and she will keep you.

- אַל-תַּעֲזֹבָהּ - do not forsake her
- What is most interesting about this phrase is the feminine direct object added to the verb תעזוב. Though it is not fully clear whether the narrator is referring to חכמה or בינה, both of which are feminine nouns, most translators and commentators read this phrase as referring to “wisdom.” In his commentary in *The Jewish Study Bible*, Fox describes Proverbs 4:1-9 as a distinct unit, which emphasizes loving wisdom. About this verse he adds: “It is not enough

to obey wisdom. One must *love* it, just as one must love God” (Fox 2004, 1454).

- ותשמרך – and she will guard you
 - The root שמר appears the Bible, where it usually means “keep,” or “guard.” We find in Proverbs 6:22, for one, תשמר עלך, – “when you lie down, it will watch over you.” In this verse, תשמור is parallel with תנחה (guide) and תשיחך (talk with you), further illustrating its meaning as “guard.” Similarly, in Psalm 121:4, the “Guardian of Israel” (שומר ישראל) “neither slumbers nor sleeps!” A שומר is constantly vigilant, protecting and keeping the one who is protected.
- אהבה – love her
 - The well-known אהב root appears in the imperative in this verse, as the narrator commands the sons to not only hold fast to “wisdom,” but, as Fox emphasizes, “love her.” The only other command form of אהב appears in Hosea 3:1, where God commands Hosea to “Go again, love a woman (-אהב אשה).” Moving beyond the command form, in Proverbs 8:17 we find Wisdom declaring: אהבתי אהבה; וימצאני; וימשיחוני; אהבתי אהבה – “I love those who love; and those who seek me early, will find me.” Her love is reciprocal, for Lady Wisdom responds to love with love. Yet it is possible to love the wrong things. In Proverbs 29:3 the narrator sets up a comparison between loving wisdom as opposed to associating with prostitutes. אש-אהב חכמה, ישמח – “A man who loves wisdom brings joy to his father, but one who associates with harlots will lose wealth.”

- ותצרך – and she will keep you
- שמר and נצר have nearly interchangeable meanings of “guard” or “keep.”

They often appear together. In fact, in his entries for each word, Even-Shoshan uses the other as a definition. In Proverbs 5:2 they are parallel to each other in a chiasmic verse structure וְנִצַּר יִנְצֵךְ; וְדַעַת, שְׁפֹתֶיךָ יִנְצֵן – “To guard direction; while your lips keep knowledge.” Similarly, Proverbs 22:12 offers: עֵינֵי יְהוָה, נֹצֵן וְדַעַת וְיִסְלֶף, דְּבָרֵי בָגָד – “The eyes of the Eternal guard knowledge; but subverts the words of the treacherous.”

ר' שִׁית חֲכָמָה קִנְיָה חֲכָמָה

וּבְכָל-קִנְיָנֶיךָ קִנְיָה בִינְיָה

7. The beginning of wisdom is - acquire wisdom,

With all your acquisitions, acquire discernment.

- ר' שִׁית חֲכָמָה – the beginning
- ר' שִׁית appears at the very beginning of the Bible. In Genesis 1:1 we read בְּרֵאשִׁית, בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים – “In the beginning God created.” Of course, the famous line is also famously difficult to translate because of the ב prefix with ר' שִׁית but it certainly helps us to understand the semantic range of ר' שִׁית. ר' שִׁית חֲכָמָה also appears in Psalm 111:10 לְכָל-עֹשִׂיהֶם שָׁקֵל טוֹב, יִרְאֵת יְהוָה-- שִׁית חֲכָמָה – “The beginning of wisdom is fear of the Eternal, good insight for all who practice it; Praise of Him is everlasting.” Here the first step in wisdom is fear of God, as opposed to our verse, which states the first step to wisdom is gaining wisdom. The theological ideas of Psalm 111:10 are

similar to ones we find in Proverbs 1:7 **יִרְאַת יְהוָה, רֵשׁ שִׁית דַּעַת; חָכְמָ וּמוֹסָר, אֲוִילִים** – “Fear of the Eternal is the beginning of knowledge; but Fools despise wisdom and discipline.” Here fear of the Eternal is the beginning of knowledge rather than wisdom, but we know **דַּעַת** and **חִכְמָה** often appear together, and are connected to one another in Proverbs.

- **קִנְיָה חִכְמָה** – acquire wisdom
- Fox argues that **קִנְיָה חִכְמָה** presents a difficulty in translating Proverbs 4:7. “The imperative [**קִנְיָה חִכְמָה**] ‘get wisdom!’ is an awkward predicate in a nominal sentence. The imperative clause must be understood as a quotation of the rule about how to start on the way to wisdom.” As a way to acknowledge this awkwardness from the Hebrew in their English translations, both Fox and Alter use a dash between **רֵשׁ שִׁית חִכְמָה** (“the beginning of wisdom is”) and **קִנְיָה חִכְמָה** (“acquire wisdom”) (Fox 171, Alter 209). Fox also adds an exclamation point at the end of the first cola of this verse to emphasize the command form. Clifford, however, ignores all of 4:7 in his translation, because he believes this verse is a later addition to Proverbs. He adds that 4:7 interrupts the personification of wisdom in this unit, and does not appear in certain manuscripts (Clifford 60).
- Note the circular structure of this idea. The first step for wisdom is to acquire wisdom. While in the above verses, the first step in wisdom and knowledge is fear of the Eternal, according to this section of Proverbs, one must acquire wisdom, to begin with wisdom. Alter suggests this reading of the verse: “one must acquire the precepts of wisdom even if at first it may be only rote, with

true comprehension drawing later” (Alter 209). For Alter, the beginning of wisdom is to simply go out there and try to attain it, and eventually deeper knowledge and understanding will follow.

- וּבְכָל-קִנְיָנְךָ – with all your acquisitions
- Some translations of this verse render this phrase as “and with all your acquiring,” as if קִנְיָנְךָ gerund. The form of קִנְיָנְךָ, though is a noun with a second person, singular possessive suffix. *NJPS* renders the verse: “The beginning of wisdom is – acquire wisdom; With all your acquisitions, acquire discernment.” In other words, a person must spend all he or she owns on acquiring wisdom. I chose to follow noun, second person possessive suffix model, because we find this form for the word קנין in other parts of biblical literature. In Psalm 105:21 we find: “He made him the Eternal of his household, empowered him over all his possessions (בְּכָל-קִנְיָנוֹ).” There is a similar structure in Genesis 36:6, which describes Esau moving his family and possessions to Seir, where there was more room. “Esau took his wives, his sons and daughters, and all the members of his household, his cattle and all his livestock, and all the property (כָּל-קִנְיָנוֹ) that he had acquired in the land of Canaan, and went to another land because of his brother Jacob.”

סְלִסְלֵהוּ וְתִי וְיִמְנָךְ

תִּכְבְּדֶךָ כִּי תִחַבְּקֶנָּה

8. Cherish her, and she will raise you;

She will honor you, if you embrace her.

- סלֶסְלָהּ - cherish her
- Even-Shoshan suggests the best understanding of סלסל is honor (כיבוד) or cherish (הוקיר); yet this verse also appears to be the only place in the Bible where this form of this verb appears with this meaning. *HALOT* also reads this word as “cherish or esteem,” because סלֶסְלָהּ is parallel to תִּחַבֶּקֶנָּה (embrace her), and because of its relation to וּמָמַךְ in the conditional phrase. In Psalm 68:5 we find the root סלל in a slightly different form (סִלֵּם), which may also give us some clues as to the meaning of סלֶסְלָהּ. The verse states: “Sing to God, chant hymns to His name; extol Him (סִלֵּם) who rides the clouds; the Eternal is His name. Exult in His presence,” (*NJPS*). Here סִלֵּם, (“extol Him”) is parallel with “Exult in His presence” (עָלִי לְפָנָיו). From this we can see that סלֶסְלָהּ may mean not just “cherish,” but “exalt.” In our verse, as well, סלֶסְלָהּ is paired with תרומם, and it might be read as a similar idea to Proverbs 8:17. Just as Wisdom loves those who love her, she exalts those who exalt her. In the end, though, I chose to follow *HALOT* and Even-Shoshan, and render סלֶסְלָהּ as “cherish her.”
- וְתִּמְמַךְ - she will exalt you
- The root רום occurs frequently in the Bible. It is almost always translated as “height,” “raise,” or “elevate.” In Psalm 27:5, for instance, the psalmist declares that in times of trouble, “He will raise me on a rock” - וְתִמְמַנִּי. In other psalms this root indicates praise of God - וְתִמְמַלְכֵּנוּ, הוֹדָה, בָּרַךְ, וְזָכַר - הוֹדָה, עֲלֵי - “The Eternal is great in Zion; He is high above all peoples” (Ps 99:2). In Psalm 37:34, we find a similar structure to that of Proverbs 4:8.

“Wait for the Eternal, and keep His way, And He will exalt you (וְיִרְמָזְקֶךָ) to inherit the land; When the wicked are cut off, you will see it.” Here it is God who exalts the listeners, if they keep “His way,” rather than Wisdom.

- This is one of the few places in the Bible where an idea or a concept elevates or exalts something. In Proverbs 14:34 righteousness (צדקה) exalts a people - תִּתִּיבֵנִי וְאֶתֵּן לִי חַיִּים, and here we have Wisdom exalting “you,” if you “cherish her.”

תַּתֵּנוּ לָרֹאשׁ שָׂדֶה לְוַיֵּת-יִחִזְקִי

עֵטָרַת תְּפָאֲרֶת תְּמַגֵּןךְ

9. She will place on your head a graceful garland;

A crown of beauty she will deliver to you."

- לְוִית־תָּהָן – graceful garland
- According to Even-Shoshan the only two appearances of לוֹיָהּ are in Proverbs 1:9 and 4:9, and in both instances the word is paired with חֵן. Proverbs 1:9 and 4:9 are remarkably similar verses. They both contain the uncommon phrase of לְוִית־תָּהָן, as well as לֵךְ־שָׁדָי. In 1:9 we read לְגִרְגָּתֶךָ; וַעֲנָקִים, לֵךְ־שָׁדָי. In 4:9 we read לְוִית־תָּהָן; וַעֲנָקִים, לֵךְ־שָׁדָי. – “For they shall be a ‘garland of grace’ for your head, a necklace around your throat.” Parallel to לְגִרְגָּתֶךָ, וַעֲנָקִים it is clear that לוֹיָהּ is something like a necklace, which would instead go around one’s head. Similarly, in 4:9 לְוִית־תָּהָן is parallel to עֲטָרָת in the chiasmic structure of this verse, which indicates its similarity to “crown” (עֲטָרָת).
- HALOT also includes Proverbs 14:24 and I Kings 7:29-30 in its entry for לוֹיָהּ. In Proverbs 14:24 the parallel structure matches עֲטָרָת to אֹלֶת (crown), which

is, perhaps why the editors use this verse as an example of לוייה. In I Kings 7:29 we find: וְעַל-הַמִּסְגָּה אֵת אֲשֶׁר בֵּין הַשְּׁלֵבִים, אָךְ אֵת בָּקָיִם וְכֹבָבִים, וְעַל-הַשְּׁלֵבִים, כֵּן: “and on the borders which were between the frames *were* lions, oxen and cherubim; and on the frames, there *was* a pedestal above, and beneath the lions and oxen *were* wreaths of hanging work.” Though spelled differently, לֹוֹת is similar to לוייה of Proverbs – both are garlands that hang, sometimes on a person’s head, sometimes as decoration for Solomon’s Temple.

- תָּהֵן – graceful
- In Proverbs 3:4 we find תָּהֵן paired with שָׁכַל and is bestowed upon a person through another’s (God or humanity’s) sight. Similarly, in Numbers 11:11 לָמָּה הִרְעִיתָ לַעֲבָדֶךָ, וְלָמָּה לֹא-מָצַתִּי חֵן, בְּעֵינֶיךָ: לֵּי וּמִי, אֶת-מִשְׁאֵל כָּל-הָעָם, לִי מֹשֶׁה asks God, הֲזֶה—עָלַי – “Why have you dealt ill with your servant, and why have I not found favor in your eyes? You have laid the burden of all this people on me.” In Psalm 45:3 we find a slightly different understanding of תָּהֵן. יִפְיִיפִיתָ, מִבְּנֵי אָדָם – “You are fairer than all children of men; Grace is poured upon your lips, therefore God has blessed you forever.” תָּהֵן is not only something that God can bestow upon someone, but it is also beautiful (יִפְיִיפִיתָ) to behold. In order to encompass these multiple, yet related, meanings, I chose to translate לִוְיַת-תָּהֵן as “graceful garland,” rather than “garland of grace,” so that the meaning could refer to both the image of the garland (graceful), and the values with which it is endowed (divine grace).

- עֲטָרָה – crown
 - We find the idea that עטרת is a symbol of royalty, which goes on one's head in 2 Samuel 12:30. וַיִּקַּח אֶת-עֲטָרַת-מֶלֶכָם מֵעַל רֹאשׁ יוֹמִשְׁקָלָהּ כֶּכֶר זָהָב, וְאַבְנֵי יָקָרָה, וַתְּהִי, עָלָיו. – “The crown was taken from the head of their king and it was placed on David's head - it weighed a talent of gold, and on it were precious stones. He also carried off a vast amount of booty from the city.” Similarly, in Zechariah 6:11, God instructs Zechariah to “Take silver and gold and make crowns (עֲטָרוֹת). Place *one* on the head of High Priest Joshua son of Jehozadak.” Moreover, in Proverbs 16:31 a “gray head” (שֵׂיבָה) is compared to a crown, and a virtuous woman (אִישַׁת חַיִּל) is a crown for her husband (עֲטָרַת בְּעָלָהּ), as long as she does not shame him (Proverbs 12:4).
- תְּפָאֲרָה – beauty
 - Similar to תְּפָאֲרָה, חֵן can have both theological implications, hinting at “glory,” and “honor,” but also describes physical appearance, as in “beauty,” “ornament,” or “splendor.” Moses, for example, is to make holy garments for Aaron “for splendor and for glory (לְכָבוֹד, וּלְתִפְאָרֶת)” (Exodus 28:2). As the High Priest, Aaron must wear clothes that are both visually attractive and appropriate for his holy position. Second Chronicles 3:6, contains a description of the adornments for the Temple: וַיִּצַּף אֶת-הַבַּיִת אֲבָן יָקָרָה, לְתִפְאָרֶת; – “He studded the House with precious stones for decoration; the gold was from Parvaim.” These “decorations,” again, serve both a visual and theological purpose. Beautifying the House (of God) is not only about making something pretty, but also emphasizing its religious importance.

- עטרת and תפארת appear together in multiple instances in the Bible. Proverbs 16:31, for one, draws a comparison between עטרת תפארת and righteousness (צדקה). “Gray hair is a crown of glory; It is attained by the way of righteousness.” In Isaiah 62:3, we read of a glorious future for Zion and Jerusalem. וְהָיִיתָ עֲטֹרַת תְּפָאֶרֶת, בְּיַד-יְהוָה; וצנו (וְצִנִּיף) מְיוֹכָה, future for Zion and Jerusalem. – “You will be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Eternal, and a royal turban in the palm of your God.” In Isaiah 28:5 we also find the two words together – בְּיוֹם הַיּוֹם, יְהוָה יְהוָה צָבָה, וְהָיָה יְהוָה צָבָה, לְעֵטֶרֶת צִבְיָה, וְלְצִפִּירַת תְּפָאֶרֶת--לְשָׂאָר, עֲמוֹ – “In that day, the Eternal of Hosts shall become a crown of beauty and a diadem of glory for the remnant of His people.” So too with Proverbs 17:6 – אֵתֶרֶת זָקְנִים, בְּנֵי בָנִים; וְתִפְאֶרֶת בָּנִים אֶתֶם – “A crown of old age is grandchildren, and the glory of children are their father’s.”
- תִּמְגֶּגֶךְ – deliver to you
- The root מגן is often translated as “deliver,” or “surrender.” For instance, Melchizedek declares to Abraham: וּבְרַחֲמֵי אֱלֹהֵי יְיָ, אֲנִשְׁר-מִגֹּן צָרִיךְ בְּיָדֶךָ; וַיִּתֶּן-יְיָ – “And blessed be God, Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand,” and he gave him a tenth of all” (Genesis 14:20). Hosea 11:8 states: “How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How surrender you (אֲמַגֶּנֶךְ), O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? Render you like Zeboiim? I have had a change of heart, All My tenderness is stirred.” Therefore, I chose to translate תִּמְגֶּגֶךְ as “deliver to you.” Though some translations render it as “place upon you,” (*NRSV*) or “crown you” (*NJPS*), I wanted to incorporate the broader sense of the root מגן rendered תִּמְגֶּגֶךְ as “deliver to you.”

Analysis of 4:1-9

Proverbs 4:1-9 presents a distinct unit in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs 4:1-9 focuses on the specific idea of cherishing wisdom, and the rewards that come from embracing wisdom. Indeed, several commentators identify this section as a separate section, especially because of its focus on the idea of wisdom. In both the *Anchor Bible Commentaries* and the *Jewish Study Bible*, Fox describes this section as the fifth in a series of lectures from a father to his child(ren). He titles this unit: “Lecture V: Loving Wisdom, Hating Evil (4:1-9).” Additionally, in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, Christine Roy Yoder makes note of this section as one of the many appearances of wisdom personified as a woman. In this unit, wisdom bestows garlands and crowns to those who cherish and embrace her, which, Yoder notes are symbols of both marriage and nobility (Yoder, “Proverbs,” 236).

Proverbs 4:1-9 begins the same way that all of Fox’s “lectures” begin. The parent calls out to his child (בני), to listen or observe her exhortations. Yet, this parental lecture stands out, because it begins with the plural “children” (בנים), instead of the singular בן with the singular, first person, possessive (see Proverbs 1:8; 2:1; 3:1; 4:20; 5:1; 6:1; and 7:1 for comparison). Further distinguishing this “lecture” from others is the fact that the parent/narrator attributes his teaching to her own father, and recalls when she was his mother’s “only one” (Proverbs 4:3-4). The parent indicates that this process is continuing a tradition of passing down teachings from generation to the next.

The final subsection of this unit focuses on wisdom, and all that she offers the people who acquire her. She offers protection for those who love her and do not leave her, and she exalts those who hold her close (Proverbs 4:6; 4:8). Indeed, followers of

wisdom will be crowned like royalty, honored with garlands, and perhaps even receive grace (Proverbs 4:9).

On a theological level, this subsection draws connections between the gifts wisdom offers with the Temple, as well as with a prophesied future for Zion. The narrator, for one, explains that wisdom will adorn one's head with "graceful garlands," garlands that decorated the Solomon's Temple (Proverbs 4:9; I Kings 7:29). Then later, we find mention of a "crown of beauty" in both Proverbs 4:9 and Isaiah 62:3.

Interestingly, though Fox mentions "evil" in his title for this "lecture," neither evil nor wickedness appear in this unit. Instead, in this complete unit, we find an achievable path toward beginning's one path to wisdom. By acquiring wisdom, and holding her close, one will live an honorable and exalted life.

Chapter 3: Wisdom's Character, Value, and Beginnings in Proverbs 8

Structural Outline of Proverbs 8

- I. Wisdom's Cries Out Across the City (8:1-4)
 - A. In public, Wisdom gives forth her voice (vv. 1-3)
 - B. She calls to humankind (v. 4)
- II. The Value of Wisdom's Instruction (8:5-11)
 - A. Wisdom's suitable speech: learn cleverness, truth, and rectitude (vv. 5-7)
 - B. Wisdom's words are straight and right for those who understand (vv. 8-9)
 - C. Wisdom's instruction outweighs all valuables (vv. 10-11)
- III. Characterizing Wisdom (8:12-13)
 - A. Where Wisdom dwells and what Wisdom finds (v. 12)
 - B. Wisdom explains: Fear the Eternal and hate evil (v. 13)
- IV. Wisdom Grants Power: Through her Mighty Counsel Rulers Reign and Righteously Decree (8:14-16)
- V. Wisdom Grants Wealth: Seek Wisdom and Find Full Treasure (8:17-21)
 - A. Those who seek Wisdom, find her love (v. 17)
 - B. Riches or Righteousness: Her produce is better than silver and gold (vv. 18-21)
- VI. Before Creation: Wisdom's Beginning (8:22- 31)
 - A. Wisdom was shaped; first of the Eternal's works of old (vv. 22-23)

- B. Before anything, Wisdom was born (vv. 24-29)
 - 1. Before the land, mountains, hills, earth, or soil (vv. 24-26)
 - 2. Before the heavens; clouds or horizon on the deep (vv. 27-28)
 - 3. Before the Eternal placed limits on the sea and land (v. 29)
- C. Wisdom is the Eternal's confidant, rejoicing in God and creation (vv. 30-31)

VII. Hear Wisdom's discipline and Live (8:32-36)

- A. Be happy, and be wise: keep watch over Wisdom's ways (vv. 32-33)
- B. A life or death decision (vv. 35-36)
 - 1. Finding Wisdom obtains God's favor (v. 35)
 - 2. Hate Wisdom, and love death (v. 36)

הֲלֹא־חִכְמָה תִּקְרָא

וְהִיא יִנְהֵג תִּתֵּן וְלֹהֵה

1. Does not Wisdom cry out;

And Understanding gives [forth] her voice.

- הֲלֹא־חִכְמָה - Does not Wisdom

- The negative question form הֲלֹא poses a difficulty in translation. While Whybray argues that the negative question form “has the effect of a strong positive assertion” (Whybray 122), other translators embrace a more idiomatic reading of the text. For example, Alter translates this phrase as: “Look, Wisdom calls out” (Alter 227), and Fox renders it as: “It is Wisdom calling,” (Fox 265). When הֲלֹא appears in other parts of wisdom literature, there are similarly conflicting readings. In Job 4 Eliphaz the Temanite directs a reply to Job, and in one verse we read: “הֲלֹא *Is not* your piety your confidence,” (v. 6). Then in another verse in the same chapter: “הֲלֹא Their cord is pulled up...” (v. 21). In Job 12:11 the *NJPS* translation uses “Truly” to highlight the emphasis, which the form הֲלֹא implies, and in 31:3-4 we find “surely” serving the same purpose. In other sections of biblical poetry, such as Psalms, translations of הֲלֹא also prove inconsistent. In Psalm 94:9 we find the phrase taking on a rhetorical role: “הֲלֹא יִשְׁמַע; אִם-יִצָּר עֵינָי, הֲלֹא יִבְיֹט” – “Shall the One who planted the ear not hear, Shall the One who forms the eye not see?” Whereas, in 85:7 we find “surely,” as a tool, again, to place emphasis – “הֲלֹא־אַתָּה *Surely* You will revive us.” Throughout the prophets, this rhetorical tool appears, as

well. Yet, unlike translations of other biblical poetry and wisdom literature, in the prophets, we find more consistent usage of the negative question form as an assertive. In Ezekiel 17, for instance: “Say to the rebellious breed: Do you not know (הֲלֹא יְדַעְתֶּם) what these things mean...” (v. 12). So too in Jeremiah 26: “Did King Hezekiah of Judah, and all Judah, put him to death? Did he not fear (הֲלֹא יָרָא) the Eternal” (v. 19). Then in Isaiah 44 we find: הֲשִׁמְעֵתָךְ הֲלֹא מֵאָז – “Have I not from of old predicted to you?” (v. 8) and in 10:11 “Shall I not do (הֲלֹא, כְּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי) to Jerusalem and her images/ What I did to Samaria and her idols?”

- A review of these translation options reveals that there are multiple ways to render the negative question form. However, it ultimately serves as a tool to place emphasis. In order to both draw a connection between the prophetic voices, and also because I prefer a more literal translation, which closely reflects the Biblical Hebrew, I chose to translate הֲלֹא here as “does not.” I wanted the translation to both draw the reader’s attention to this rhetorical phrase, as well as place an emphasis on the verse.
- וְלֵהּ – and Discernment gives [forth] her voice
- Though both תְּבוּנָה and בִּינָה frequently appear parallel to חִכְמָה, *DCH* indicates that there are only two times when we find תְּבוּנָה personified in the Bible. In Proverbs 2: תְּבוּנָה תִּנְצְרֶכָה – “Discernment shall keep you” (*NJPS*) and in Proverbs 8:1 we find תְּבוּנָה תִּתֵּן וְלֵהּ - where Understanding speaks aloud. In the post-biblical wisdom text, Ben Sira, there is a similar appearance of personified Understanding (Sirah 4:24). Alter capitalizes “Discernment” in

his translation, and Fox capitalizes “Good Sense” in the *Anchor Bible Series* to highlight this personified form.

בְּרֹם שָׁמַיִם וְעַל־יְדֵדָיִם

בֵּית נְחִיכּוֹת נֶאֱצָבָה

2. Atop the heights, on the way,

At the crossroads, she stands

- בְּרֹם שָׁמַיִם וְעַל־יְדֵדָיִם – Atop the heights
 - מְרוֹם is literally translates to “at the head of the highest places.” frequently rendered as either “mountain” or “elevated site.” In Isaiah 22:16 the prophet describes a חֲצֹבִי מְרוֹם קֶבֶד – “a grave carved on high.” So, too in Jeremiah 17:12, which foretells a “throne of glory on high (מְרוֹם).” However, the words usage in Ezekiel helps flesh out its importance in this verse. In Ezekiel 17 the prophet offers this prophecy from God, which foretells a time when God will plant a bough יִשְׁרָאֵל מְרוֹם - “on the mountain height of Israel” (v. 23). God plants this bough at height of the mountain to ensure that all will see it and know of God’s power (v. 24). In Ezekiel 20:40 and 34:14 the prophet makes declarations on the mountain heights of Israel in order to ensure that all can hear God’s message. Wisdom, herself, also calls from the “tops of the heights of the city (מְרֹמֵי קִרְיָת) in 9:3, and in 9:14 “Lady Folly,” seemingly Wisdom’s opposite, also calls from “a seat in the high places of the city (עַל-כִּסֵּא, מְרֹמֵי קִרְיָת).”

- Fox, referencing medieval commentators, suggests that Wisdom speaks from “the hills or high ground within the city (Radaq, Hame’iri)” (Fox 265). He also emphasizes that the phrase: “ראש מרומים” is probably to be distinguished from ראש דרך, the beginning of a road, which is usually where several roads converge, as in Ezekiel 21:26” (Fox 265). Alter adds that the “Lady Wisdom” positions herself “at the top of the heights” to ensure that all can hear her voice (Alter 227). Isaiah 40:9 contains a similar reference to taking to high places to deliver a message. “Get you up to a high mountain (עַל הַר־גִּבְעָה), O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength (הִרְיִמִי בִכְחַת), O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up (הִרְיִמִי), do not fear.” The prophet not only stands at a high place to deliver his message, but he also “lifts” his voice to reach the people.
- בֵּית נְתִיבוֹת – at the crossroads

 - Again, we find an idiomatic phrase. The literal translation of בֵּית נְתִיבוֹת is “house of paths,” however, that obscures the meaning of the phrase. Though we often associate בֵּית with “house,” there are times in the Bible where it indicates “between.” For example, in 2 Kings 11:15 and 2 Chronicles 23:14 we find a description of the slaying of Athaliah. The high priest calls out that the people must slay Athaliah “אֶל-מִבֵּית הַשָּׁד – between the ranks.” Similarly, in Ezekiel the prophet describes the construction of a house, with free space “בֵּית צֶלַח – between the chambers” (41:9).
 - Rather than a house, Fox explains that this location – at the crossroads – is a point where “several lanes diverge from the main road,” and it offers Wisdom

“visibility and exposure” (Fox 266). Fox makes a telling comparison here, which speaks to his own bias against women in the public sphere. He compares Wisdom to a prostitute placing herself at the crossroads (as in Ezekiel 16:25).

- נִצָּבָה – she stands
- The last word of this verse continues this powerful positioning. The root נצב often indicates a sense of “standing with authority.” For example, in Numbers 22:23 Balaam’s donkey refuses to budge, because she sees a messenger of the Eternal “נִצָּב – standing” in the road. So too, in Genesis 18:2, Abraham lifts his eyes and suddenly sees three men “נִצָּבִים – standing” before. Many consider these men to be heavenly beings, because they then foretell the birth of Isaac. The Eternal also stands - נצב (see Ps 82:1 and 119:89). These verses imply that there is an element of divinity to נצב.

לִיד שְׁעָרִים לְפִי־קֶרֶת
מְבֹא פְתָחִים תִּרְנָה

3. Alongside the gates, at the city entrance,

At the approach to the portals, she cries out

- לְפִי־קֶרֶת – at the city entrance
- קֶרֶת is a relatively rare word for “city,” appearing in only four other places in the Bible (Proverbs 9:3, 14, 11:11, and Job 29:7). Fox suggests that we can trace its roots to Phoenician or Aramaic (Fox 266), and *HALOT* adds that it also might be related to Ugaritic.

- Though לפי is never used for “gate” or “entrance” in any other place, the idiomatic understanding of this phrase is clear – the opening or “mouth” of the city. Its usage also heightens the poetic structure of this verse, with the repeating ל sound in both halves of the first cola – further emphasizing Wisdom’s location.
- מְבוֹא פִתְּחִים – at the entrance to the openings
 - Both מְבוֹא and פִתְּחִים indicate an entryway into a space. We often find מְבוֹא rendered as “entrance.” In Judges 1:24, spies from the tribe of Joseph ask for assistance to find the מְבוֹא הָעִיר “entrance to the city” of Bethel. Again, in 2 Kings 11:16, soldiers force Athaliah into the palace מְבוֹא הַסּוּסִים – “through the horses’ entrance” before they execute her. פִתְּחִים most often indicates an “opening,” though idiomatically in the *NJPS* translation it is often “entrance.” For example, in Genesis 18:1, Abraham sits at פִתְּחֵי-הָאֵהֶל “entrance of the tent.”
 - Alter and Fox offer more idiomatic renderings of this phrase, such as “at the approach of the portals” (Alter 227) and “at the portals” (Fox 263). Though, perhaps, redundant I chose the more literal translation “the entrance of the openings” because it emphasizes the public nature of Wisdom’s placement when she speaks. Fox indicates that the importance of this location is that Wisdom stands at the “outer opening of the gateway, where everyone entering or leaving the city or conducting business in the gate would hear” (Fox 266). We find this behavior in 2 Samuel 15. Absalom wakes early and stands עַל-יָד הַדֶּרֶךְ הַשְּׁעָר “next to the road of the gate,” in order to catch people coming before

the king with business, before they could enter. In contrast to 8:2, where Wisdom speaks from the high places, now she calls out from the entrance to the heart of city affairs. Like Absalom, she catches people with political and commercial business. Wisdom meets the people where they are, competing with the hustle of everyday life, to catch their attention and ensure that they hear here.

- תִּרְנָה – she cries out
- Some commentators see an interesting connection between this verb and 1 Kings 22:36, ‘As the sun was going down, a shout (תִּרְנָה – feminine noun) went through (וַיַּעֲבֹר – masculine verb) the army.’ Fox quotes Zerahiah b. Shealtiel, who says: “this is the herald who proclaims matters of state” (Fox 266). This comparison implies that in 8:1-3 (and 1:20-21), Wisdom is like a royal herald.

אֲלֵיכֶם אֲשִׁים אֶקְרָא
 אֲלֵי אֱלֹהֵי אֲדָם

4. To you, O people, I cry,

And my voice to humankind.

- אֲלֵיכֶם – to you
 - The semi-chiastic structure of this verse emphasizes the importance of Wisdom’s audience. She begins her speech with the conjugated form of אֵל, followed by a group of people, then a verb conjugated in the first person singular. The verb is gapped in the second cola, which continues with the

directional preposition followed by a collective noun representing a group of people. Fox adds that “the frontal positioning of אֲלֵיכֶם ‘to you,’ is emphatic, making the semantic predicate of the sentence” (Fox 267). This positioning highlights to whom Wisdom speaks, rather than her speaking. She shows care for her audience, humanity, and directs her speech with laser focus.

- אֲנִי – people
- This form of the plural of אִישׁ only appears in two other places in the Bible. In Psalm 141 we find: אֶל-תַּט-לִּבִּי לְדִבֶּר רָע לְהִתְּ וְלֵל עֲלִלוֹת בְּרִשָׁע אֶת-אֲנִישִׁים פְּעֻלֵּי-אָוֶן וּבָל- אֶל-תַּט-לִּבִּי לְדִבֶּר רָע לְהִתְּ וְלֵל עֲלִלוֹת בְּרִשָׁע אֶת-אֲנִישִׁים פְּעֻלֵּי-אָוֶן וּבָל- אֶל-תַּט-לִּבִּי לְדִבֶּר רָע לְהִתְּ וְלֵל עֲלִלוֹת בְּרִשָׁע אֶת-אֲנִישִׁים פְּעֻלֵּי-אָוֶן וּבָל- “Let my mind not turn to an evil thing, to practice deeds of wickedness with men who are evildoers; let me not feast on their dainties” (141:4). Then in Isaiah 53: נִבְזָה וְנִחְדָּל אֲנִישִׁים, אֵשׁ מְכָא וְתָן דוּעַ חֲלִי; וּבְמִסְתֵּר פָּנָיו – “He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of pains, and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised and we did not esteem him” (Isaiah 53:3). In both of these examples, אֲנִישִׁים represents a group of men in negative circumstances. In Psalm 141, for example, these men are associated with deeds of iniquity and wickedness, and in Isaiah 53, the prophet compares a person hated most amongst men. Use of this uncommon form of the plural of אִישׁ in Proverbs 8 cannot be a coincidence. Wisdom uses hints at these other appearances as she calls out to the אֲנִישִׁים, and though she directs her comments to all people, she uses a verbal cue to speak to the most despised and sinful amongst them.
- I struggled with whether or not to translate אֲנִישִׁים with a gender. There are places where its more common equivalent, אָנוּשִׁים is translated as “people,”

because it could include both men and women. There are also many times when איש, as the singular, is “man,” for example in the second creation story (Genesis 2:24). However, there are other instances where איש indicates “human being.” For instance, in Psalm 49:3 בני איש is parallel to בני אדם (as it is in this verse), and the translation of the verse indicates their equivalence: גם- – “Both low and high, rich and poor together.” Ultimately, I chose “people” as the translation, especially because בני אדם is parallel to אישים.

פְּתָאִים עֲרָמָה

וְכַסִּילִים הִבִּיּוּ לֵב

5. O simple ones instruct [yourselves in] cleverness,

And fools instruct [your] mind.

- הִבִּיּוּ – instruct
- The root בין appears frequently in both the book of Proverbs and sections about Wisdom. It is frequently understood as “understand” or “discern.” Yet in this verse, it is conjugated in the causative form, and so we find Wisdom demanding that “simple ones” and “fools” to “cause to discern or understand.” In Daniel 9, for instance, Daniel reveals that Gabriel came to him in a vision: “And he made me understand, and talked with me, and said: ‘Daniel, I now come forth to give you insight with understanding’” (9:22). In other instances, this usage indicates “to teach,” “to show,” or “to tell” as in Job 6:24, הוֹרִנִי, וְאֶנִּי אֶתֶר שׁ; – “Teach me; I shall be silent; Tell me where I am wrong.”

- Here, the repetition of **הִבִּיּוּ** presents a difficulty for an English translation. Both usages indicate “cause to learn or understand,” but without the gapped personalized direct object, the phrase is difficult to comprehend in English. Therefore, I used the repeated term “instruct,” for emphasis, and I added “yourselves” in the first cola and “your” in the second.
- **עֲרָמָה** – cleverness
 - In contrast to its appearance in Genesis 3:1, when the snake is described as **עָרוּם** or “shrewd,” **ערם** as “cleverness” does not have the same kinds of negative tone in Proverbs. **ערם**, is indeed “cleverness” or “shrewdness,” but **ערם** is a positive – something to achieve and strive for in Proverbs. In 15:5, for example, we find **וְסוֹר אָבִיו; וְשֹׁמֵר תּוֹכַחַת יְעָרִים אָוִיל** – “A fool spurns the discipline of his father, But the one who heeds reproof becomes clever.” So too, in the opening exordium of Proverbs 1: **וּמִזְמָה: דַּע וְנָעַר, לְנֶעֱר, לְנֶעֱר** – “For endowing the simple with shrewdness, the young with knowledge and foresight” (1:4).
- **הִבִּיּוּ לֵב** – instruct [your] mind
 - **לֵב** in biblical Hebrew can be both “heart” and “mind,” as the source of knowledge for humans, as well as a source of feeling. Here, we can understand **לֵב** as the body part open to knowledge and learning. In Exodus, for instance, God sends the plagues upon Pharaoh’s **לֵב**: **אֲנִי שֶׁלַח אֶת-כָּל-מִגְפָּתִי אֵל-לֵב** – “I will send all my plagues upon your person, and your courtiers, and your people, in order that you may know...” (9:14). **לֵב** can also be the part of humans, which “pay attention” or “give

consideration” to something. In Proverbs 10:8 a חָכָם־לֵב can “accept commands,” and in Deuteronomy 29:3 the לֵב can “know.”

שָׁמַיִם וְאֶרֶץ כִּי־נִגִּידִים אֲדַבֵּר

וּמִפֶּתַח שִׁפְתַּי הֵן שָׂרִים

6. Listen for the suitable things I speak

And from the opening of my lips, rectitude

- כִּי־נִגִּידִים – suitable things
 - Fox explains that the Masoretic Text most likely changed the vocalization of this word from *n^egādîm* to *n^egîdîm*, which is why so many translations render this word as “princely things” or “noble things.” Instead, he suggests reading it as “candid things,” especially in light of the unit created from vv. 6-9, which are “entirely concerned with honesty and truth” (Fox 269). כִּי־נִגִּידִים corresponds to נִכְחִים in verse 9, which means “straightforward” or “honest” (*HALOT*). In this verse, as well, כִּי־נִגִּידִים is parallel to הֵן שָׂרִים, which also means “upright.” The root נגד usually means “opposite” or “corresponding to,” as in Psalm 101:3 – “I will not set any worthless thing before my eyes (לִנְגֹד עֵינַי).” However, reading כִּי־נִגִּידִים as “opposite things” or “corresponding things” does not make sense. It is helpful, instead, to look toward Genesis 2:18, when God describes the partner for the man as עֶזְרָה, כֹּנֵנָה – “a suitable helper.” We could then understand this verse as Wisdom offering “proper” or “suitable” things when she speaks. Though I found Fox’s argument compelling, I ultimately chose a meaning closer to other uses in the Bible,

though it still acknowledges the theorized original root of the word, rather than the Masoretic Text.

- שָׁפְתַי – my lips
 - שָׁפְתַי appears in this verse, and then repeats in the next. We often find שפה as lips or part of the mouth in the Bible. The term is used to describe both a body part, as in Proverbs 5:3 “For the lips (שָׁפְתַי) of a forbidden woman drip honey,” or as a metaphor for speech, as in Job 12:20 “He deprives trusty men of speech (מִקִּיר שִׁפְהָ).” Here, it is possible to read this verse as both metaphor and literal. This personified Wisdom has lips from which she speaks, but she also emphasizes her speech.
- הַיָּשָׁרִים – rectitude
 - The directional term ישר indicates “straight ahead.” With the ה preposition, however, translators often render it as “integrity” or “rectitude.” In Proverbs 1:3, the narrator of the Proverbs explains that the purpose of the book is “For acquiring the discipline for success, Righteousness, justice, and equity (וּמִשְׁרִים).” So, too in Proverbs 23:16 when the narrator declares that he will rejoice when the son speaks “right things (הַיָּשָׁרִים).” I chose “rectitude.” This translation is in keeping with Alter’s translation. “Rectitude” both acknowledges the parallel structure of the verse where הַיָּשָׁרִים pairs with “suitable things,” and also emphasizes the “correct” or “right” nature of Wisdom’s speech.

7. For truth, my tongue declares

And loathing of my lips is wickedness

- יְהִיגָה - utters
 - Translations often render the root הגה as “meditate” as in Jos 1:8: לֹא-יָמוּשׁ סֵפֶר – “This book of instruction shall not depart your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night.” Yet, it can also indicate “declare” or “proclaim,” as in Ps 35:28: וְגִי, תְהַלֵּל צִדְקָךְ: “And my tongue shall declare Your righteousness.” Considering her public location and her audience, Wisdom does not mutter, otherwise how would the people hear her.
- חֶכְמִי – my tongue
 - We find translations of חך as both the “palate,” “seat of taste/tongue,” or representing “speech.” Ezekiel 3:26 describes a tongue clinging to “your palate (אֶל-חֶכְמִי)” (see also Psalm 137:6; Job 29:10, and Lamentations 4:4 for similar imagery). Yet, Proverbs 24:13 presents honey as “sweet to your taste (עַל-חֶכְמִי).” Fox simply translates this as “mouth,” suggesting that חך incorporates multiple parts of the physical mouth. However, that does not include the metaphorical uses of חך as speech, as in the description of the forbidden woman, again, in Proverbs 5:3 “...and smoother than oil is her speech (חֶכְמָה).” Alter’s translation of “tongue,” incorporates both the corporeal

nature of *חך* as a part of the mouth, as well as the metaphorical nature, as “tongue” is also an idiom for speech in English (Alter 227).

- *וְעֵבֶת* – loathing
 - It is difficult to separate the term *תועבה* from its association with “abomination” or “abhorrence” in Leviticus 18. In Proverbs, however, *תועבה* usually appears with the tetragrammaton, describing acts that are “abhorrent” or “loathsome” to the Eternal (see Proverbs 11:1, 20; 12:22; 15:8, 9, 26; 16:5; 17:15; 20:10, 23). As opposed to its appearance in Leviticus, *תועבה* in Proverbs means an act, which God finds objectionable. These loathsome acts include lying, false weights, differing forms of measure, pride, as well as wickedness and evil plans, but not an association with any sort of sexual act. *תועבה* in Proverbs is about treatment of others in a fair and good way. Fox translates *תועבה* as “loathe” rather than “abomination” (Fox 263). Alter makes the same translation choice, but acknowledges that in this verse *תועבה* is in *s’ michut* as: *וְעֵבֶת שְׁפִתִי* - “the loathing of my lips” (Alter 227). I chose to stay true to the order of the Hebrew in this verse, and therefore, translated *וְעֵבֶת* as a gerund.
 - It is also worth noting that this is the only time in the book of Proverbs where *תועבה* does not appear with the tetragrammaton. Here, it is Wisdom’s lips that find wickedness “loathsome.”

8. In righteousness are all the words of my mouth

None of them are twisted or crooked

- גִּפְתָּל וְעִקֵּשׁ - twisted or crooked
- עִקֵּשׁ is regularly rendered as “crooked” when describing paths or ways, as in Proverbs 2:15 – “whose paths are crooked, and devious in their paths.” However, עִקֵּשׁ can also describe a body part like the heart/mind in Proverbs 11:20: “Men of crooked mind are an abomination to the Eternal.” Similarly, Proverbs 6:12 states: “A scoundrel, an evil man Lives by crooked speech (עִקֵּשׁ וּתְפָה),” where עִקֵּשׁ describes a mouth to represent “crooked speech.”
- פִּתְּלִי means “tied on” or “thread,” which is twisted together. For example, in Genesis 38:18 Tamar asks Judah – “your signet, your cord, and your staff that is in your hand.” Then in Job 5:13 “wily” people are גִּפְתָּלִים. Both an inanimate object and a human can be פִּתְּלִי. Although in Job the root פִּתְּלִי appears in the נִפְעַל, which distinguishes “wiliness” in people rather than a cord (פִּתְּלִי).
- The roots פִּתְּלִי and עִקֵּשׁ are paired together in three other places in the Bible. In his farewell address, Moses describes God’s children as עִקֵּשׁ וּפִתְּלִי – “crooked and perverse” (Deuteronomy 32:5). Then in 2 Samuel 22:27 and Psalm 18:27 we find the repeated phrase: “עִקֵּשׁ-וְעִקֵּשׁ, תִּתְּפֹל, תִּתְּבָר, תִּתְּבָר, תִּתְּבָר” “With the pure, You act purely, and with the perverse, You are wily.” עִקֵּשׁ and פִּתְּלִי

can describe both humans and inanimate objects, and highlight both the nature of a person's actions, as well as the physical impact of these ideas. Fox explains that the “physical imagery of ethics throughout Proverbs 1-9 is consistent. Honesty is bright, straight, directly to the front. Dishonesty is dark, crooked, and off to the side – a departure from the right and bright path” (Fox 270). Here, Wisdom describes her words, using this physical imagery, and like many comparisons in Proverbs – the straight path is the righteous one.

כָּלֶם נֹכָחִים לַמֵּבִין

וְשִׁירִים לַמֵּצְאֵי דַעַת

9. All are upright to one who understands

And right for those who find knowledge

- נֹכָחִים – upright
 - Because נֹכָחִים is parallel to שִׁירִים, it highlights the Wisdom's speech as both a physical direction, and that is “correct” or “righteous” in nature. We find נֹכָח frequently in Isaiah. In Isaiah 26, even a wicked person can learn righteousness in the “land of uprightness (אֶרֶץ נֹכַח)” (Isaiah 26:10), and in Isaiah 30:10 נֹכַח is a synonym for truthful statements: אֲשֶׁר אָמְרוּ לְרָאִים, לֹא – “Who said to the seers, "Do not see," To the prophets, "Do not prophesy truth to us; Speak to us falsehoods, Prophecy delusions.” Isaiah 57:2 emphasizes the directional nature of נֹכַח, for those who “walk in uprightness (וְהָלַךְ, נֹכַח)” rest in peace.

Though some translations render גִּבְרִים as “straightforward” or “honest” (see Fox 263), I chose to highlight its relationship to the prophetic voices, by translating it as “upright.”

- לְמַצְאֵי דַעַת – find knowledge
- *HALOT* defines מָצָא as both “to find” or “find what was sought,” as well as “obtain” or “achieve.” Both translations flesh out the semantic range in this verse. For example, in Genesis 2:20: וְלֹא־מָצָא עֹזֵר כְּנָגָו - “but for Adam, there was not found a suitable helper for him.” For those who search for the “right”, they will “find knowledge.” Then, in Genesis 26:12, Isaac sowed in the land, and “reaped (יִמְצֵא) in the same year. He “achieved” greatness in the fields. So too, with those who “find knowledge,” they “achieve” a right path for themselves.

קְחוּ־מוֹסֵרִי וְאַל־כֶּסֶף

וְלִיעַת מִתְרוֹץ נִבְחָר

10. Acquire my instruction over silver,

And knowledge rather than choice gold

- וּמֹסֶרִי – my instruction
- Though sometimes “chastisement” or “reproof,” מוֹסֵר in Proverbs frequently means “instruction” in order to improve oneself. In 1:3 we find מוֹסֵר paired with the root לִקְחַת, the same verb root as this verse. In this earlier pairing, the narrator describes the purpose of Proverbs as: “For acquiring success (לְקַחַת,) Righteousness, justice and equity.” Later, in Proverbs 24:32 the

narrator explains that acquiring ins instruction (לְקַחְתִּי מוֹסֵר) is the process of reflection and observation.

- כֶּסֶף – silver
 - כֶּסֶף can mean both “money” and “silver” as a precious metal in the Bible. Its pairing with נִבְחַר in this verse emphasizes its precious quality. For example in Job 28:1 לְכֶסֶף is paired with לְזָהָב (gold). The pairing appears again in Zechariah 13:9 and Malachi 3:3. Perhaps most telling about the value of this כֶּסֶף comes later in this chapter, in verse 19, when we find מְכֶסֶף נִבְחַר (choice silver) to describe Wisdom’s produce.
- מִתְרוֹץ נִבְחַר – than choice gold
 - רוֹץ is a poetic term for gold (*HALOT*). Proverbs 3:14 and 16:16 (again) compare wisdom to כֶּסֶף וְיָמָּהּ רוֹץ (silver and gold). Moreover, in Zechariah 9:3, the prophet declares: וַתִּבְנוּ צֹר מִן הַיָּם; וַתִּצְבְּרֵי כֶסֶף, כְּעָפָר, וְחֶיָּהּ רוֹץ, כְּטִיט חוּצוֹת - “Tyre has built herself a fortress; She has amassed silver like dust, And gold like the mud in the streets.” The psalmist then compares laying down in the sheepfolds, under God’s protection, to “wings of a dove sheathed in silver, its pinions in fine gold (רוֹץ יָפֵה)” (Psalm 68:14).

כִּי-טוֹבָה חֲכָמָה מִפְּנִינִים
וְכָל-חֲפָצִים לֹא יִשְׁווּ-בָּהּ

11. For wisdom is better than rubies,

And all valuables cannot equal her

- This verse is very similar to an earlier one from the book of Proverbs. In Proverbs 3, the parent encourages the child to “find wisdom,” and in verse 15 we learn that it is because *יְקָרָהּ הִיא, מִפְּנִיִּים (מִפְּנִינִים) וְכָל-חֲפָצֶיהָ, לֹא יִשְׁוּ וּבָהּ* – “She is more precious than rubies; All of your goods cannot equal her.” Repetition is a common practice in the Bible, and indeed this further highlights wisdom’s value and importance. This verse, however, is also notable for its “circularity.” Fox acknowledges that some wonder if this verse is an interpolation, because, it is redundant for personified Wisdom to praise wisdom. This verse, however, acts as a cap to this first section of Wisdom’s speech, and offers support to the verses preceding it (Fox 271).
- *מִפְּנִינִים* – than rubies
 - Though some offer a more general translation of *פְּנִינִים* as “jewels,” it is almost always translated as “rubies” according to *NJPS*. Indeed, many of these other usages are also in Proverbs. As mentioned above, Proverbs 3:15 also compares wisdom to both “rubies” and *חֲפֶז* (desirable or valuable) objects. The *אִשְׁת־חַיִּל* (“capable wife”) of Proverbs 31:10 is also worth “far beyond rubies (*מִפְּנִינִים*),” and in Proverbs 20:15 “Gold is plentiful, jewels abundant (*רַב־פְּנִינִים*), But wise speech is a precious object.”
- *כָּל־חֲפָצִים* – all valuables
 - *אֵם-אֶמְנָע* are literally “desired objects,” as in Job 31:16. Job wonders *אֵם-אֶמְנָע, וְעֵינֵי אֶלְמָנָה אֶכְלָה* – “If I have withheld anything that the poor desired, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail” (*NRSV*). Here and in Proverbs 3:15 *חֲפָצִים* is paired with *פְּנִינִים*, hinting at not only the desirability, but the

value of חפצים. Similarly, in Isaiah 54:12 we find חפץ paired with precious stones: וְשַׁעְרֶיךָ לְאַבְנֵי אֶקֶדָּח; וְכָל-גֹּיִלְךָ, לְאַבְנֵי-חֹפֶץ – “I will make your battlements of rubies, Your gates of precious stones, The whole encircling wall of gems.”

אֲנִי-חֹכֵם שְׂכֵנְתִי עֲרֻמָּה

וְדַעַת מְזֻמּוֹת אֶמְצָא

12. I, Wisdom, dwell with cleverness;

Knowledge of prudence, I find

- שְׂכַנְתִּי – I dwell
 - שִׁכַן covers a multitude of meanings around the idea of “settle” or “dwell.” For example, in Exodus 24:16 the glory of the Eternal “dwelled (שִׁכַן)” for six days, a temporary time period. In comparison, Psalm 37:27 וּבִּירְמִיָּה, וְעָשֶׂה-וֹב – “Depart from evil, and do good, So you will abide forever.” שִׁכַן is also often said of God. In Zechariah 2:14 the Eternal dwells amongst the daughters of Zion (בָּתֵּי יְרוּשָׁלַיִם) (see also Exodus 25:8, 46; Numbers 5:3, 35:34; and Ezekiel 43:9, to name a few). God also dwells in Jerusalem (see Zechariah 8:3, 8; Psalm 135:21), and Zion (see Isaiah 8:18; Joel 4:17, 21; and Psalm 74:2). Though not a perfect correlation, the use of the root שִׁכַן draws a line between the God, who dwells amongst Israel, the heavens, Zion, etc, as well as the מִשְׁכָּן, the temporary dwelling place that the Israelites carried on their journey to the Promised Land.

- מְזֻמָּה – prudence
 - Though מְזֻמָּה sometimes indicates a “plot” or “wicked plan,” in Proverbs it is often parallel to more positive terms. We find it paired with common terms in wisdom literature (like בִּינָה, דַּעַת, or חִכְמָה) as it is in this verse. In these examples מְזֻמָּה is usually rendered as “foresight” or “prudence.” For instance, in Proverbs 2:11 “Foresight (מְזֻמָּה) will protect you, And discernment (תְּיָגֵה) will guard you” or Proverbs 5:2 “That you may have foresight (מְזֻמָּה), While your lips hold fast to knowledge (דַּעַת).” Rather than translate מְזֻמָּה as “shrewdness” or “cunning” like Fox and Alter, respectively, I chose “prudence,” because it highlights the thoughtful nature of מְזֻמָּה and the planning that it requires, without the negative tone.

יִרְאַת יְהוָה שְׂנֵאת רָע
 גָּאֹה וְגָאוֹן וְדָרָךְ רָע
 וְכִי תִהְיֶה כָּזֹת שְׂנֵאתִי

13. Fear of the Eternal is hating evil

Arrogance, haughtiness, an evil way

Duplicity of speech do I hate.

- יִרְאַת יְהוָה שְׂנֵאת רָע – Fear of the Eternal is hating evil
 - Most scholars contend that this phrase is a later insertion, not original to the text. Clifford excises the whole cola from his translation, and simply explains that it “makes no sense in the context,” and adds that it may be a gloss from other sections in Proverbs, which focus on this idea (see Proverbs 1:7, 3:7)

(Clifford 92). Fox suggests that this cola is a “pietistic insertion intended to counterbalance the possibly amoral overtones of cunning and shrewdness” and argues that interrupts the connection between vv. 12 and 14, which both praise wisdom (Fox 272). “Cunning and shrewdness” are part of Fox’s translation, and assume negative undertones in the v. 12, which I do not read in the Hebrew. Whybray also mentions the fact that with this first line included, verse 13 breaks with the pattern of two cola verses throughout the rest of Wisdom’s speech (Whybray 124). Notably, Alter includes this line in his translation, and does not comment on the nature of it at all.

- גָּאֹן גִּאֲוָן – arrogance, haughtiness
- Note the rhetorical tool, here. Wisdom repeats the paronomastic word pair to highlight her point. The words both sound alike, using seemingly the same root, and indeed even have similar meanings, but are, in fact, derived from different words. Wisdom connotes totality with this pun – condemning every sort of pride.
- The root of the first word in this pair, גִּאֲוָן, is גוה, and translates to “arrogance” or “pride.” It is related to Jeremiah 13:17, where the prophet calls out “For if you will not give heed, My inmost self must weep, Because of your arrogance (גוה); My eye must stream and flow With copious tears, Because the flock of the Eternal is taken captive.” In comparison, the root of the second word in this pair is גא, and is more closely related to the idea of “height” or “eminence.” For example, Isaiah 24:14 describes people’s rejoicing at גִּבְרַת יְהוָה – “the majesty of the Eternal.” In Proverbs 16:18 we find גִּבְרַת paired

with גִּבְהָ, further emphasizing its relationship to “lofty heights.” In order to distinguish these two related, but distinct roots, I translated גִּבְהָ as “haughtiness” and גָּאָה as “arrogance.” In biblical metaphors, physical height becomes a figurative term used in both positive and negative ways.

- וּפִי תִהְפֹּךְ – and duplicity of speech
- Though related to תִּהְפֹּךְ, הִפְךָ adds a level of intensity to the idea of “turning upside down,” or “turning over.” Almost exclusively found in Proverbs תִּהְפֹּךְ is usually rendered as “perversity” or “duplicity,” especially when it is connected to speech. In Proverbs 2, it appears twice; first to describe “men who speak duplicity (תִּהְפֹּךְ מִדְבָּר),” and then “duplicity of evil men (תִּהְפֹּךְ רָע)” (vv. 12 and 14, respectively). Proverbs 16:28 speaks of the damage that a “shifty man (אִשָּׁר תִּהְפֹּךְ) or slanderer can do to another, again suggesting a duplicitous nature to the act. In Deuteronomy 32:20 God threatens to hide from the Children of Israel, because they are a “treacherous breed (תִּהְפֹּךְ לֹא אֱמֶה), Children with no loyalty.” In order to tie it to the idea of “double speak,” I translated this word as “duplicity,” though “perversity” is another common translation choice (see Fox 263, Clifford 92, and Alter 228).
- Though literally, “a mouth’s perversities” I chose the idiomatic phrasing of “perversity of speech,” to emphasize the act, which is troubling to Wisdom, not the body part. This also ties the third and last cola with the other acts that Wisdom condemns of “arrogance” and “haughtiness” in the second cola of this verse.

14. Mine are counsel and competence

I am Discernment, mine is might

- תוֹשִׁיָּה – competence
 - *HALOT* argues that תוֹשִׁיָּה is something of a catch-all term in wisdom literature, and it is incredibly difficult to give an adequate translation of the Hebrew in modern languages. "It appears as one of the favorite ideas of wisdom literature, where it takes on many shades of meaning; the general sense...really means the promotion of being, encouraging something to exist, allowing the successful outcome of an enquiry; as such it means help as much as cleverness or skill" (*HALOT*). *NJPS* renders it as "resourcefulness," and Alter chooses "prudence." Fox chooses "competence," and certain Christian translations offer "sound wisdom."
- אֲנִי בִינָה לִי גִּיּוֹרָה – I am Discernment, mine is might
 - The combination of עֵצָה, גִּבּוּרָה, בִּינָה and תְּבוּנָה appear in two other places, though not in exactly the same order as this verse and v. 12, we find them in both Isaiah 11:2 and Job 12:13. Isaiah prophesies that redemption will come from the "stump of Jesse," and we will recognize him because וְנָחָה עָלָיו, רוּחַ – "The spirit of the Eternal shall alight upon him, A spirit of counsel and valor, A spirit of devotion and reverence for the Eternal." In Job, however, these attributes instead belong to God "With Him are wisdom and courage (וְגִיּוֹרָה); His

are counsel and understanding (עצה וְיָתְוּנָה).” Here, Wisdom claims possession of “counsel,” and “might.” She embodies “understanding” and “discernment,” as if she was either proof of God’s spirit or even like God.

בִּי מְלָכִים יִמְלְכוּ

וְרוֹזְנִים יִתְּקוּ צֶדֶק

15. Through me sovereigns reign

And leaders decree righteous laws

- רוֹזְנִים – leaders
 - רוֹזְנִים is not a common word in the Bible, and its exact meaning is unknown. We almost always find רוֹזְנִים paired with מְלָכִים. In Judges 5:3, for one, Deborah calls out רוֹזְנִים הַאֲזִינוּ מְלָכִים, שָׁמְרוּ – “Hear, O kings! Give ear, O potentates!” (though I chose the more colloquial, “rulers,” the meaning is clearly the same). (See also Habakkuk 1:10 and Proverbs 31:4.) The one other appearance of רוֹזְנִים is in Isaiah 40:23, where it is paired with שְׁפָטֵי אֶרֶץ (judges of the earth). Some render it as “governors” or “rulers,” and Fox adds that it “always refers to foreign officials” (Fox 271).
- יִתְּקוּ – decree [righteous] laws
 - The root חקק indicates “to enact” or “to decree,” however here, and in other places the importance of these laws is on justice and righteousness. Note the connection to justice, in this example from the words of King Lemuel: כֹּה־נִשְׁכַּח מִחֻקֶּק; וְ שָׁנָה, דִּין כָּל-בְּנֵי-עֲנִי – “Lest they drink and forget what has been ordained, And infringe on the rights of the poor” (Proverbs 31:5). So,

too in Isaiah's prophetic call "Ha! Those who write out evil writs (הַחֲקִיקִים), And compose iniquitous documents, to subvert the cause of the poor, To rob of their rights the need of My people; that widows may be their spoil, And fatherless children their booty!" (Isaiah 10:1-2). The mark of a wise king or ruler, who decrees laws through Wisdom is one who does so with an eye toward justice and righteousness (צדק).

בִּי שָׂרִים יִשְׁׁוּ

וְנִדְבָרִים כָּל עֲפָטֵי צֶדֶק

16. Through me rulers rule

And nobles, all the judges of the earth

- בִּי שָׂרִים יִשְׁׁוּ – rulers rule
 - Both v. 15a and v. 16a contain paronomastic phrases, tying the verses together. In order to highlight this coupling I chose “sovereigns reign” for v. 15 and “rulers rule” for v. 16. This way the English would mimic the repeating sounds, just like the Hebrew. It also draws attention to the second cola in each verse, which is not paronomastic.
- כָּל עֲפָטֵי צֶדֶק – all the judges of the earth
 - The Masoretic text literally gives us “all the judges of righteousness,” which is a possible reading of this verse, but most scholars agree it is unlikely. All translations that I looked at changed this line to “all the judges of the earth.” Alter explains that several Hebrew manuscripts, and two ancient translations

of the text show ארץ instead of צדק. It is easy to imagine a scribal error, which inadvertently reproduced צדק from the previous verse (Alter 229).

אָנִי, אַהֲבִיָּה (אַהֲבִי אֶהֱבֶה);

וּמִשְׁחֵרִי, יִמָּצְאֵנִי

17. I love those who love me

And those who seek me, find me

- אָהֲבֶה (אַהֲבִי) – I love those who love me
- אָהֲבֶה (אַהֲבִי) - Note the *qere* and *ketiv* in this verse. Whybray suggests that the *ketiv* ties the verse to 4:6, when the parent encourages the child to “אַהֲבֶה” love her [Wisdom] (Whybray 126). Alter renders this phrase more literally as “I, all my lovers, I love” (Alter 229), but most other translations choose the more idiomatic “I love those who love me.” In this case, for the sake of readability, I too chose the more idiomatic English translation.

עֲשֹׂר־וְכָבוֹד אֶתִּי

הוֹן עֹלָם וְצִדְקָה

18. Riches and honor are with me

Enduring wealth and righteousness

- עֲשֹׂר־וְכָבוֹד – riches and honor
- These words often appear together in the Bible (see Proverbs 3:16, 22:4; 1 Chronicles 29:12, 18; 2 Chronicles 17:5, 18:1, 32:27). In Proverbs 22:4 עֲשֹׂר וְכָבוֹד is the product of humility. In First and Second Chronicles עֲשֹׂר וְכָבוֹד are a

sign of a king's power, prestige, and proof of God's favor. Surprisingly, we also find this pairing in the Book of Esther, but there it is Haman who boasts of "his great wealth (כָּ וְזַעַשׁ וְ) (Esther 5:11) and King Ahasuerus who uses his party to demonstrate "the vast riches of his kingdom and the splendid glory of his majesty (וְזַעַשׁ כָּ וְזַ מְלָכוּתוֹ) (Esther 1:4). Yet, unlike the previous examples, in Esther עוֹשֶׁר and כְּבוֹד are part of *s'michut* phrases rather than conjunctions. Wisdom's speech draws a connection to earlier and later mentions in Proverbs, as well as the theology of Chronicles, which uses עוֹשֶׁר and כְּבוֹד as proof that a king is beloved or favored.

- קֶוֶן עֲלֵת וְצִדְקָה – Enduring wealth and righteousness
- עַתִּיק often means "ancient," or "old." For example, in 1 Chronicles 4:22 we find a description of "ancient records (וְהַדְּבָרִים, עֲתִיקִים)." Similarly, Daniel 7:13, 22 also use עַתִּיק to describe the "Ancient of Days." However, v. 18 appears to be the only time this root appear in this form, and so it is difficult to pinpoint its exact meaning. Some scholars suggest it is related to עַתִּיק, as in Isaiah 23:18 "They shall not be treasured or stored, rather shall her profits go to those who abide by the Eternal, that they may eat their fill and clothe themselves elegantly (עַתִּיק)." Then we find the riches (הוֹן) of the second cola of verse 18 are not only "ancient" or "able to endure," but they are stately and venerable, as well.

טוב פריי מחר זי ומפז

ותי ואתי מכסף נבחר

19. My fruit is better than gold, fine gold,

And my produce than choice silver

- מפז – fine gold
 - פז is normally parallel to זהב or, as is the case with this verse, חרוץ, as a way to place emphasis. For example, in Psalm 19:10-11 “Fear of the Eternal is pure, abiding forever; the judgments of the Eternal are true, righteous altogether, more desirable than gold (מזהב) than much fine gold (ומפז רב); sweeter than honey, than drippings of the comb.” Additionally, we find a similar comparison in Psalm 119:127: וּמִפָּז – עַל-כֵּן, אֶהְבֵּתִי מִצֻּוֹתַיךָ מִזֶּה – “Rightly do I love your commandments more than even gold, even fine gold.”
- תי ואתי – my produce
 - תבואה can mean “produce” or “yield” from the land, or something akin to “profit.” Proverbs 3:14 and 8:19 describe the profits of a relationship with Wisdom. In the earlier chapter, the narrator explains: “Her value in trade is better than silver, Her yield (תי ואתה) greater than gold” (Proverbs 3:14). Similarly, Job 31:12 bemoans a fire that will destroy “the roots of all my increase (וּבְכָל-תְּבוּאָתִי).”

בְּאַרְח־צִדְקָה אֶהְלֵךְ

כִּתְּךָ נְתִיבוֹת מִשְׁפָּט

20. Upon the paths of righteousness, I walk,

Within the paths of justice

לְהַנְחִיל אֶהְבִּיאוֹ יְיָ

וְאַצְרֵתֵיהֶם אֶמְלֵא

21. To endow those who love me,

And their treasuries I will fill

- לְהַנְחִיל – endow
 - נחל is an inheritance, therefore in the הפעיל “causes to receive an inheritance,” or, more elegantly, “to endow.” We find this idea in throughout Deuteronomy, as it repeats the idea that God will give the Israelites their allotted land. In 12:10, Moses instructs the Israelites: “When you cross the Jordan and settle in the land that the Eternal your God is allotting to you (מִנְחִיל אֶתְכֶם), and [God] grants you safety from all your enemies around you and you live in security.” Then again in 19:3 “You shall survey the distances, and divide into three parts the territory of the country that the Eternal your God has allotted to you (יִנְחִילֶךָ). God endows this land to Israel, and in return Israel must execute certain laws. Wisdom also offers a reciprocal relationship – an endowment for those who love her.

- אֲצֻרֹתֵיהֶם – their treasures
- אוצר is a “storehouse” (see Nehemiah 12:44, 13:12), but it mean a “treasure” as well. The prophet Jeremiah foretells a time when God will “hand over your wealth and your treasures (חֵילְךָ וְאֲצֻרֹתְךָ) as a spoil” (15:13). אוצר can also mean a metaphorical treasure, as in Deuteronomy 28:12 וְאָפַת יְהוָה לְךָ אֶת-וְאֲצֻרֹתַי יִפְתָּח לְךָ יְהוָה – “The Eternal will open for you [God’s] bounteous store, the heavens, to provide rain for your land in season and to bless all your undertakings.” This is part of the inheritance Wisdom offers – a full treasury – but it is unclear if this is a metaphor or literal.”

יְהוָה קִנְיִי בְּשֵׁיט דְּרַכִּי

קָדָם מִפְּעֻלָּיו מֵאֵז

22. The Eternal created me, beginning of His way

Earliest of His works of old

- Throughout this section of Wisdom’s speech (Proverbs 8:22-31), I conjugated God’s actions in the masculine. Of course, we sometimes read masculine conjugations as symbolically non-gendered, or gender-inclusive, especially without a pronoun, but there are no translations of Proverbs, which currently read the text in such a way. I contemplated translating all masculine conjugated verbs for God’s work without a pronoun, or inserting “God” where one might read “He,” but that felt disingenuous to the text. I believe this poem is both a statement of Wisdom’s power and value, but also one that shapes her into a female partner to a male God. Translating the verses with gendered language for

God, highlights for the reader the interpretative difficulties that this text poses for a feminist critique. Is Wisdom a plaything for God, or an equal partner? We must wrestle with the text, in order to come to our own conclusions. Rabbis Leonard Kravitz and Kerry Olitzky wrote a modern commentary on Proverbs together in the early 2000s, in which they offer a gender-neutral translation of Proverbs, in contrast to my choices, here.

- קָנִי – created me
- The root קנה means “acquire” in the broadest sense, though this does miss some of the lexical meaning. “Acquire” implies that the object in question was already in existence, but in Hebrew קנה includes multiple avenues of acquisition. For example, in Deuteronomy 32:6 “Do you thus requite the Eternal, O dull and witless people? Is not He not the Father who created you (לֹא הוּא אֲבִיךָ קָנֶךָ), Fashioned you and made you endure!” Moses reminds the people that God קנה (created/acquired) them. The psalmist also declares to God: כִּי-אַתָּה, קָנִיתָ כְּלִי תִּסְכְּנִי, בְּבֶטֶן אִמִּי – “It was You who created my conscience; You fashioned me in my mother’s womb” (Psalm 139:13). The nature of this verse also directs our attention to the creation story in Genesis, and there, too, we find קנה. The woman names her first born קַיִן (Cain) for “I have gained a male child with the help of the Eternal - אֶת-יְהוָה - קָנִיתִי אִישׁ” (Genesis 4:1).
- קנה also appears frequently in Wisdom literature listing good things, such as חכמה, דעת, בינה, and indeed חכמה. (See more about Proverbs 4:5-7 in chapter 2.) The implication in Proverbs 4:5-7 is both that wisdom already existed, and

that one should “acquire” her like a partner, because she offered a reciprocal relationship of good fortune to those that do.

- Not surprisingly, many scholars have written about this verse, and this word, in particular. For some, it presents a theological conundrum. If God acquired Wisdom, and she already existed, then that allows for the possibility that Wisdom was coeval with God. This textual interpretation, according to Fox, can be traced back to a translation in the Vulgate (Fox 279). However, textual variants from the Septuagint and other translations (like versions in Syriac) suggest an interpretation closer to my translation, above. Fox adds that these textual traditions “presuppose Ben Sira’s paraphrase: ‘Before all things, wisdom was created’ (Sir 1:4). This is [also] accepted by the medieval Jewish commentators and most modern translations and interpretation” (Fox 279).
- רַ' שִׁית – beginning
 - Again, Proverbs 8:22 harkens back to the creation story. Genesis 1:1 famously states: בְּרַ' שִׁית, בְּרַא אֱלֹהִים, אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ – “When God began to create heaven and earth.” Others translate this verse as: “In the beginning God created heaven and earth,” (*NJPS*). Furthermore, Jeremiah uses ראשית to describe the beginning of a king’s reign in 26:1, 27:1, 28:1, and 49:34. Proverbs 4:7 also mentions the beginning of wisdom, as does Psalm 111:10: רַ' שִׁית חֵכְמָה, יִרְאֵת יְהוָה שְׂכָל טוֹב, לְכָל-עֹשִׂיהֶם – “The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Eternal; all who practice it gain sound understanding.” ראשית can also indicate “first” as in “best” or “choicest,” as in Jeremiah 2:3 where Israel is God’s יְרֵאָתָהּ – רַ' שִׁית תְּ – “first fruits” of the harvest or Ezekiel 48:14, which

forbids Levites from selling their land, because it is ר' שית הארץ - “the choicest of the land.” It is possible to read Wisdom’s description of her creation as both “first” and “choice,” though in this verse, with ראשית parallel to קדם, it makes “beginning” a more compelling translation.

- קדם – before
 - קדם in biblical Hebrew is both a directional term, indicating east, and a temporal term, indicating “before,” “earlier,” or “olden days.” Lamentations 5:21 asks of God (חַדֵּשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם יוֹבָהּ), “Take us back, O Eternal, to Yourself, And let us come back; Renew our days as of old.” In Psalms 74:12, 77:6, and 143:5 all use the term to refer to “days of old (מִקְדָּם),” implying that it is from “time immemorial.”
- מֵאָז – of old
 - With the preposition מִן, אז (then) creates a phrase translated closer to “before,” “earlier,” or poetically “of old.” A similar construction appears in Psalm 93:2, “Your throne stands firm from of old (מֵאָז); from eternity, You have existed.”

מִן וְלִפְנֵי

מִן מִקְדָּמֵי-אֶרֶץ

23. From the start of time I was fashioned,

From the beginning, at the first of the earth

- מִן וְלִפְנֵי – from the start of time
 - Fox explains that there are two great “eons: past and future,” and both are called עולם (Fox 281). Considering the context of this verse, a future-oriented

interpretation does not make sense. The preposition מן, also strengthens the argument for this translation. For example, “It was then, and later too, that the Nephilim appeared on earth -- when the divine beings cohabited with the daughters of men, who bore them offspring. They were the heroes of old, the men of renown (הַמְּהִימָה הַגִּבֹּרִים אֲשֶׁר מִן וְלָם, אֲנָשֵׁי הַשָּׁם) (Genesis 6:4). In Deuteronomy 32:7 וְלָם מִן is parallel with וְזֶה הַיּוֹם : “Remember the days of old (שָׁנֹת וְיָמֵי זָקֵן), Consider the years of ages past (שָׁנֹת וְיָמֵי זָקֵן),” which highlights the Eternality of this phrase. So, too in Psalm 90:2, which not only contains מעולם, but many of the other key words from subsequent verses of this section of Wisdom’s speech: וְלָם עַד- וְלָם, אֶתְּהָאֵל – “Before the mountains came into being, before You brought forth the earth and the world; from eternity to eternity You are God.”

- נִסְכָּתִי – I was shaped
- מִסְכָּה is a cast image, as in Numbers 33:52, which advocates the destruction of “molten images (כָּל־צִלְמֵי מִסְכָּתָם) and Deuteronomy 27:15, which forbids the creation of them תוֹעֵבַת יְהוָה וּמִסְכָּה יַעֲשֶׂה פֶסֶל וְאִשָּׁר יַעֲשֶׂה פֶסֶל – “Cursed be anyone who makes a sculptured or molten image, abhorred by the Eternal.” Here, God forms Wisdom, like the making of a molten image.

בְּאִין־תְּהִמּוֹת וְלִלְתִּי

בְּאִין מְעִינּוֹת נִכְבְּדֵי־מַיִם

24. When there were no deeps, I was born

when there were no wellsprings of water-sources

- תְּהוֹמוֹת – deeps
 - תְּהוֹם is most closely associated with the imagery of creation. In Genesis 1:2 we find: “the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep (תְּהוֹם) and a wind from God sweeping over the water.” So, too, the psalmist offers this description of the primeval depths: “You made the deep (תְּהוֹם) cover it as a garment; the waters stood above the mountains” (Psalm 104:6). In Psalms 77:17 and 148:7 the plural form indicates the ocean depths, but Alter wisely suggests that Wisdom “wants to take us back to the moment of her gestation that is antecedent to the beginning of creation proper” (Alter 238). She alludes to creation throughout this section of her speech, and this clever word choice highlights this poem’s association with the early chapters of Genesis.
- וְלֵלְתִי – I was born
 - In the active form חוּל means “to writhe,” or “to be in labor.” In Proverbs 8:24-25 the verb is in the *po’al* – so Wisdom is “brought forth (through labor pains).” Deuteronomy 32:18 contains the root חוּל: “You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you (מִיְּחֻלְלֶךָ); you forgot the God who gave you birth.” The psalmist declares: “Indeed I was born (וְלֵלְתִי) with iniquity; with sin my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:7). Job 15:7-8 asks of its audience: “Were you the first man born? Were you created (וְלֵלְתָּ) before the hills? Have you listened in on the council of God? Have you sole possession of wisdom?” (Job 15:7-8). Note the intertextual connection between both wisdom books.

Job ties God's counsel to the acquisition of wisdom, as well as a question of knowledge from the beginning of creation."

- מַעְיָנוֹת נְכַבְדֵי-מַיִם – wellsprings of water-sources
- The literal translation of this phrase is: "wellsprings of heavy-water" or "wellsprings of honored-water." The *NJPS* translation suggests "No springs rich in water." כבד can indicate honor through riches. Abram is, for example "very rich (כבד מאד) in cattle, silver, and gold" (Genesis 13:2). However, most scholarly translations argue that the root כבד (honor, weighty), does not make sense in this context, and emend the Masoretic Text to נכבי-מים, which they render: "sources of water." *HALOT* also ties the usage in Proverbs 8:24 to נכבי. In Job 38:16, we find a similar phrase: נְכַבְי-יָם ("sources of the sea"). Clifford (93), Alter (230), and Fox (282) all agree on the emendation, and Whybray (132) also suggests it as an interpretative possibility.

בְּטָרָם הָרִים הִטְבּוּ
לִפְנֵי גִבְעַת חוֹלְלָתִי

25. Before mountains were set down

Before hills were, I was born

- הִטְבּוּ – set down
- In the *qal* form, טבע "to sink down," like וְאֵם, בְּשִׁחַת עַוְוָה – "The nations sink in the pit they have made," (Psalm 9:16), or טֹבַעְתִּי, בִּיּוֹן מְוִלָּה וְאֵין מַעְמָד – "I am sinking into the slimy deep and find no foothold," (Psalm 69:3). In Proverbs 8:25 טבע is in *hiphil*, for "to be sunk" or "settled." Jeremiah 38

describes the prophet sunk in the mud (v. 6), and in verse 22 the prophet is “sunk in the mire (הִטְבָּעוּ)” while his friends turn their back. Job 38:4-6 ties to the beginning of time (i.e. creation): “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations? Speak if you have understanding. Do you know who fixed its dimensions Or who measured it with a line. -עַל-מָה, אֲדַנִּיָּה הִטְבָּעוּ אוֹ מִי- .”
 -אָכֵן פְּנֵתָה יְרֵה, -Onto what were its bases sunk? Who set its cornerstones?”

עַד-לֹא עָשָׂה אֶרֶץ וְחוּצוֹת

יְיָ שׁ עֲפָרוֹת תִּבְּלֶה

26. He had not yet made the land, and fields

And the first dust of the soil of the world

- יוּצוֹת – fields
 - חוץ means “outside,” though there are times when the context of the word means “fields.” For example, Psalm 144:13 states: -אֵל- מִזְּנוֹי מְלֵאִים מִפִּיקִים מִזֶּן, -“Our storehouses are full, supplying produce of all kinds; our flocks number thousands, even myriads, in our fields.” Similarly, in Job 5:10 Job praises God as the giver of rain: הַנֹּתֵן מָטָר, -עַל-פְּנֵי-אֶרֶץ וְשִׁלַּח מַיִם, -עַל-פְּנֵי חוּצוֹת water over the fields.”
- עֲפָרוֹת – dust of the soil
 - We often translate עפר as “dust,” but that does not fully reflect the words meaning in Hebrew. In Genesis 2, God forms the אָדָם from “the dust of the earth (עָפָר מִן-הָאֲדָמָה)” (Genesis 2:7). Then in Genesis 3:19 we find עפר

בזעת אפך, תאכל לחם, ע' שובך אל-האדמה, כי ממנה לקחת: כי-עפר אתה, ואל- twice: – “By the sweat of your brow Shall you get bread to eat, Until you return to the ground - For from it you were taken. For dust you are, And to dust you shall return.” In Amos 2:7 עפר is paired with ארץ and translated as “dust of the ground.” Though in English we associate “dust” with the particles collected on furniture or electronics, in the Bible it evokes the idea of soil or ground, like the first human made of מן-האדמה (dust of the earth). To flesh out this imagery in the English, I added “soil” to the translation, although it is not there specifically in the text.

- תבל - world
- Unlike ארץ and אדמה, which can mean “earth” or “land,” תבל means “world,” all of it. In Proverbs 8:26 תבל sits in collocation with ארץ, which places emphasis on the phrase through the repetition of synonyms. We find this pairing in Psalm 90:2 (as mentioned above), and again in Proverbs 8:31. In Job 37:12 the pairing implies the habitable world: וואַס וְתָמִיד מִתְהַפֵּךְ בְּתֵקָה וּלְתֹרֵם – “He keeps turning events by His stratagems, That they might accomplish all that He commands them Throughout the inhabited earth.”

בְּהִכִּינֵי שָׁמַיִם שָׁמַיִם אֲנִי

בְּחֹזֶק אֶל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹמֹת

27. When He prepared the heavens, there I was

When He inscribed the horizon upon the deep

- הִכִּינּוּ – He prepared
 - In the *hiphil* the root כוּן can mean “to prepare” or “establish.” It often appears connected to the idea of creation. In Jeremiah 10:12 “He made the earth by His might, Established the world by His wisdom (מִכִּיּוֹן תִּבְּלָה בְּחָכְמָתוֹ), And by His understanding stretched out the skies.” Similar language appears in Jeremiah 33:2 and 51:15. Psalm 65 describes God, who “fixed the mountains מִכִּיּוֹן (הָרִים)” (v. 7) and “You take care of the earth and irrigate it; You enrich it greatly, with the channel of God full of water; You provide grain for men; for so do You prepare it (תִּכְיָנֶה)” (v. 10). Psalm 74:16 relates closely to Proverbs 8:27, describing God as the creator of the sun and moon: לֵךְ אֶרֶץ-לֵךְ לְיָלֵךְ; “the day is Yours, the night also; it was You who set in place the orb of the sun.”
- בָּחַר – when He inscribed
 - Unlike previous verses, where חָקַק is related to law and or to “enact a law,” here it indicates “inscribed.” Similar uses occur in Isaiah 30:8: “Now, Go, write it down on a tablet And inscribe it (חָקַק) in a record, That it may be with them for future days, a witness forever,” and 49:16 “See, I have engraved you On the palms of My hands (עַל-כַּפַּיִם חָקַקְתִּי), Your walls are ever before Me.” Job 26:10 also connects חָקַק to חָג, which I will discuss in the next bullet point: חָק-חָג, עַל-פְּנֵי-מַיִם עַד-תִּכְלֹת אֹרֶךְ-הַנֶּשֶׁךְ – “He drew a boundary on the surface of the waters, At the extreme where light and darkness meet.”

- אֶרֶב – horizon
- As mentioned above, אֶרֶב is the boundary on the “surface of the waters... where light and darkness meet” (Job 26:10). In Job 22:14 שְׁמַיִם is “the circuit of heaven” around which God walks, and in Isaiah 40:22 וּגֹגֶת הָאֲרֶזֶץ is “the vault of earth.” All of these examples describe the space between the earth, the sky, and the water.

בְּאַמְצֵי שָׁחֳקִים מִמַּעַל

בְּעִזּוֹז עֵינֹתַי וְזֶם

28. When He made firm the clouds on high

When He strengthened the springs of the deep

- בְּאַמְצֵי שָׁחֳקִים – When He secured the clouds
- שָׁחֳקִים can be “dust,” “clouds of dust,” and also simply “clouds.” In Deuteronomy 33:26 שָׁחֳקִים is parallel with שָׁמַיִם, helping us to locate them (see also Isaiah 45:8; Jeremiah 51:9; Psalms 36:6; 57:11; 108:5; Job 35:5). In Job 38:37, the narrator asks: מִי יִשְׁכֵּב שָׁמַיִם, וְנִבֵּל שָׁחֳקִים בְּחִכְלָה; וְיִסְפֹּר שָׁחֳקִים בְּחִכְלָה – “Who can number the clouds by wisdom? Or who can pour out the bottles of heaven?” Equating שָׁחֳקִים with נְבִילֵי שָׁמַיִם “bottles of heaven” or “waterskins,” also helps to flesh out the image of שָׁחֳקִים as “clouds” not just “dust.”
- The imagery here is surprising. Firming wispy, fluffy clouds seems to be an impossible task for a mortal, and this description, therefore, emphasizes that God is capable of anything. This imagery also ties Proverbs 8:28 to the next verse, when God sets limits on the sea. Fox suggests that these seemingly

paradoxical statements represent the power of God in creation. Strengthening that which seems insubstantial and holding back that which seems uncontrollable (Fox 285).

- מַעֲזִיז – when He strengthened
- *HALOT* suggests reading this use of עֲזָז as “defiant,” similar to Psalm 9:20
 וּמָה יִהְיֶה, אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֵל שׁ; יִשְׁפֹּךְ וַיִּמָּחֶם, עַל-כָּנָךְ – “Rise O Eternal! Let not men have power; let the nations be judged in Your presence.” The people cannot defy God and “prevail” over the Eternal. This semantic range supports the imagery of God defying uncontrollable natural elements. Yet, I also wanted to maintain the parallel structure of this verse, and chose the more traditional translation of עֲזָז as “strengthened,” so that it matches “secured” in the first cola. In Job 37:6 – “He commands the snow: ‘Fall to the ground!’ And the downpour of rain, His mighty downpour of rain (וַיִּשְׁפֹּךְ מִטּוֹטְוֹתָיו).” Here, too, we find a “defiant” image, commanding nature, which obeys God’s commands.

בְּשׁוּמוֹ לַיָּם חֲקוֹ

וַיִּמָּחֶם לֹא יַעֲבֹרוּ־כֶּףּוֹ

כִּי וַיִּקְוֵה מוֹסְדֵי אֶרֶץ

29. When He set the sea to its limits

That the waters not transgress His command

When He fixed the foundations of the land.

- חֶקֶל – its limit
- חוק can be “law,” or it can mean a “portion” or “limit.” For instance, Job 14:5 – חֲרוּצִים, יָמָיו--מִסְפַּר-חֲדָשָׁיו אַתָּה: חֶקֶל עָשִׂיתָ, וְלֹא יַעֲבֹר אִם – “His days are determined; You know the number of his months; You have set him limits that he cannot pass.” God sets limits on a person’s life. Ezekiel 45:14 exemplifies the idea of חוק as an allotted portion: וְחֶקֶל הַשֶּׁמֶן הַבֵּית הַשֶּׁמֶן, – “while the due from the oil - the oil being measured.” So, too, in Proverbs 30:8, the speaker asks only for לֶחֶם חֲקִי, a daily food allotment.
- יַעֲבֹד וְיִפְּסֹוּ – transgress His command
- עבר can simply mean “to pass,” but it also can indicate a “transgression” or “overstep.” In Daniel 9:11 Israel’s transgression is associated with sin: וְכָל-יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר כְּתוּבָה “יִשְׂרָאֵל, עָבְדוּ אֶת-יְהוָה, וְיִפְּסוּ, וְיִבְלֹתוּ שֶׁ עָבְדוּ בְּקִלְדָּ; וְתַמְדָּ עָלֵינוּ הָאֵלֶּה וְהַשְׁבָּעָה, לַעֲשֹׂר כְּתוּבָה – “All Israel has violated Your teaching and gone astray, disobeying You; so the curse and the oath written in the Teaching of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured down upon us, for we have sinned against [God].” Job 14:5 describes the limits on one’s life set by God, which a human cannot overstep: חֲקֹו עָשִׂיתָ, וְלֹא יַעֲבֹר – “You have set him limits that he cannot pass.” In Numbers 22:18 Balaam explains to Balak’s advisors that he cannot contradict God’s command: לֹא אֹכֵל, לַעֲבֹר אֶת-פִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי, לַעֲזֹת – “I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of the Eternal my God.” Literally Balaam cannot overstep God’s “mouth (פִּי), but like this verse, the mouth is a metaphor for speech.

- יַעֲבֹד רַבּוֹ - transgress His command
- עבר can simply mean “to pass,” but it also can indicate a “transgression” or “overstep.” In Daniel 9:11 Israel’s transgression is associated with sin: וְכָל-וְהַשְׁבָּעָה, אֲשֶׁר כְּתוּבָהּ “יִשְׂרָאֵל, עָבַד אֶת-יְרֵמְיָה, וְיֹרָם, לְבַלְתָּ שׁוּעַ בְּקִלְדָּ; וַתִּמְדּוּ עָלֵינוּ הָאֱלֹהִים וְהַשְׁבָּעָה, אֲשֶׁר כְּתוּבָהּ.” “All Israel has violated Your teaching and gone astray, disobeying You; so the curse and the oath written in the Teaching of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured down upon us, for we have sinned against [God].” Job 14:5 describes the limits on one’s life set by God, which a human cannot overstep: וְלֹא יַעֲבֹר עֲשִׂיתָ, – “You have set him limits that he cannot pass.” In Numbers 22:18 Balaam explains to Balak’s advisors that he cannot contradict God’s command: לֹא אוּכַל, לַעֲבֹר אֶת-פִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי, לַעַז זֶה – “I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of the Eternal my God.” Literally Balaam cannot overstep God’s “mouth (פִּי), but like this verse, the mouth is a metaphor for speech.

- מוֹסְדֵי אֶרֶץ – foundations of the land
- This phrase is often part of a series of metaphors to demonstrate God’s power. For instance, in Psalm 82 the psalmist asks how long will judge the people so unfavorably, and in verse 5 adds: “They neither know nor understand, they go about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth totter (וְכָל-וּסְדֵי אֶרֶץ)”
In Jeremiah 31:37 God assures the people: “If the heavens above could be measured, and the foundations of the earth below could be fathomed (וַיִּחְקְרוּ) (מוֹסְדֵי-אֶרֶץ לְמֶטֶה), only then would I reject all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done.” Isaiah 24 predicts a time of terror when the “earth’s foundations tremble (וַיִּרְעָשׁוּ מוֹסְדֵי אֶרֶץ) (24:18) and the earth breaks and sways drunkenly, as God punishes all (vv. 19-21).

וְאֶהְיֶה אֶצְלוֹ אֱמוּן

וְאֶהְיֶה שְׂשׁוּעִים יוֹם יוֹם

מִשְׁחָקָת לִפְנֵי כָל-עַתָּה

30. And I was by Him, confidant

I was a delight daily

Rejoicing before Him at all times

- אֱמוּן – confidant
- There is incredible debate around how to understand אֱמוּן in this context. This is the only appearance of this word in the Bible, and it is unclear whether any other words are possibly related to אֱמוּן (*Even-Shoshan Qonqordanzia*). The debate around אֱמוּן centers around translation and interpretation, as well as the

theological implications of these interpretations. There are three common translations, which most scholars debate. The first is “artisan.” אָמֹן is usually a person skilled in crafts or an artist. For example, Jeremiah 52:15 describes when the craftsmen (הָאֲמֹנִים) were taken into exile by Nebuzaradan. This is a popular translation and interpretative possibility, and reflects later rabbinic interpretation. In his commentary for the *Jewish Study Bible*, for example, Fox connects this translation to a midrash from Genesis Rabbah in which God uses Wisdom (equated with Torah) as a tool in creation – like the blueprints for creation (Fox, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 1462). However, many people struggle with this interpretation theologically because, again, it makes Wisdom coeval with God, and implies a greater role for Wisdom in the work of creation than the previous verses indicate. The second possible translation is that of “ward,” “nursling,” or, as a verb, “growing up,” which Fox prefers. One can look to Lamentations 4:5 for textual support where הָאֲמֹנִים means “nourished,” and therefore אָמֹן might be one who is nourished or nursed. Fox suggests reading the root אָמַן in the infinitive, and he, therefore renders it as “growing up” (Fox 285). However, many people also disagree with this interpretation of the text. Without Fox’s reading of אָמֹן as an infinitive absolute, אָמֹן is a masculine word, and does not make sense as a description of Wisdom as a woman. The third traditional interpretation of אָמֹן is that of “constant(ly),” “faithful(ly)” or “confidant.” This translation assumes a relationship between אָמֹן and נֶאֱמַן, and there are early Greek and Latin translations of Proverbs, which attest to this usage (Fox 286). The *NJPS*

translation also prefers “confidant” for a translation of חֶסֶד, which focuses on the root of the word חָסַד meaning “loyal” or “faithful.” In Deuteronomy 32:20, God, for example, threatens to hide the holy countenance from the people for they are a “treacherous breed, children with no loyalty in them (חֶסֶד בָּנָם).” Alter, perhaps, favors this interpretation for its poetic charm, and he renders it as “intimate.” He writes: “Before there were creatures to occupy God’s attention, Wisdom was His delightful and entertaining bosom companion” (Alter 232).

- Two Christian commentators offer slightly different, but also compelling, readings of this line. Whybray suggests that one read חֶסֶד as a description of God, and not Wisdom. Therefore, the cola is: “And I was with him, [the] Creator” (Whybray 135-6). He argues that חֶסֶד is a “repointing” of חָסַד. In Song of Songs 7:2, the narrator says: “How lovely are your feet in sandals, O daughter of nobles! Your rounded thighs are like jewels, The work of a master's hand (מְעַשֵׂה יָדֵי אֲדָמָה).” He explains: “It may seem strange that none of the Versions or later exegetes interpreted the word as referring to God as Creator, but they, like modern exegetes, were faced with an unfamiliar and difficult word, which they naturally saw as connected in some way with the Hebrew *‘mn*, and attempted to find ways to relate to Wisdom’s **I was** rather than to **him**. Clifford, in comparison, offers a strong argument for an ancient Near East root for חֶסֶד. He believes it has ties to the Akkadian *ummānu*, which means “scribe,” “sage,” or “heavenly sage” (*HALOT*). “An *ummānu* is a divine or semi-divine bringer of culture and skill to the human race. The

figure is attested in Mesopotamian mythology and was known to Levantine scribes. The word was correctly rendered by the Greek recension but wrongly vocalized by the Masoretes” (Clifford 101). He adds that this reading is also faithful to the image of Wisdom, which we receive in this chapter and others where Wisdom personified appears. “Wisdom lives with God and in her role as sage brings to human beings the wisdom and culture they need to live rightly and serve God. Proverbs combines traditions of the heavenly mediator of wisdom with its own literary personification of Wisdom” (Clifford 101).

- I struggled with Fox and others reading of חֵכֶם as “nursling” or in the infinitive “growing up,” because this interpretation seems like a microaggression against Wisdom, minimizing her and her purpose, and equating her to a child. Reading חֵכֶם as an artist, or like the blueprints for creation, is an appealing rendering, and is in keeping with later rabbinic tradition on Wisdom. However, I chose “confidant,” like the *NJPS*, because it implies that Wisdom serves God, and offers advice, while also highlighting the “intimate,” to use Alter’s word, relationship between God and Wisdom, which the text illustrates. Wisdom, according to the previous verses, was there first, and kept God company throughout creation. Whether we are to see her as an inspiration, blueprints, or that she acted as a “sage” for God, it is impossible to tell, from what we can read in the text and from extrabiblical sources.

- שְׂעִשְׂעִים – delight
 - Though it causes much less debate than אָמֹן, the use of the masculine plural of שְׂעִשְׂעִים in this verse, offers some interpretative challenges. Some translators suggest an addition to the text, so that Wisdom is “[His] delight” (שְׂעִשְׂעִי), that is, she is God’s delight (Alter 232; Fox 287). Some, instead, highlight the chiasm in verses 30 and 31, and read שְׂעִשְׂעִים like שְׂעִשְׂעִי in 31 – so that both refer to the delight that Wisdom takes (Clifford 97). Clifford translates this chiasm as: “I was daily taking *delight*; *rejoicing* before him at all times” (8:30bc) “*rejoicing* in his inhabited world; I take *delight* in human beings” (8:31).
 - It is possible to read the verse through both interpretative lens, because we find similar uses in other sections of the Bible. In Isaiah 5:7 וְיִצְחָק וְיִשְׂרָאֵל refers to the tribe of Judah, which was “lovingly tended” by God, yet the psalmist of Psalm 119 declares God’s “teaching (תּוֹרַתְךָ)” (vv. 77, 92, 174), “decrees (צִוִּיֶּיךָ)” (v. 24), and “commandments (מִצְוֹתֶיךָ)” (v. 143) to be “my delight (שְׂעִשְׂעִי).” I chose to emphasize the chiastic structure of vv. 30-31 in my translation, and translated שְׂעִשְׂעִים as “took delight,” to highlight the importance of Wisdom’s relationship with both God and humanity.
 - It is also worth noting, that some scholars use שְׂעִשְׂעִים as further support for the rendering of אָמֹן as “nursling,” or “growing up,” because in Jeremiah 31:20 the prophet declares: “Truly, Ephraim is a dear son to Me, A child that is dandled (שְׂעִשְׂעִים יִלְדָּה)! Whenever I have turned against him, My thoughts would dwell on him still. That is why My heart yearns for him; I will receive

him back in love, declares the Eternal.” Other translations render this declaration as: “Is Ephraim my dear son? *Is he the child I delight in?*” (NRSV). Here, Ephraim is both a singular (יֶלֶד) and a plural (שְׂעִיִּים), similar to Wisdom in Proverbs 8:30. However, שְׂעִיִּים does not appear exclusively in verses about children, or babies, and the Jeremiah verse is the only one that draws this connection.

- מְשַׂחֵק – rejoicing
- In Proverbs 1, this root indicates mocking (v. 26), however in 8:30 שָׂחַק is in the *piel*, and is usually rendered as “playing” or “dancing.” For example, in 1 Chronicles 15:29 מְרַקֵּד is paired with מְשַׂחֵק as David celebrated the arrival of the Ark of the Covenant. So, too in 1 Chronicles 13:8, as the Israelites transport the Ark of God, they מְשַׂחֵקִים לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים - “danced before God” with musical instruments. In Jeremiah 15, the prophet declares: “I have not sat in the company of revelers (מְשַׂחֵקִים) And made merry (וְלֹא־עָלִיזָה)” (v. 17). I rendered מְשַׂחֵקֵת as “rejoicing,” (as did the *NJPS* for Proverbs 8:30-1), because “rejoicing” can incorporate “playing,” “dancing,” “merrymaking,” but also makes sense in both this verse and the next, where Wisdom also “rejoices” in the human world.

מְשַׂחֵקֵת בְּתוֹכָא אֶרֶץ

וְשְׂעִיִּים אֶת־בְּנֵי אָדָם

31. Rejoicing in His inhabited world,

Delighting in humanity

- בְּתִבְלָא אֶרֶץ – His inhabited world
- This phrase differs slightly from Proverbs 8:26, where they are in conjunction, rather than *s'michut*, and in this verse אֶרֶץ has a pronomial suffix. The only other time both words are paired together in a similar grammatical form is in Job 37:12 “He keeps turning events by His stratagems, That they might accomplish all that He commands them Throughout the inhabited earth (תִּבְלָא (אֶרֶץ).” Hence, the idiomatic rendering here: “His inhabited world.”
- וְשִׂשְׁשִׁי אֶת־בְּנֵי אָדָם – delighting in humanity
- This cola completes the chiasm, which begins in Proverbs 8:30.

וְעֵתָה בָּנִים שִׂמְחָה וְלִי

וְאֶשְׁרֵי דְרָכֵי יִשְׁמְחוּ

32. And now children listen to me;

Fortunate are those whose ways they keep

- אֶשְׁרֵי – fortunate
- אֶשְׁרֵי appears frequently in biblical poetry. For those who are familiar with Jewish liturgy, Psalm 84:5 famously begins “the Ashrei” in morning services: “Happy are those who dwell in Your house; they forever praise You. Selah.” Proverbs 3:13 states: אֶשְׁרֵי אָדָם, מְצָא חֵכְמָה; “Happy is the man who finds wisdom, The man who attains understanding,” which closely relates to the theme of the final section of Proverbs 8. Though these examples connect happiness to worship of God and finding wisdom, אֶשְׁרֵי can also refer to the forgiveness of sin (Psalm 32:2);

those who consider the “wretched” (Psalm 41:2); as well as those who are chosen by God (Psalm 65:5; Deuteronomy 33:29), to name a few. For that reason, I prefer “fortunate” for אֲשֶׁר־י, like Adele Berlin (see her commentary on Psalms in *The Jewish Study Bible*), instead of the more common “happy,” because it incorporates both ideas (“happiness” and “forgiveness of sin”).

שְׁמָעוּ וְסָר

וְחָכְמוּ וְאַל־תִּכְבְּרוּ

33. Hear my discipline,

And be wise, do not toss it aside

- חָכְמוּ – be wise
- חכם as a verb is common in Proverbs, and appears in a few other books of the Bible. For example, in Deuteronomy 32:29 Moses states: וְחָכְמוּ, יִשְׁכַּח לוֹ זֹאת; – “Were they wise, they would think upon this, Gain insight into their future.” Similarly, Job 32:9 asks rhetorically: “It is not the aged who are wise (לְאֲרֵבִים יִחְכְּמוּ), The elders, who understand how to judge.” Proverbs 19:20 suggests a similar path to wisdom as Proverbs 8:33 וְסָר וְקִבַּל וְשָׁמַע עֲצָה, “Listen to advice and accept discipline; In order that you may be wise in the end.”

אֲשֶׁרִי אָדָם שֹׁמֵר לִי

לְשָׂקֵד עַל־דַּלְתֵי יוֹם וָיוֹם

לְשֹׁמֵר מְזוֹנֹת פֶּתַחִי

34. Fortunate is the person who hears me

To watch over my doors daily

To keep the post of my portal

- אָדָם – the person
 - אָדָם is almost always rendered as “man,” when it does not refer to the first person, Adam. Yet, its use in biblical law, indicates a broader understanding, making the non-gendered “person” an acceptable translation. For example, Leviticus 13:2 describes the process for addressing a skin swelling: “When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration (אָדָם, כִּי־יִהְיֶה בּוֹ וֶרֶבֶשׁ וּשְׂאֵי אוֹ־סַפֵּחַ אוֹ בִּהְרֹת)”. Additionally, Numbers 19:14 states: “This is the ritual: When a person dies in a tent (וְזֶה אֲדָם כִּי־יָמוּת) (בְּאֶהֱלָה), whoever enters the tent and whoever is in the tent shall be unclean seven days.” Just as these laws refer to a “person,” in general, there is no reason to think that only men receive the benefit of listening to Wisdom. In her commentary on *Parashat B’reishit* in *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, Tamara Cohn Eskenazi explains that although translators often render אָדָם as “man,” the singular noun “stands here [Genesis 1:26] for a collective...It refers to humankind as a whole, including both females and males” (Eskenazi 7). She adds that older translations render אָדָם as “man,” meant in a gender-neutral sense, but this usage is often misunderstood and

“thereby misleading” (Eskenazi 7). Apart from the approximately thirty references to the first human, Adam and one as the progenitor of a lineage (see Joshua 14:15), אדם in the Bible is a generic term “employed when gender is germane” (Eskenazi 7).

- לְשָׂקֵד עַל־דַּלְתֹתַי / לְשָׁמֵר מְזוּזַת פֶּתְחִי – to watch over my doors.../to keep the post of my portal
- Though many interpreters propose that the actions of these cola hint at the actions of a suitor for Wisdom, it is also possible to read a protective note in the word choice of the second two cola of this verse. For example, Job 31:32 contains: וְיָבֹא לִקְבֹּרֹתִי וְעַל־גִּלְשִׁי יֵשֶׁן וְאֵין וָאֵין – “He is brought to the grave, While a watch is kept at his tomb.” Moreover, in Jeremiah 31:28 the Eternal declares: “and just as I was watchful over them (שָׁקֵדְתִּי עֲלֵיהֶם) to uproot and to pull down, to overthrow and to destroy and to bring disaster, so I will be watchful over them (בָּנוּ אֶשְׁקֵד עֲלֵיהֶם) to build and to plant.”

כִּי מִצָּאִי, מִצָּאִי (מִצָּאִי) חַיִּים;

וַיִּפְקֵד בְּיָוָה, מִיְהוָה

35. For those who find me, find life;

And obtain favor from the Eternal

- וַיִּפְקֵד בְּיָוָה, מִיְהוָה – obtain favor from the Eternal
- This phrase appears two more times in the book of Proverbs. 12:2 reads וְיִפְקֵד בְּיָוָה, מִיְהוָה; וְיִפְקֵד בְּיָוָה, מִיְהוָה – “A good person earns the favor of the Eternal, A person of intrigues, [God’s] condemnation,” and in 18:22 מִצָּאִי אֶשְׁקֵד,

מִיֵּהְנֶה – “The one who finds a wife has found happiness, And
 טוב; וַיִּפְקֶדָּהּ וְ, מִיֵּהְנֶה
 has won the favor of the Eternal.” It seems that one may obtain God’s favor
 through generic “goodness,” as well as finding happiness in marriage.

וְהָטָא חָמָס בְּפִשּׁוֹ

כָּל־מְשֻׁנְאֵי אָדָם יָמוּת

36. But the one who offends me, destroys the self,

And all who hate me, love death

- הָטָא – offends me
 - Some translations prefer “miss the mark” for חָטָא, but Proverbs 8 speaks of an intimate relationship with Wisdom, and so “offends me” highlights the personal nature of this affront. For instance, Genesis 40:1 uses חָטָא to describe the cupbearer’s and baker’s mistakes: “Some time later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt gave offense (חָטָא) to their lord, the king of Egypt.” Additionally, after receiving a scolding from God, Abimelech asks Abraham: “What have you done to us? What wrong have I done to you (וַיַּחֲזִיקֵנִי חָטָא) that you should bring so great a guilt upon me and my kingdom?” (Genesis 20:9). Reuben, too, equates חָטָא with personal harm: “Did I not tell you, ‘Do not wrong the boy?’ (אֵלֶיךָ חָטָא בְּיָלֶד) But you paid no heed.” (Genesis 42:22).
- חָמָס – destroys
 - חָמָס means to “treat violently” or “destroy.” For example: “I cry ‘Violence (חָמָס)! But am not answered; I shout, but can get no justice” (Job 19:7). חָמָס

can also hint at abuse, or degradation. For instance, in Lamentations 2:6, we read: “He has stripped His Booth like a garden (וַיִּהְיֶה כְּגַן שָׂשׁ; שָׁחַת מִעַץ).” God “strips” the tabernacle, using *הסמס* as the verb. Similarly, in Ezekiel 22:26, the “priests have violated (כִּהְיוּ הָהָרָקִים חֲמָסִין)” God’s teaching, and have profaned that which is sacred to God. Again, we see the reciprocal nature of Wisdom. Those who offend her, cause personal harm to themselves.

Analysis of Proverbs 8

Proverbs 8 presents Wisdom's second well-designed speech. Much longer than her speech at the end of Proverbs 1, in Chapter 8, Wisdom extols her virtues, and describes her beginnings. Her rhetoric and style demonstrate her value. She speaks from a unique place of power, both physically out in public, and metaphorically as the source of power. However, the thing that most distinguishes this speech from her previous one is the way it both subtly and explicitly emphasizes Wisdom's relationship to God. Through language, choice, place, and style, this theme ties together this chapter of Proverbs.

We can find several places where Wisdom's word choice draws connections with other biblical books. In section IV (vv. 14 – 16), for example, the language is similar to that of Isaiah 11:2 and Job 12:13, drawing a connection between Wisdom's power and that of God's. Whybray explains:

In Isaiah 11:2 'the Spirit of the Lord..., the spirit of wisdom and understanding (*bînāh*), the spirit of counsel and might (*'ēṣāh ûgēbûrāh*), the spirit of knowledge (*da'at*) and the fear of the Lord" are the attributes of the future ideal Israelite king, bestowed on him by God; in Job 12:13 it is God himself to whom are attributed wisdom, might (*gēbûrāh*), counsel and understanding (*'ēṣāh ûtēbûnāh*). Here, in Proverbs 8:14 it is Wisdom who claims to possess counsel (*'ēṣāh*) and sound wisdom (*tûṣiyyāh*), insight (*bînāh*) and strength (*gēbûrāh*).³⁴

This employment of identical terms calls attention to the content of Isaiah 11:12 and Job 12:13. It appears, from these passages, that the terms from above were terms primarily applied to God, and secondarily to kings, who presumably rule in God's name. This also offers insight into Proverbs 8:14-15. Here, Wisdom claims to be the source of power and

³⁴ Whybray, *Proverbs*, 124-5.

might through which rulers and sovereigns reign. Similarly, we find language in Psalm 90:2 reflected in Proverbs 8:23-25. In Psalm 90:2, the psalmist declares: בְּטָרָם, הָרִים יֵלְדוּ – “Before the mountains came into being, before You brought forth the earth and the world; from eternity to eternity You are God.” The mirrored language between Psalm 90 and Proverbs 8, draws the reader’s attention to the language that is not the same. Psalm 90 traces God’s roots to before these acts of creation, but Proverbs 8 also emphasizes that Wisdom predates those actions. Because she predated creation, like God, it is possible to read Proverbs 8:23-25 as an emphasis of Wisdom’s special relationship with God – they were the only ones first who existed.

Where Wisdom speaks also plays an important role in her message. In the first section of her speech, Wisdom cries out from several different locations. She calls out from atop heights, at crossroads, and along the city wall (Proverbs 8:1-3). Fox offers a commentary on this variety of locations:

If these identifications of locations are correct, Lady Wisdom is not delivering her speech in a single spot. Rather, she preaches in two distinct areas of similar character: at the high places within the city, whence the lanes branch out, and outside the city wall, at the entrance to the gates. [...] This means that the chapter is describing not a unique incident or sequence of events but an ongoing, typical occurrence. The scene and events are atemporal: Wisdom addresses mankind in all cities, insides and outside the city walls, in high places and low grounds, repeatedly and forever.³⁵

Wisdom chooses the busiest places for her speech. She stands amidst the hustle and bustle of politics and commerce to reach people where they are.

³⁵ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 267.

Perhaps the most compelling part of Wisdom's speech, and indeed the most debated section of Proverbs 8, is the description of Wisdom's beginnings in verses 22 –

31. Stylistically this section is different from the others parts of Proverbs 8. Alter explains the difference between this sections and the verses that precede it:

Although Lady Wisdom is still speaking, the section from here, through verse 31 looks like a new poem or, at the very least, a distinct new segment of the same poem. The speech from verse 1 through verse 21 is a celebration by Wisdom of her powers... [And] it must be said that much of the poetry of this section deploys boilerplate language, echoing quite similar formulations – or even formulas – that one encounters elsewhere in Proverbs. The poem that begins with verse 22 has a cosmic framework rather than a pragmatic one: Lady Wisdom's self-celebration goes back to the role she plays as god's intimate before He launched on the work of creation. [...] This cosmic vision, moreover, is articulated in soaring poetry that seems quite unlike the poetry of the preceding section.³⁶

Just as her words remind the reader of Wisdom's special role and relationship with God, so does the tone and style of this poem within a poem. Wisdom's "soaring poetry" echoes the incredible descriptions of creation in Genesis and Psalms, and lends importance to her role as the first of creation.

For some, these literary clues connecting Wisdom to God poses a theological dilemma. Leaving people to wonder at a personified Wisdom's purpose. Are we meant to understand her as God's cosmic partner (romantic or otherwise), others are strongly invested in separating Wisdom from God. I believe much of this theological concern stems from questions of gender and the issue of Wisdom's power relative to God. In the next chapter, I will explore personified Wisdom through a feminist lens, in an attempt to address some of these theological questions and concerns.

³⁶ Alter, *Wisdom Literature*, 230.

Chapter 4: Reading Personified Wisdom Through a Feminist Lens

In her Proverbs commentary, Christine Roy Yoder describes personified Wisdom as “breathtakingly complex.” Yoder explains: “She speaks as God, or a prophet, taking her stand in the busiest places of the city in the thick of everyday bustle and calling out to the naïve, scoffers, and fools to heed her instruction. She is a teacher who promises to reveal all that she knows, all that she is, and provide generously for those who seek her.”³⁷ For some scholars, the personified Wisdom of Proverbs represents a goddess-like deity, who is reminiscent of contemporary ancient Near Eastern goddesses of knowledge, Ma’at or Isis.³⁸ For others, she represents a go-between, mediating between God and the people.³⁹ Still others see her as God’s partner, or something akin to God in her own right, as she uses powerful God-like or prophetic speech.⁴⁰ Through each of these interpretations, Wisdom is a symbol of feminine power in Proverbs. We may not be able to understand the original intent behind the presentation of Wisdom personified as a woman in Proverbs. However, through a feminist reading of the texts where Wisdom appears, we see that she offers new ways of thinking about both ancient Israelite religion, as well as modern interpretations of theology.

³⁷ Christine Roy Yoder, “Proverbs,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, et al. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 236.

³⁸ Roland E. Murphy, “Wisdom and Creation,” in *Wisdom and Psalms: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner, et al. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 39.

³⁹ Silvia Schroer, “Wise and Counseling Women in Ancient Israel: Literary and Historical Ideals of the Personified *HOKMA*,” in *The Feminist Companion to the Bible: A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 81.

⁴⁰ See Schroer, Lang, and Baumann

In this chapter I will first explain what I mean when I suggest a feminist reading of Wisdom. I will then present and consider the most common topics of interest and importance for scholars who wish to read Wisdom this way, offering textual examples from Wisdom's speeches and appearances in Proverbs 1–9. Finally, in the conclusion, I will offer my own understanding of personified Wisdom and the important role she plays in my own women-centered reading of the Bible.

Why a Feminist Reading of Personified Wisdom?

It is no secret that there are very few women's voices in the Bible. Women characters in the Bible are few and far between in comparison to male characters. Even named female characters are sometimes silent objects upon whom actions happen, rather than subjects acting on the world around them. For young girls and women reading the Bible, one must carefully search for female voices and active female role models. Additionally, for many, many generations, men have controlled both the realms of biblical interpretation and biblical scholarship. These male-dominated readings and interpretations of the Bible were taken as the "universal" reading, leaving little, or no, room for alternative interpretative or scholarly viewpoints.

In the case of wisdom literature, this homogeneity in perspective led to a reading of wisdom literature through only one lens. In her introduction to the *Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature*, Athalya Brenner explains that the traditional reading of wisdom was a male one. As a result of a confusion between author, narrator, and textual speaker, most scholarly treatments of wisdom assumed a male speaker. She adds:

Until recent years, scholars tended to describe the so-called 'wisdom literature' of the Hebrew Bible as the domain of the hypothetical 'wise':

males, urban, elders in role if not in age. The speaker-in-the-text was conceived of as a male ‘teacher,’ perhaps within a formal framework. Such a framework entails a certain amount of literacy, at the very least, and an urban, relatively affluent setting. The addressee was described as a (young) male in need of education in the ways of life and *savoir-faire*. The relationship between the two, following many such discourses in Proverbs, was understood as typically that of *metaphorical* ‘father’ and ‘son’: the addressed ‘sons’ was taken to be not a kin term, but a derived term.⁴¹

Of course, considering the scope of this project, presuming only male speakers throughout wisdom literature demonstrates a surprising blindness to alternative voices within the Hebrew text. Therefore, this chapter places an emphasis on a feminist reading of Wisdom, who is indeed personified as a woman throughout Proverbs.

Brenner presents a possible understanding of what a feminist reading of the Bible looks like in the introduction to the *Feminist Companion to Song of Songs*, the first book in the series of feminist companions, which she edited in the late twentieth century. Brenner argues that society influences our reading, and as a result, we read the Bible through the patriarchal framework, which dominates societal norms.⁴² Feminist critique of biblical text and interpretation considers both female types and stereotypes of femininity as well as the literary and social structures which “underlie the texts.”⁴³

My goal in this chapter is to bring to light a female voice in wisdom literature, which Brenner described as part of a “suppressed, submerged or silenced trace of women’s traditions.”⁴⁴ Personified Wisdom speaks as a woman in a male society. Even

⁴¹ Athalya Brenner, “Introduction,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Bible: Wisdom Literature*, ed. Athalya Brenner, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 12.

⁴² Athalya Brenner, “On Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Feminist Woman: Introduction to the Series,” in *A Feminist Companion to Song of Songs*, ed. Athalya Brenner, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press: 1993), 12.

⁴³ Brenner, “On Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Feminist Woman,” 17.

⁴⁴ Athalya Brenner, “Introduction,” 12

at times when she is not her own narrator, she represents a source of support and connection for humanity. If one only looks to the canonical texts associated with the Jewish calendar, one might miss Wisdom's counsel, her story, and her striking speeches which are tucked away in Proverbs. This chapter, then, is an opportunity to feature her words and her being, as well as explore some of the interpretative and scholarly possibilities surrounding a female Wisdom in the Bible.

Acquiring Wisdom

In her speeches, Wisdom speaks to the public in the first person. She is proud and powerful, demanding the reader's attention and listener's consideration. However, there is another type of literature in Proverbs which features a personified Wisdom, one which focuses on the acquisition of Wisdom. In these sections, Wisdom is still personified as a woman, but she is the object of another's advice rather than the subject of her own speeches. Part of my textual analysis focused on one such example of these interludes: Proverbs 4:1-9.⁴⁵ When comparing these different styles of personification, one might dismiss Proverbs 4, and other sections like it, because Wisdom does not speak for herself. However, that dismissal is premature. Of course, Wisdom as narrator is a distinguishing feature of Proverbs 1:20-33 and 8, Proverbs 4:1-9 presents another image of personified Wisdom. The narrator of Proverbs 4 describes Wisdom through the lens of marriage or partnership, which, as I will demonstrate, Israelite readers of Proverbs would find familiar and relatable, while still emphasizing her importance and value.

⁴⁵ See chapter 2.

In Proverbs 4 the narrator is a parent offering advice to an audience of juniors, perhaps children, about how to live life. In verse 5, the narrator introduces the idea of acquiring Wisdom: קְנֵה חִכְמָה, קְנֵה בִינָה; אַל-תִּשְׁכַּח וְאַל-תֵּט, מֵאֲמָרֵי-פִי – “Acquire Wisdom, acquire Discernment; Do not forget, and do not turn from the words of my mouth.” The speaker adds: אַל-תַּעֲזֹבֶהּ וְתִשְׁמְרֶהָ אֶהְיֶה וְתִצָּרֶךָ – “Do not forsake her, and she will guard you; Love her and she will keep you” (4:6).⁴⁶ Here, the narrator presents an image of Wisdom that is in similar to some of the ways that Wisdom presents herself. For example, in Proverbs 8:17, Wisdom declares to her followers “I love those who love me; and those who seek me, find me.” The parent promises the learners protection and support from Wisdom; and Wisdom promises reciprocal love to her followers.

There are also intertextual connections between Proverbs 4 and Wisdom’s speech in Proverbs 8, indicating that Wisdom as object and Wisdom as subject are not so very different. The parent of Proverbs 4:7 explains: “The beginning (רִ' שִׁית) of wisdom is acquire (קְנֵה) wisdom, and with all your acquisitions, acquire discernment.” Similarly, we have Wisdom’s description of her own beginnings: יְהוָה-קִנֵּנִי, רִ' שִׁית דָּר ו': קִדְם מִפְעֻלָּיו מֵאָז: - “The Eternal created me, beginning of His way; earliest of His works of old” (8:22). The use of רִ' שִׁית and the root קנה tie these verses together, and draw the reader’s attention to both versions of Wisdom’s beginnings.

From a feminist perspective, one might feel uncomfortable with the imagery of acquisition, associating it with patriarchal assumptions surrounding the institution of marriage. However, scholarship suggests that the imagery of love and acquisition in

⁴⁶ In this chapter, all translations of Proverbs 1:20 -33; 4:1-9; 8:1-36 are my own, and all other biblical quotes are from the *NJPS* translation, unless otherwise noted.

these sections is intentional on the part of the compiler of Proverbs, and serves as a tool to create an image of Wisdom tied to home as a center of power and stability. Camp explains the socio-cultural context of Proverbs was one of transition and upheaval, as the locus of power in post-exilic Israelite society moved from the king to the family.⁴⁷ She argues that the love language in Proverbs 4 contributes “to the symbolic efficacy of Personified Wisdom.”⁴⁸ d Wisdom acts as a mediator between humanity and God, where one demonstrates one’s obedience to God through obedience to the beloved Wisdom.⁴⁹ Therefore, the love language in Proverbs 4:6-9, serves as a tool to help humanity relate to its complex relationship with God. The language of acquisition takes an abstract concept, like covenant, and transforms it into one that people understand – partnership between one person and another. For Camp, Wisdom synthesizes certain aspects of the “human experience of love” with “religious identification... in a manner peculiarly relevant to the post-exilic age.”⁵⁰ Additionally, she argues that even when Wisdom does not speak for herself she serves as something akin a religious symbol. She writes:

She [Wisdom] formulates a basic congruence between a particular style of life (the ethos) and a specific (in this case explicit) perception of reality (the world view), sustaining each with the borrowed authority of the other. Although legitimation of female authority is not the only, nor even the primary, purpose of the wisdom poems, they cannot affect their primary purpose – viz., the establishment of Wisdom’s capacity to mediate God’s blessings to humans – without the assumption of that authority which they in turn, if only secondarily, support. One might ask at this point, ‘why female imagery?’...In Israel, as in many cultures, the work of women provided the impetus and direction for the ‘everyday,’ and, indeed, may be seen to embody it.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, (Sheffield: Almond, 1985), 274.

⁴⁸ Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, 275.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 276.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 278.

⁵¹ Ibid., 264-5.

In acquiring Wisdom, humanity has an opportunity to access God's blessings, as Camp suggests. Furthermore, Wisdom, in representing the "every day," makes God's blessings that much more accessible to humanity. She does not offer a far-off form of support from the heavens, instead she is in the home, and her protection is easily attained by those who protect her.

Wisdom's Speeches and a Position of Authority

In Proverbs 8 and 1:20-33, we find Wisdom operating from a position of power, demonstrating her dominion over others, including kings and nobles. Her words themselves are powerful; and she presents herself in parallel comparison with others who represent authority, like fathers, teachers, and prophets. Moreover, it is her agency in her speech which demonstrates her power: she speaks to humanity, and she demands that humanity follow her instruction.

Wisdom declares that through her just governance is possible. In Proverbs 8:14-16 she states: "Mine are counsel and competence, I am Understanding, mine is might. / Through me sovereigns reign, and leaders decree righteous laws. / Through me rulers rule, and nobles, all the judges of the earth." In the first person, female voice, Wisdom speaks with agency, in comparison to the (male) sovereigns, rulers, leaders, and judges, who receive her "counsel and competence." Furthermore, Wisdom's power is described as גְּיוֹרָה. Though it does not appear exclusively in relation to God, גִּבּוֹר often describes God's power and might (see Psalms 21:14, 54:3, 65:7, 71:18, and 145:11 for just a few examples of this). We also see in this passage that the female Wisdom not only has power over powerful men, but she uses her might to influence just governance. Wisdom

is, in fact, a vessel of just leadership and righteous power. Some commentators even draw a connection between this section and two other biblical passages: Isaiah 11:2 and Job 12:13. In Isaiah 11:2, the prophet describes the future ruler of Israel, from the Davidic line, upon whom God's spirit will land. "A spirit of wisdom and insight (רוּחַ חָכְמָה), A spirit of counsel and valor (רוּחַ יִצְהָר וְיָדָה), A spirit of devotion and reverence for the Eternal." Job 12:13, 17-19 uses similar language as a way to emphasize God's power over rulers. It reads: "With Him are wisdom and courage; His are counsel and understanding," then in vv. 17-19 God holds that power over rulers and kings, to bend them to the divine will. Whybray, for one, draws connections between Wisdom's speech, and the passages in Job and Isaiah to associate Wisdom with God's spirit and ruler ship. However, Wisdom's counsel does not debase rulers nor bend them to her will; rather, through her they improve.

It is not only in governmental institutions that Wisdom displays her power. Wisdom also offers a counterimage to the father narrator of Proverbs 1-9, and thereby takes on the role of the authority figure in the broader community, as well. For example, in Proverbs 1, the father offers advice to his son, "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction; neglect not your mother's teaching, / for they are a graceful garland for your head, and a necklace for your throat" (vv. 8-9). In her speech, later in that chapter, Wisdom declares in the streets and broad places, "How long, simple ones, will you love simplicity; And scorners lust scorn; and fools hate knowledge / Turn back to my rebuke; See I will pour out to you my spirit; I will make known my words to you" (Proverbs 1:22-3). Like the father, Wisdom calls out to her listeners and advises them to heed her teachings. In contrast to the father, though, Wisdom's audience is not one child, but a

plurality of listeners. She not only occupies the same role as the father – as a teacher offering reproof – but Wisdom takes on a greater role of authority teaching the many rather than the few.

In her study of patriarchal wisdom in Proverbs 1-9, Carol Newsom considers personified Wisdom as a counterpoint to all displays of masculine power and authority throughout this text. She explains:

Hokmot (personified wisdom) is an extension of the cultural voice that speaks through the father can be seen in the complementary authoritative position she occupies. Where the father is the authoritative voice in the family, *Hokmot* is the corresponding voice ('in the streets,' 'in the public areas,' v. 20) who occupies places that are physically symbolic of authority and power ('at the entrances of the gates,' v. 21).⁵²

Newsom expands her analysis, suggesting that it is not only the size of Wisdom's audience that demonstrates her power, but also where she offers these interludes. Though the father's lectures are not placed in any specific location, his audience (that is, his children) hints at the idea that his are private lessons. For example, in Proverbs 4:3 the father begins his lecture: "For once I was a son to my father, tender and the only one before my mother." The father's language highlights that his story is an intimate one, not meant for public consumption. Wisdom's authority not only stems from who she speaks to, but where. Personified Wisdom calls out to people in public arenas, like the kings and nobles she advises.

Wisdom also demonstrates her authority in her speeches, which distinguishes her from other biblical characters. Newsom adds:

⁵² Carol A Newsom, "Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, ed. Alice Bach (New York: Routledge, 1999), 88.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the text is that it posits a past to the relationship between *Hokmot* and the reader. Her first words are: ‘How long will you...’ (Proverbs 1:22). The reader’s subjectivity is furnished not only with a past but with a guilty one. As one who is “naïve,” “cocky,” and “complacent” (v. 22), he has refused advice and correction.⁵³

In this relationship, Wisdom acts and speaks, while the readers receive her advice. Like rulers, whose ability to rule justly depends on her, Wisdom directs the fates of those who listen to her. For example, those who follow her instruction receive riches (Prov. 8:10, 19); and they are guaranteed a long and favorable life. She is the actor in this relationship, the one able to bestow this largesse. While some women in biblical stories are subjects and many others are objects, when Wisdom gives forth her voice, she is both the agent of action on others’ lives, as well as her own narrator.

Further illustrating her independence and power, in the beginning of both of her speeches, Wisdom places herself in the public domain. In Proverbs 1 she is “in the streets” and “plazas,” “at the head of bustling crossroads,” and “the entrances to the gates of the city” (vv. 20 – 21). Then in Proverbs 8, Wisdom calls out from the highest heights, so that her voice carries across the expanse (v. 2). She goes down to the gates of the city, “at the portals” of commerce and politics she cries aloud (v. 3). In his commentary, Fox offers this compelling read of the import of these locations:

Wisdom...delivers her message where the competition is fiercest, not competition from other orators but from the everyday distractions of business, politics, and disputes. Far from being esoteric or academic, Wisdom plunges into the midst of this hustle and bustle to reach people where *they* are.⁵⁴

⁵³ Newsom, “Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom,” 88.

⁵⁴ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 267.

Wisdom functions like a good politician or leader, bringing her message to the people. She calls out to her audience in the public squares and atop the heights to make her message accessible, so no one is excluded.

Wisdom as a Prophet

This public forum for Wisdom also connects her to the prophets. For instance, at the beginning of Chapter 8 we find: “Listen! Is it not Wisdom calling, Good Sense raising her voice. / Atop the heights near the road, at the crossroads she takes her stand” (vv. 1-2). This description mirrors God’s instructions to Isaiah to call out to the people on their fast day: “Cry with full throat, without restraint; Raise your voice like a ram’s horn!” (Isaiah 58:1). Moreover, in both declarations we find the root קרא and the word קול, which emphasizes the connection between these verses. As if she was a prophet, Wisdom calls out to the people with a divine message – a reminder to the people to acquire her, and do what is expected of them. Also in Proverbs 8, Wisdom stands atop heights to spread her message. We see similar tactics in Ezekiel 20 and 34, where the prophet delivers God’s message from the mountains to reach the people. Through these strategies, Wisdom highlights her position of power, urging people to heed her call.

Besides the location of her call to the public, the language Wisdom uses also draws connections to that of the prophets. For example, Fox and Scott Harris both write about the intertextual references between Wisdom’s speech in Proverbs 1 and the prophet Jeremiah. Fox compares Proverbs 1:26-31 to Jeremiah 11:11, demonstrating Wisdom’s use of prophetic language. Harris also presents a detailed analysis of this innerbiblical

relationship, cataloging each word in Proverbs 1:20-33 that also appears in Jeremiah 7.⁵⁵ From these comparisons to the prophetic books we can see the similarities between the prophets and Wisdom's rebuke of those who ignore her call: "Then they will call me (וְקָרְאוּ לִי), but I will not answer (וְלֹא אֶעֱנֶה); they will seek me, but they will not find me" (Prov. 1:28). Jeremiah, in comparison, warns the people: "And now, because you do all these things – declares the Eternal – and though I spoke to you persistently, you would not listen; and though I called to you (וְקָרָאתִי אֲתֶכֶם), you would not respond (וְלֹא תֵעֲנִיתֶם)" (Jeremiah 7:13). Wisdom, like Jeremiah, refuses to hear people's cries when disaster befalls them, even if they cry out.⁵⁶ Ignoring Wisdom comes with terrible consequences. Considering the example from Jeremiah 7:13, Wisdom leaves those who do not answer her call to their self-destruction.

Additionally, Wisdom employs rhetorical tools, like the prophets, to strengthen the impact of her words. Proverbs 8:1 contains the rhetorical phrase: לֹא (‘‘does not’’). The prophets also frequently use the negative question form לֹא־כֵן as a form of emphasis (see Ezekiel 17:12; Jeremiah 26:19; Isaiah 44:8 for just a few examples of their use of this rhetorical tool).⁵⁷ In Proverbs 8:1 the negative question form draws the attention of Wisdom's listeners, as if she demands our focus. Wisdom's use of similar language and rhetorical tools as the prophets highlights her agency, and positions her like a prophet as one who acts as an intermediary between God and the people (a significant position of power).

⁵⁵ Scott L. Harris, *Proverbs 1-9: A Study of Inner-Biblical Interpretation*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 94.

⁵⁶ Harris, *Proverbs 1-9*, 95.

⁵⁷ For more on this topic, see chapter three.

Wisdom and Creation

As I mentioned in my annotated translation, Wisdom's association with creation is controversial. In Proverbs 8:22-31, Wisdom describes her own creation, and her predating the rest of the creation of the world. For many, Wisdom derives much of her authority from her association with and actions during creation. Still others are uncomfortable with this association, which they fear poses a theological problem, presenting Wisdom as coeval with God. Though I acknowledge this theological difficulty, my interest in this feminist reading of Wisdom is text-based and not theological. Instead, I choose to consider the potential that a female Wisdom, present for creation, offers a reader searching for powerful women's voices in the Bible.

Most of Wisdom's description of her own beginnings draw parallels to the creation story in Genesis 1 and 4. She emphasizes her preeminence in creation, by drawing the reader's attention to other well-known creation narratives. In Proverbs 8:22 Wisdom states: *יְהוָה--קִנְנִי, ר' שִׁית דָּר ו': קִדְם מִפְּעֻלֵּי מָאָז* – “The Eternal created me, beginning of His way; earliest of His works of old.” Not only does Wisdom claim her status as the first of God's creations, but her language draws a direct line between her own creation and that of the creation story of Genesis. The woman in Genesis 4:1 names her first child Cain, because *אֶת-יְהוָה שָׁ אֲקָנִיתִי* – “I acquired a man with the help of the Eternal.” The writer of Proverbs 8 uses these closely linked words to recall the famous birth of Cain, and thereby ties Wisdom's beginnings even more closely to those of Genesis. Furthermore, in Proverbs 8:24, Wisdom claims her birth preceded even the *תְּהוֹ* – the deep. We find in Genesis 1:2 that the *תְּהוֹ* existed before God began to form the world: *וְהָאֲרֶץ הָיְתָה תִּוָּ וְיָבִיחַ וְחָשָׁךְ עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים* – “the earth being

unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water.”

Later in this section, Wisdom emphasizes her predating the creation of the world. She lists: “When He prepared the heavens, there I was; when He inscribed the horizon on the deep. When He firmed the clouds on high; when He strengthened the springs of the deep. When he set the sea to its limits, that the waters not transgress His command” (Proverbs 8:27-9). Maxine Hancock suggests that Wisdom’s presence at the creation of the world indicates not only an intimate relationship with God, but the principle by which God created the world. She adds: “Not only is she the means by which humanity fears the Eternal, but she is also the means by which the universe is structured. By implication, those who find her and live by her align themselves to that same order, finding peace and tranquility.”⁵⁸ Hancock implies that there is a relationship between a peaceful life and finding Wisdom in creation. By observing her role in creation, one improves one’s existence. Fox takes this idea even further, noting that just as creation highlights God’s power in the world, this section of Wisdom’s speech underscores “Wisdom’s presence throughout creation thus to celebrate her preeminence.”⁵⁹

The poetic structure of this section also celebrates Wisdom’s preeminence. Beginning in the second cola of Proverbs 8:30-31 we find a chiasm. Wisdom concludes the description of her beginnings, highlighting two specific words: שׁעשׂע and מִשְׁחֶק. In her speech she states: “I was a **delight** (שׁעֲשִׂיעִים) daily; **rejoicing** (מִשְׁחֶקָה) before Him at all times. / **Rejoicing** (מִשְׁחֶקָה) in His inhabited world; **delighting** (שׁעֲשִׂיעִי) in humanity.”

⁵⁸ Maxine Hancock, “Proverbs,” in *The IVP Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Catherine Clark Kroeger, Mary J. Evans. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 329.

⁵⁹ Fox, *Proverbs*, 281.

(Prov. 8:30-31). In her analysis of personified Wisdom, Camp offers this commentary on the above chiasm:

Not only the context of the poem but the structure itself 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. Without going into full review of the literary arguments, one can see the point clearly in the chiastic structure of 8.30b-31 'I was his delight day after day playing before him continually playing in his inhabited world and my delight was with humankind.' The first stich presents *Wisdom* as *Yahweh's* 'delight' the final stich says that her 'delight' was with *humankind*. The middle two stichs correspond to this movement from the divine realm to the human: Wisdom 'plays' both *before him* and *in his inhabited world*. In this poem, Wisdom is the only link between God and humans. They are not even part of the act of creation that is portrayed here.⁶⁰

The poetic structure of Proverbs 8:30-31 mimics Wisdom's role as a mediator between God and humanity. She acts as a delight for both, and is delighted by both. She rejoices before the Creator, and rejoices for the created world, and in doing so, she brings God and humans into closer connection with one another.

Hancock and Camp both mention the role that Wisdom plays in creation, though the text itself is unclear about the nature of that role. Much of this confusion centers around Proverbs 8:30. The Hebrew reads: וְאֶתֵּן אֶת־חַיִּי אֶל־יְהוָה, which I translate as: "And I was by Him, confidant."⁶¹ As a confidant, Wisdom was present for creation, by God's side (which we see in 8:22-30), though it does not indicate what, if any, purpose Wisdom may have served in creation.⁶²

⁶⁰ Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, 272.

⁶¹ I briefly summarize the interpretative possibilities, and debate around translation of אֶתֵּן in chapter three.

⁶² This translation intentionally leaves further details of her role in creation as vague and unclear, in keeping with the struggles one has in translating it.

Many interpreters express discomfort with certain translations of אִמּוֹן, especially translations, which place Wisdom in a position of authority or as a contemporary of God. For example, אִמּוֹן has the same root letters as אֹמֵן, or artist. However, if one renders אִמּוֹן as “artisan,” that implies that Wisdom aided God in creation. Fox demonstrates a strong desire to infantilize the female Wisdom, translating אִמּוֹן as “nursling.”⁶³ He further diminishes Wisdom’s perceived power or importance by declaring her a derivation of Yahweh and therefore subordinate, as well as emphasizing that because Wisdom “did not exist from eternity. Wisdom is therefore an accidental attribute of godhead, not an essential or inherent one.”⁶⁴ Rabbis Kravitz and Olitzky, in their modern commentary on Proverbs, also discourage their readers from viewing Wisdom through an empowered lens or considering her God’s partner.⁶⁵ I rejected these critiques as microaggressions against Wisdom in my annotated translation, and I present them here in order to demonstrate the importance of reading Wisdom as a woman, who embraces the idea of a female presence during creation.

Wisdom as a Representation of Goddess

Chiefly because of her claims to the creation story, much has been written about personified Wisdom and her standing as a transcendent being. Scholars consider her closeness to God, her God-like speech, her authority in the divine realm, and also her roots as either a remnant of goddess-worship, or an Israelite interpretation of

⁶³ Fox, *Proverbs*, 285.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 279.

⁶⁵ Leonard S. Kravitz and Kerry M. Olitzky, *Mishlei: A Modern Commentary*, (New York: UAH Press, 2002), 86.

contemporary ancient Near East goddesses. Though it is impossible to know for sure of personified Wisdom's roots in Proverbs 1-9, or the biblical authors' intent with presenting her as such a transcendent being, by considering these multiple interpretations, it is possible to use a feminist lens to evaluate her divine status and actions in Proverbs 1-9.

Bernhard Lang claims to see a relationship between goddesses of the ancient Near East and personified Wisdom of Proverbs. He draws connections between the language in Wisdom's speeches to Ishtar and Ma'at. For example, Ishtar's subtitle is "she who gives scepter, throne, and royal power to every king," which we might associate with Wisdom's claim that rulers and sovereigns rule through her (Prov. 8:15-16).⁶⁶ Ma'at is responsible for cosmic order, social harmony, justice, and truth, whereas Wisdom asserts that she is the source of justice and fair rule (Prov. 8:18, 20).⁶⁷ Lang also suggests that it is possible to read Wisdom's role as God's confidant and delight in Proverbs 8:30-31 as an allusion to Athirat, the Ugaritic god, El's, consort. He posits: "Athirat, is well known from Ugaritic texts as 'mother of the gods' or 'creatrix of the gods.' She may indeed be Wisdom's mother."⁶⁸ The possibility of reading Wisdom as a product of an ancient Near Eastern goddess, or a vestige of ancient Israelite religion, which recognized both God and Goddess before monotheism completely took over, appeals to feminist readers searching for an alternative to the image of one all-powerful, (traditionally) male God.⁶⁹ Reading

⁶⁶ Bernhard Lang, *Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs: An Israelite Goddess Redefined*, (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1985), 60.

⁶⁷ Lang, *Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs*, 60.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 64.

⁶⁹ Of course, there are many ways to imagine God and many metaphors for God throughout the Bible, which offer readers alternative images for God. Yet, the image of God as male persists.

personified Wisdom through this lens, allows one to imagine the possibility of a female God, as well.

Yet, a vision of Wisdom as merely a consort to God feels limiting from a feminist perspective, and does not take into account the active role Wisdom takes in Proverbs. The power Wisdom possesses is especially clear in her use of God-style language. In her interludes in Chapters 1 and 8, Wisdom makes promises of blessings for those who follow her counsel, and curses for those who do not. In Proverbs 8:17-21 she promises:

I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me.
Riches and honor are with me; Enduring wealth and righteousness.
My fruit is better than gold, fine gold, and my produce than choice silver.
Upon the paths of righteousness I walk; within the paths of justice.
To endow those who love me, and their treasures I will fill.

While there is wealth and plenty for those who seek Wisdom, those who ignore her teachings can expect that Wisdom will ignore their call. In Proverbs 1:29-30, she warns: “Because they hated knowledge, and they choose not to fear of the Eternal. / They refused my counsel; they spurned all my rebuke.” These promises sound very similar to the assurances of blessings and curses of Deuteronomy. In it, Moses promises overflowing troughs, fruitful lands and bodies, rains for healthy harvests, and protection from enemies as long as Israel hears and observes God’s commandments (Deut. 28:1-14). However, the people can expect famine, war, pestilence, disease (and fifty more verses of curses) if they ignore God’s laws (Deuteronomy 28:15-68).

Through this comparison we see how Wisdom mirrors God’s blessings and curses (of course not to the same extreme), and therefore how similar she is to God, as if she, too, were divine. Gerlinde Baumann echoes this idea, and suggests that Wisdom derives much of her divine authority from this modeling of “YHWH-speech,” and therefore “she

awards a nearly divine position to the phenomenon of wisdom with all its facets.

Because of this, she demands obedience, and at the same time expects obedience of the wisdom sayings from chapter 10 onwards.”⁷⁰ Through her divine speech, Wisdom’s power continues long after she disappears from the book of Proverbs.

Baumann further suggests that Wisdom’s closeness to God strengthens her divine status.⁷¹ Proverbs 8:22-31 places Wisdom close to God at the time of creation, and Baumann argues that it is possible to read this section as one that illustrates Wisdom as more than confidant or a delight of God. She explains that after advising and assisting the male YHWH God in creation, Wisdom becomes a darling, perhaps even a lover to God, as she dances around this newly created world.⁷²

Yet, Baumann does not leave her analysis there. She submits that Wisdom’s divine power firmly lies in her knowledge of the world’s order, and because of that she can teach people how to follow God’s commandments. She writes:

הַכֹּמֶה exists as a transcendent being of goddess-like rank at YHWH’s side. She is his transcendent creation. Because of her knowledge about the world’s order she is able to teach an ethos to men and women that resembles YHWH’s commandments and consequences. People are to love the Wisdom Figure like a ‘personal goddess’ and walk in her ways... Her call is for a spiritual relationship of individuals towards her, which manifests itself by keeping the Torah.⁷³

For Baumann, Wisdom deserves the reader’s respect for both her partnership with God, as well as her own role in people’s lives. She implies that the roots of Wisdom’s

⁷⁰ Gerlinde Baumann, “A Figure with Many Facets: The Literary and Theological Functions of Personified Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9,” in *Wisdom and Psalms: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner, Carole R. Fontaine. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 56.

⁷¹ Baumann, “A Figure with Many Facets,” 55.

⁷² Ibid., 45.

⁷³ Ibid., 71.

transcendence lie deeper than her role as mediator between the divine and earthly realms, and her role in creation. Wisdom's power, in fact, derives from the counsel she offers humanity when she stands in the public plazas and atop the heights calling for people to heed her voice.

Though some scholars are content to merely read Wisdom as a divine or a transcendent being, others see her as much more than that. These theologians and scholars latch on to the idea that Wisdom incorporates both human and divine attributes. For Schroer, Wisdom offers a way to integrate feminist theology with traditional monotheism. She writes:

[Wisdom] incorporates the Goddess without relinquishing Jewish-Christian monotheism...She functions as an intermediary authority between God and humankind, heaven and the world. Thus transcendence and heaven are combined with the feminine. Biblical Sophia meets the requirement of feminist theology to integrate human experience instead of separating or demonizing parts of it, to search for correspondence and interconnections instead of settling for separation and differentiation. She offers help because she is interactive and open: she contains without imposing limits.⁷⁴

Tikva Fryner-Kensky, in comparison, views Wisdom as the divine intermediary we search for, to bring us closer to God.⁷⁵ As we show our love for Wisdom, we draw closer to God, for incorporated in wisdom is awe of the Eternal (Proverbs 8:13). Though neither Fryner-Kensky nor Schroer is comfortable calling Wisdom a representation of the Goddess, they both view her as a feminine incorporation, which blends godliness with humanity, and brings the two into closer communion with one another.

⁷⁴ Schroer, "Wise and Counseling Women," 81.

⁷⁵ Tikva Fryner-Kensky, "Goddesses: Biblical Echoes," in *Feminist Approaches to the Bible*, ed. Hershel Shanks. (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1994), 42.

Conclusion

Who is Lady Wisdom? No one can say for sure.

Is she a vestige of an earlier cult goddess worship? Or an Israelite version of other ancient Near East goddesses of wisdom? Is she transcendent or divine? Is Wisdom God's partner or an intermediary between the Eternal and humanity?

I was initially attracted to Lady Wisdom's independence and agency. As a feminist, I am intrigued by the possibilities personified Wisdom presents for thinking about God and religion. Most importantly, though, in a world where women are still regularly silenced, ignored, spoken over, and dismissed, I wanted to highlight a biblical female voice who speaks with authority. Wisdom's cry has something to offer to modern readers, and I would hate for her voice to be lost to future generations. Therefore, I took it on myself to offer this in depth textual analysis of personified Wisdom, embracing a proudly feminist lens through which to read this fascinating biblical character.

A textual analysis of her speech and actions in Proverbs 1:20-33, 4:1-9, and 8, demonstrates that Wisdom is indeed a powerful figure. Wisdom was present at creation and is able to occupy roles and places of authority. Using the language of the prophets, speaking from public locations of power and weight, Wisdom is a model of personal agency. She speaks with and from a place of authority, and demands that humanity hear her call (or they will suffer the consequences). Indeed, even when others describe her, even as an object, there is power in Wisdom. Through her sovereigns and rulers not rule, but they reign justly and righteously. She represents an ideal to which one wants to aspire. Through her, there is a forged connection between heaven and earth. Those who follow her, reap goodness and metaphorical wealth, and even find God's favor.

There are some feminist scholars who would like to create a feminist theology around Wisdom. They consider her powerful language and use of authority, and wonder if she is a vestigial representation of an ancient Israelite goddess, or a contemporary of other ancient Near Eastern goddesses. Others find her use of prophetic language most intriguing, and view her as a connection between the human and the divine. All of these considerations are possible interpretations for personified Wisdom, and by viewing Wisdom through a feminist lens, we can begin to imagine new ways of relating to biblical power and authority.

Perhaps, most importantly for me, Wisdom offers us an image of a woman of words. Sadly, in this day and age, that is still a thing at which to marvel. As a future leader of the Jewish people, I find the model of personified Wisdom incredibly compelling. Lady Wisdom offers an example for leadership, which others can emulate. She speaks with authority, but in locations where her message will reach her audience. She uses rhetorical tools and language to make her message appealing, and ensure she has her audience's attention. She offers a path to live justly and righteously, and perhaps most importantly, wisely. Through Wisdom's counsel, searching out knowledge, and discernment, by hearing her call, we, as humans, have access to the divine.

Refusing to lose this model of female empowerment and pride, and inspired by her commanding presence, I have tried to shine a light on Wisdom's powerful female voice in the Bible, and bring forth her call to my own community.

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