

Excursus: "Who Is Sophia?"

9 Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn out its seven pillars. 2She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine; she has set her table. 3She has sent out her maid servants, and she calls out from the tops of the heights overlooking the city, 4"Whoever is naïve, let him come in here!" She says to him who lacks understanding, 5"Come, eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed. 6Forsake your ways, you who are naïve, and you shall live; walk in the way of understanding!" (Prov. 9:1-6)

8 22Jehovah possessed me at the beginning of his work, before his deeds of old. 23I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began. 24When there were no oceans, I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water; 25before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was brought forth, 26when he had not yet made the earth or the fields or any of the dust of the world. 27When he set the heavens in place, I was there, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, 28when he established the clouds above and secured the fountains of the deep, 29when he gave the sea its boundary so that the waters would not go beyond his commandment, when he marked out the foundations of the earth. 30At that time I was with him, as a master craftsman. I was filled with delight day after day, always rejoicing in his presence; 31rejoicing in his inhabited earth and my delight was in the sons of men. (Prov. 8:22-31)*

*Literally, "*his way*"

Introduction

In November of 1993 an ecumenical women's conference was held in Minneapolis, MN. The centerpiece of that conference was a pagan worship service to the goddess, "Sophia. Part of that pagan ritual included this prayer:

Sophia, creator goddess, let your milk and honey flow.
Sophia, creator goddess, shower us with your love. ...
Our sweet Sophia, we are women in your image.

Who is Sophia?

The name "Sophia" is a Greek term meaning "wisdom;" and the whole concept of a goddess named "Wisdom" (or, "Sophia") is derived from a wretched perversion of these very passages of Proverbs in which divine wisdom is poetically personified as a noble woman.

Because of the abuse and misconception to which "she" has been subjected, it is important for us to understand exactly what and who "Sophia" really is as interpreted by the Word of God itself.

The Opening Chapters of the Book of Proverbs are Written in Poetic Form

It is vitally important for us to appreciate the fact that these opening chapters of Proverbs are Hebrew poetry. In these chapters we are confronted with a poetic personification of divine wisdom. Especially in Proverbs 9:1-6 divine wisdom is personified as a noble woman who has prepared a great banquet and invites guests to her magnificent mansion. By definition, personification is a poetic device in which a thing or an immaterial entity is presented in human terms or with human attributes; by way of example, consider some other biblical personifications: *“Let the rivers clap their hands; let the mountains sing together for joy”* (Psl. 98:8.) *“You will go out with joy and be led out in peace; the mountains and the hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands”* (Isa. 55:12.) As an example of a “reverse” form of personification note Psalm 91:4, a passage in which the LORD’s care for His people is described in terms of the care of an eagle for her young: *“He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge.”*

It is utterly unfounded and irresponsible to draw the conclusion from this poetic personification that divine wisdom is a feminine deity. By applying this type of reasoning to such a passage as Psalm 91:4 (quoted above,) we would draw the conclusion that the LORD God is a bird, or that He has a bird-like appearance. Different rules apply to the interpretation of poetry as compared to the interpretation of prose. Prose is presenting literal, factual statements of truth; poetry may employ images to convey truth.

One very simple grammatical reason why divine wisdom is personified as a woman is due to the structure of the Hebrew language: in Hebrew the word for wisdom occurs in the feminine gender (חֵכְמוֹת or חֵכְמוֹהָ.) Whereas in English all things (material and immaterial) are spoken of in the neuter gender (“it,”) in some other languages (including Greek and Hebrew) things may arbitrarily be referred to in any gender (masculine, feminine or neuter.) By way of example, in English the word “door” occurs in the neuter gender, so one would say, “I shut it.” In German the word for “door” occurs in the feminine gender (die tur,) so one would say, “I shut her.” In Hebrew the word for “door” occurs in the masculine gender (פֶּתַח,) so one would say, “I shut him.” Since in Hebrew the word for “wisdom” happens to occur in the feminine gender, it is therefore quite natural to personify wisdom in feminine terms and to do so without seeking to convey any theological significance by means of such personification (i.e.; trying to convey to us the idea that divine wisdom is a feminine deity.)

A further reason why wisdom is personified in feminine terms is in order to carry out the contrast between wisdom and folly. The Hebrew word for “folly” (כְּסָלָה or כְּסִילוֹת) also occurs in the feminine gender and is personified as a seductive woman or prostitute who leads men to destruction. To portray Wisdom as a

noble woman who invites men to a banquet of good things is a natural contrast to Folly, (all the more since the Hebrew word for wisdom also occurs in the feminine gender.)

We must also take note of the fact that in the mysterious passage of Proverbs 8:22-31, where we learn of wisdom's presence with God from the beginning of the creation, it appears that wisdom uses a **masculine** term of self-description: "*Then I was with him* [the LORD], *[as] a master craftsman*" (Prov. 8:30.) Here divine wisdom describes "himself" as a master craftsman "assisting" in the work of creation.

The general guide for biblical interpretation is that the New Testament (as the final and full revelation of God) enlightens us concerning the true and full meaning of the Old Testament. What does the New Testament tell us about the wisdom of God? What light does it shed upon Proverbs 8:22-31?

The Old Testament Must Be Interpreted in Light of the New Testament

In Proverbs 8:22 divine wisdom itself declares, "*Jehovah possessed* (קָנָה) *me ... before his deeds of old.*" Note Proverbs 8:24-25, where divine wisdom testifies, "*When there were no oceans, I was brought forth* (חִוֵּל,) ... *Before the mountains were settled [in place] ... I was brought forth* (חִוֵּל)." Wisdom is described as being was "*brought forth*" by God before the creation. Compare the testimony of the divine wisdom of Proverbs with the testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Gospel of John: "*I come forth from the Father*" (Jn. 16:27b); "*I came out from the Father*" (Jn. 16:28); "*I came forth and am come from God*" (Jn. 8:42.) Furthermore, Jesus, the incarnate Word, is described as "*the one and only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father*" (Jn. 1:18.)

In Proverbs 8:23 divine wisdom declares, "*I was appointed from eternity ... before the earth was.*" As the commentators Keil and Delitzsch (*Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, Vol.1, p.185) point out, the Hebrew term used here (נִסְּךְ) contains the meaning of being appointed to a royal position. What Proverbs 8:23 is stating is that the divine wisdom has **always** occupied an exalted, royal position with the LORD. Compare the testimony of divine wisdom in Proverbs 8:23 with the testimony of the apostle Paul about the Lord Jesus Christ in Philippians 2:6; "*Christ Jesus, existing in the form of God, he did not regard his being on an equality with God as a thing to be exploited.*" The Greek phrase, ἀρπαγμός ηγεομαι, has the meaning of possessing something that may be exploited for one's own benefit. Philippians 2:6 is telling us that Christ Jesus always possessed a position of equality with God the Father but, despite His divine rights, He willingly underwent the incarnation for our salvation. Also note John 17:5, a passage in which the Lord Jesus praying to His Father makes this

request: *“And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world was [created].”*

In Proverbs 8:27 divine wisdom declares, *“When he [the LORD] set the heavens in place, I was there.”* Divine wisdom was present with God at the time of creation, or what the Bible calls *“the beginning.”* Compare this testimony of the divine wisdom with the testimony about the Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, recorded in John 1:1-2, *“In the beginning was the Word [a title for the incarnate Son of God], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God.”*

In Proverbs 8:28-30a divine wisdom declares,

... when [Jehovah] established the clouds above and secured the fountains of the deep, ²⁹when he gave the sea its boundary so that the waters would not go beyond his commandment, when he marked out the foundations of the earth. ³⁰At that time I was with him, [as] a master craftsman.

Divine wisdom was actively involved with the LORD in His work of creation. Compare the testimony of divine wisdom in Proverbs 8:28-30 with the testimony about the Lord Jesus Christ as presented in the New Testament: *“All things were made through him”* (Jn. 1:3); *“by Him [Christ Jesus] were all things made”* (Col. 1:16); *“he [the Father] has spoken to us by his Son ... through whom he made the universe”* (Heb. 1:2.)

The New Testament indicates that the divine wisdom of Proverbs in its full and true identity is in some way an Old Testament manifestation or revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, the One *“in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”* (Col. 2:3.)

Conclusion

To refer to the divine wisdom of the Book of Proverbs as the goddess “Sophia” is completely unfounded and false. In the light of the New Testament, the divine wisdom presented in the Book of Proverbs must be related to, if not actually identified with, no one other than the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.