

# Australian EJournal of Theology

INAUGURAL ISSUE - AUGUST 2003

ISSN 1448 - 6326



Sophia - The Divine Wisdom

## Lady Wisdom as the Created Co-Creator in Syriac Proverbs 8:22-31

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### Abstract

*The characteristics of Wisdom in the Syriac translation of the Bible may be explored by comparing the Syriac text with the two recognised sources, Hebrew and Greek. In the main, Syriac Wisdom is very similar to Hebrew Wisdom and many of the Greek innovations are not employed. She was made before the universe to work with God and to be close to humans. In Syriac her role in creation is more evidently in parallel God's own constructive activity. Canonical Wisdom in Syriac may be understood as a distinct biblical portrait, not as a collage of sources.*

The poem where Personified Wisdom describes her unique relationship with the creator God is one of the best-known passages in the book of Proverbs. In Hebrew Proverbs 8:22-31, Wisdom explains where her authority comes from and why she is to be trusted. She was created before anything else and was by the side of God at every stage of creation. For this reason speaking Wisdom can claim a hearing. In the history of the reception of Proverbs, this text gained importance through its use in Christology. [1] We are unable in this study to detail the evidence of the reception of Lady Wisdom in Syriac Christianity. We intend only to focus on some aspects of the vocabulary and structure of a text that has been canonical for important Christian churches over many centuries. Our method is one

of intertextual comparison. It is generally agreed that Syriac Proverbs shares features of the standard Hebrew Massoretic Text and features of the Septuagint. Assuming the dependence of Syriac Proverbs on Greek Proverbs, the extent of that dependence is debated, and no doubt varies from passage to passage. Richard J. Clifford writes that the Syriac translator rendered the Massoretic Text into transparent Syriac, using the Septuagint as a help to understand the MT. [2] Jan Joosten sees a somewhat greater dependence of the Syriac on the Greek, and asks if Syriac Proverbs could not be better understood as a collage of Hebrew Proverbs and Greek Proverbs. [3] Our method of comparing the Syriac with the Hebrew and Greek seems well founded in the actual process of composition. We will compare the Syriac with the Hebrew and Greek in order to discover in this way some of the enduring features of Syriac Wisdom. It is not our direct aim to examine the translator's intent or the translation technique. Before beginning to read the three texts, however, we will sketch in broadest strokes the historical background to the appearance of the Syriac bible and Syriac Proverbs.

Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic. Aramaic is the language of the Church and of Judaism that spread eastward to the edge of the Roman Empire, and even to India and China. Syriac was spoken in the early centuries of the Christian era in the principality of Edessa, corresponding to the present-day northern Syria and Iraq and southern Turkey. References in early literature to the growth of the church east of Syria suggest that Christianity reached Edessa some time before 200 AD. Fourth century legends attribute the introduction of Christianity to Addai (Thaddeus), an Aramaic speaking Christian from Syro-Palestine. In the legend, Addai healed and converted King Abgar. If there is anything in this tradition, Addai's visit may have taken place between A.D. 190 and 211. [4]

The translation of the Bible into Syriac (the *Peshitta*) may be dated in the second or third century and by the fifth or sixth century this translation would have reached its permanent form. It is unclear whether Syriac Proverbs was the work of Christians or Jews. An interesting suggestion is that Syriac Proverbs was translated from within a Jewish community that was in the process of adopting Christianity. [5]

#### Wisdom in Hebrew Prov 8:22-31

In the terms of Richard J. Clifford, Hebrew Wisdom's unique role at time of the world's creation is expressed in two complementary cosmogonies, vv. 22-26 and vv. 27-31. Vv. 22-26 emphasise the birth of Wisdom *before* all else, and vv. 27-31 present Wisdom's being *with Yahweh* during the creation of the universe. [6] The first section is as follows:

NRSV Proverbs 8:22 The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.

23 Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

24 When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water.

25 Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth,

26 when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil.

This text describes Wisdom's temporal priority through a series of negatives. Yahweh honours Wisdom by making her before anything else. There were no cosmic waters (v. 24), no pillars of the earth (mountains and hills, v. 25), and no habitable surface of the earth (v. 26). Four Hebrew verbs are used to describe Wisdom's origin, "created", "set up", and a repeated "brought forth". [7]

The second cosmogony in Hebrew (vv. 27-31) describes Wisdom's presence at creation in positive terms. [8]

27 When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,

28 when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep,

29 when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth,

30 then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always,

31 rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

After the description of Wisdom's presence throughout creation in vv. 27-29, vv. 30-31 tell us of the relationship between Wisdom and Yahweh. The description of Wisdom's cooperation with Yahweh the creator in terms of "master-worker" in v. 30 is a disputed reading of a difficult Hebrew term. "Child" and "sage" are alternative images. If Wisdom is a sage, then as a trusted counsellor, she shares delightful confidences and reminiscences with Yahweh, just because she, uniquely, saw the world coming into existence. [\[9\]](#) However, if we understand Wisdom as a child or nursling, this would continue the imagery of gestation and birth in vv. 24-25. The NRSV reading, "master-worker", follows the Greek interpretation, as we shall see. Finally, in this passage we may observe the parallel established between Wisdom delighting in Yahweh in v. 30 and Wisdom delighting in Yahweh's creation, the human race, in v. 31. In short, in Hebrew, Wisdom, brought into existence before all else is, to say the least, a privileged witness to God's creative activity. However, a role of active cooperation through advice or constructive activity may be intended.

#### Greek Wisdom in Prov 8:22-31 LXX (italics added)

8:22 (Brenton LXX in English) *The Lord* made me the beginning of his ways *for his works*.

23 He established me before time [was] in the beginning, before he made the earth:

24 even before he made the depths; before the fountains of water came forth:

25 before the mountains were settled, and before all hills, *he begets me*.

26 *The Lord* made countries and uninhabited [tracks], and the highest inhabited parts of the world.

27 When he prepared the heaven, I was present with him; and when he prepared his throne upon the winds:

28 and when he strengthened the clouds above; and when he secured the fountains of the earth:

29 and when he strengthened the foundations of the earth:

30 I was by him, *suiting [myself to him]*, I was that wherein he took delight; and daily I rejoiced in his presence continually.

31 For he rejoiced when he had completed the world, and rejoiced among the children of men. [\[10\]](#)

Having introduced Wisdom in Hebrew, we will, before turning our attention to Syriac Wisdom, note some of Greek Wisdom's special features. The differences between Septuagint Proverbs

and the Hebrew Massoretic Text are explained by some authors more in terms of the different Hebrew text used by the translator, and by others in terms of the translator's creativity. [11] This translation may be said to be a faithful but a creative translation of a Hebrew text somewhat different from the Massoretic Text. It is usually set in the context of Greek speaking Alexandria in the second century BCE. [12] In the view of David-Marc d'Hamonville, nowhere is the Greek translator more innovative than in the Wisdom passage of 8:22-31, which is described as an original and studied literary composition with philosophical and theological import. [13] Max Küchler, too, has studied the special features of Greek Wisdom. [14] He demonstrates that the Greek author highlights the role of God in creation and this author tends to make Wisdom God's exclusive possession. We may observe some details. The text is structured with the two mentions of "The Lord made" in vv. 22 and 26, whereas the subject "Lord" is explicit only once in Hebrew. At the outset, God "creates" Wisdom, and any hint of God's acquiring a pre-existing entity is avoided. For similar reasons, there is in Greek a switch from active verbs to passive verbs in v. 25. "I was brought forth" in Hebrew becomes in Greek "he begets me", and the prior mention of "I (Wisdom) was brought forth" in v. 25 Hebrew is altogether omitted in Greek. In Hebrew, we read that Wisdom was the first of God's works (v. 22). In Greek, Wisdom was made "for his works", so giving Wisdom's appearance a divine finality. The mythological imagery in Hebrew v. 29 evokes a primitive god of the sea: "When He assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command". This sentence, perhaps considered to impinge on Jewish monotheism, is dropped in Greek. Wisdom's role in v. 30 is evoked in Greek in a musical image of harmony, not through the image of the child or the sage. As regards the Greek reading, d'Hamonville suggests that the term *harmozousa* may be understood in two ways. In the active sense, Wisdom establishes harmony in the universe, and this sense is expressed in "master-worker". In the passive sense of the term, Wisdom is in full accord, which is understood in "suiting myself [to him]" in the Brenton translation above. [15] Of particular interest is the change in v. 31. In Hebrew, Wisdom delights in the created world and in human beings. However, in Greek, it is God who takes pleasure in the accomplishment of (his) creative work and it is God who takes pleasure in human beings. Küchler argues that Greek Wisdom does retain her playful merriment and unquenchable vital affability, but she is withdrawn from humans. Wisdom is in the sphere of the divine, not of humanity. [16] After noting the Greek innovations, we can only wonder if the Syriac text will appear as a literal translation of the Hebrew or more as a collage of Greek and Hebrew, as mentioned at the outset.

## Syriac Wisdom

Prov 8:27-31 Syriac (Lansa, italics added) [17]

22. The Lord created me (*brny*) as the first of his creations (*bryth*), before all of his works.
23. I was established (*i.e., he established me, 'tqnyy*) from everlasting, from the beginning, before he made the earth.
24. When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water.
25. Before the mountains were settled (*ntqnw*), before the hills were formed was I conceived.
26. While as yet he had not made the earth nor the valleys nor the best soil of the world.
27. When he established (*mtqn*) the heavens, I was there; when he set a circle upon the face of the deep.
28. When made firm the clouds above; when he strengthened the fountains of the deep.
29. When he gave to the sea its bounds, that the waters should not transgress his commandment; when he laid down the foundations of the earth:

30. I together with him was establishing them (*mtqn'*); and daily I was his delight, rejoicing always before him,

31. Rejoicing in his habitable earth; and my delights were with the sons of men.

As in Greek, Syriac Wisdom is unambiguously a creation of the Lord, not God's acquisition. In v. 22 Syriac the verb *br'*, create, sharpens the sense of the Hebrew, as does the Greek. Indeed Syriac reiterates the point of Wisdom being the first creature by translating "his acts" in v. 22 as "his creation" (*bryth*), using a derivative of "create" in v. 22.

The Syriac translator evidently has no problem with Hebrew mythological language of God restraining the tempestuous primeval waters in vv. 27b and 29a. What is important is not the mythology, but that Wisdom was there: "When he gave to the sea its bounds, that the waters should not transgress his commandment...I [was] with him" (vv. 27, 30). The Syriac term in v. 30 translated above as, "was establishing them", merits some comment. Wisdom's role is that of God's working partner. Wisdom is not the child, nor the sage. In the context of the previous description of God's creative activity, the Syriac translator envisages Wisdom's creative activity as parallel to that of God. Lansa's translation is correct. As is evident from the italic insertions above, verbs of the same root (*tqn*) are used for the Creator fashioning the mountains in v. 25, for the Creator fashioning the heavens in v. 27a, and for Wisdom's role beside God in v. 30. In v. 31 the Syriac translator renders the Hebrew, not the Greek:

"and daily I was his delight, rejoicing always before him,

Rejoicing in his habitable earth; and my delights were with the sons of men." (8:30b-31, Syriac).

Syriac Wisdom rejoices at the completion of creation, she is close to humans and rejoices in humans.

Finally, we must mention a trait of Syriac Wisdom in v. 31. Lansa translates v. 31b as "and *my delights were with the sons of men*". The Syriac is made to parallel the Hebrew, as the context requires. The Syriac term (*mshtbh'*) has a range of meanings. [18] This is the third time it is used of Wisdom. At the beginning of chapter 8, we read: "She cries at the gates, at the entrance to the city; she 'cries aloud'" (*mshtbh'*). In 1:20 we read: "Wisdom 'is glorified' (*mshtbh'*) in the market places" (Lansa). Does this verb suggest that Wisdom glories or boasts (the meaning in 1 Kgs 20:11), or Wisdom is praiseworthy (2 Sam 14:25), or cries out (Prov 8:3), or is praised (Matt 6:2)? [19] Lansa may well be right. Wisdom glories or delights in the sons of men, as the Hebrew has it. However, if we detect even an overtone of the praise of Wisdom in this text, we cannot but recall that other woman in Proverbs who achieves renown. This woman is the ideal human woman or wife. In the book's final poem we read:

Comeliness is deceitful and beauty is vain

but a woman who reverences the Lord shall be praised.

Give her the fruit of her hands,

And let her own works praise (*nshbhwnh*) [20] her in the gate. (31:30-31, Syriac, Lansa)

Who then is Syriac Wisdom? Our analysis of this passage would support Clifford's contention about the translation process for Syriac Proverbs mentioned at the outset. Syriac Wisdom has the main traits of Hebrew Wisdom, and difficult points are clarified with the help of the Greek. The notion of creation is perhaps somewhat more extended than demanded by textual obscurity in the Hebrew. The word collage, however, does not seem to indicate sufficiently the limits imposed on use of Greek. Like Hebrew Wisdom, Syriac Wisdom's portrait is sketched in a robust Semitic idiom. She is brought into existence by God before the creation so as to have a role in creation. She is, like Greek Wisdom, herself explicitly God's creation. God made her in

order to be at work at God's side in the fashioning of the universe. More evidently than in Hebrew or Greek, she and God fashion the universe together. She enjoys a relation of joyful intimacy with the creator and with humans. There is some suggestion that Syriac Wisdom achieves glory or praise. If so, Wisdom's praise and renown mingle with those of that other woman who in Proverbs is the Divine Wisdom's human face. [\[21\]](#) While we acknowledge the sources of Syriac Wisdom in Hebrew and Greek, we may finally dwell on the finished portrait, as Syriac readers have done. Lady Wisdom is the God's created co-creator.

One can only wonder what was the impact of the Proverbs' Wisdom imagery on the religious imagination of Syriac Christianity? In another context, Sebastian Brock refers to "the drenching power of symbolism for Syriac spirituality and its breathtaking pursuit of biblical imagery." [\[22\]](#) It seems that the invitation to Wisdom's feast (Prov 9:1-6) could be applied to the pursuit of the reception of Wisdom in the Syriac Christian writers.

#### Footnotes:

[\[1\]](#) David-Marc d'Hamonville, *La Bible d'Alexandrie: Les Proverbes*. La Bible d'Alexandrie, ed. Marguerite Harl, Gilles Dorival, and Olivier Munnich. Paris: Cerf, 2000. See p. 208 on 8.22 LXX.

[\[2\]](#) Clifford, Richard J. "Observations on the Text and Versions of Proverbs." *Wisdom You Are My Sister: Studies in Honor of Roland E. Murphy on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Michael L Barré (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1997) 47-61, here p. 59.

[\[3\]](#) Jan Joosten, "La Peshitta de l'ancien testament dans la recherche récente." *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 76, 4 (1996) 385-395, see p. 392.

[\[4\]](#) For the story of the Church's movement east from Antioch and for the introduction of Christianity to Edessa, see W. Stewart McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity to the Rise of Islam* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press) 3-35.

[\[5\]](#) Joosten, "La Peshitta," 390.

[\[6\]](#) Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999) 95-97.

[\[7\]](#) The verb *qnh* translated "create" in the NRSV 8:22 may be understood as "acquire" or "beget". Whatever the intended original meaning (see Clifford, *Proverbs*, 96) I would note that throughout Proverbs *qnh* is used for acquiring wisdom (4:7, 16:16, 17:16, 23:23).

[\[8\]](#) See Clifford, *Proverbs*, 96.

[\[9\]](#) See William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Old Testament Library. London: SCM, 1970) 358. See also Clifford, *Proverbs*, 99-101.

[\[10\]](#) C.L. Brenton, Lancelot. *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English* (Hendrickson, 6th printing, 1997) 795.

[\[11\]](#) Clifford, "Observations," 50-51.

[\[12\]](#) For this question, see d'Hamonville, *Bible d'Alexandrie*, 24-25.

[\[13\]](#) d'Hamonville, *Bible d'Alexandrie*, 89.

[\[14\]](#) Max Küchler, "Gott und seine Weisheit in der Septuaginta (Ijob 28; Spr 8)," *Monotheismus und Christologie: Zur Gottesfrage im Hellenist*

*ischen Judentum und im Urchristentum* (ed. Hans-Josef Klauck, 118-143. Freiburg.Basel.Wien: Herder, 1994) 118-43.

[15] D'Hamonville, *Bible d'Alexandrie*, 210. On the grounds of the grammatical and metaphorical context, this author argues for the passive sense ("étant bien accordé") rather than the active sense ("mettant en accord"). He also cites the contexts of musical instruments the term has in the Greek bible.

[16] Kùchler, "Gott und seiner Weisheit", 139.

[17] The Syriac translation here is from *Holy Bible From the Ancient Eastern Text: George M.Lansa's Translations From the Aramaic of the Peshitta*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, nd.

[18] *sbh*, Ethpa'al.

[19] ed R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, Hildesheim : Georg Olms, 1999, first published Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1879-1901. See vol 2, 4023-24.

[20] The word is the active form (Pa'el) of the verb *sbh* used of Wisdom.

[21] Thomas P McCreesh, "Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10-31." *RB* 92, no. 1 (1985): 25-46. See p. 46: "The poem's marked concentration of attention on the wife and on all that she does, the development of various themes emphasising her virtues as well as her practical prudence and ingenuity, and the remarkable similarities between the portrait of the wife and the various descriptions of Wisdom indicate that the poem in chapter 31 is the book's final, masterful portrait of Wisdom."

[22] S. Brock, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, trans. Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, (Uni. California Press, 1987) 11.

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