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THE COMPOSITE NATURE OF LADY WISDOM: THE CREATED ORDER, THE
EXCELLENT WIFE, RUTH, THE LOVER

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ABSTRACT

The Book of Proverbs presents Lady Wisdom as a composite character. She is not only the Lord's first creation, representing the order of creation, but also the female protagonist of Proverbs—the excellent wife (Prov 31). The composite nature of Lady Wisdom becomes apparent through (1) a lexical and thematic study of these women, (2) the composite nature of the antagonist to Lady Wisdom—Dame Folly; and (3) the character of Ruth. The pinnacle of wisdom is to marry Lady Wisdom. One could be wise, but if he fails to marry the excellent wife, then he, in fact, is not wise. Further analysis of the wisdom corpus reveals Lady Wisdom also appears in Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. A lexical and thematic study of Lady Wisdom with the female lover of the Song of Songs reveals they are the same character. Understanding Lady Wisdom as a composite character explains why Solomon, though wise, was unable to be wise in Ecclesiastes 7—he failed to marry the excellent wife. Solomon had a thousand woman, but none of them were Lady Wisdom (Ecc 7:28). Intertextual resonance between 1 Kgs 11, Eccl 7, and Song 8 reveal that Solomon not only was unable to find Lady Wisdom but was rejected by her (Song 8:11–12).

INTRODUCTION

Solomon presents several different pictures of Dame Folly—a stranger, an immoral woman, a prostitute, and an adulteress. Solomon's Dame Folly is a composite character who uses physical allurements to deceive and destroy the young man. Lady Wisdom, on the other hand, seems almost divine. This divine identification, however, fails to encompass the vastness of her

character. Like Dame Folly, Lady Wisdom represents a composite character consisting of not only the Lord's first creation, but also an archetypal, ideal woman who is capable, noble, valiant, and virtuous (Prov 31). She is characterized in Ruth and eroticized in the Song of Songs. This woman is the woman to whom every woman should seek to be (Prov 31:10–31; Ruth; Song of Songs), every unmarried man should seek to marry (Prov 31:10), and every married man should seek to cultivate (Song 2:15; 8:11–12). The man who fails to marry/cultivate this woman has failed to be wise—he has failed to live according to the order of creation.

This thesis will be argued through an intertextual analysis of Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly in Prov 1–9, Prov 31, the character of Ruth, the female lover in the Song of Songs, and Solomon's enigmatic statements in Eccl 7:28 and Song 8:11–12. First, Lady Wisdom is a personified representation of God's order in creation; she is not the Lord or Jesus. Second, lexical and thematic parallels argue that Lady Wisdom, the Virtuous Woman, and the Song of Songs female lover are the same character. Third, through a study of Lady Wisdom's antagonist, Dame Folly, and Lady Wisdom's corresponding physical manifestation, Ruth, the composite characterization of Lady Wisdom becomes even more evident. Finally, understanding Lady Wisdom as a composite character explains Solomon's failure to find Lady Wisdom (Eccl 7:28), and Lady Wisdom's rejection of Solomon (Song 8:11–12).

THE LORD AND LADY WISDOM

Lady Wisdom is often identified as divine. Robertson writes, “Encountering wisdom is not dealing merely with an abstract idea. Encountering wisdom means interacting with a person, who is none other than God himself.”¹ Robertson's assertion seems logical considering that wisdom

¹ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of Wisdom: A Redemptive-Historical Exploration of the Wisdom Books of the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2017), 51.

rebukes the young man just as the Lord rebukes him (cf. Prov 1:25–26; 3:11), laughs at the destruction of the simple/rebel just like the Lord (cf. Prov 1:26; Psa 2:4),² and states that whoever finds her finds life (Prov 8:35).³ At other times, however, the Lord is superior to wisdom: the Lord possesses (קנה) wisdom (Prov 8:22), weaves (נסך) her (Prov 8:23), and gives birth (חיל) to her (Prov 8:24).⁴ This inferiority of wisdom has sparked discussions and controversies for centuries. The early church fathers operated under the assumption that Jesus the Messiah was Lady Wisdom. Arians argued from Proverbs 8:22, 24 that Jesus (Lady Wisdom) was created by God the Father. Athanasius employed the analogy of faith and articulated the Trinitarian doctrine commonly held by Christendom today.⁵ This discussion continues today. Robertson exegetes Proverbs 8 and explains, “This personified wisdom suitably represents in old covenant form the Word that was face to face with God in the beginning. The wisdom-Word was God, and all things were made by him (John 1:1–3).”⁶

Interpreting Lady Wisdom, however, as God the Father or Jesus strains the language of Proverbs 8. While the verb קנה likely does not mean “to create,”⁷ the focus of Prov 8:22 concerns a time—“at the beginning” and “before his works.” At this time wisdom was born (חיל) (Prov

² Waltke explains, “Only God laughs at the time of judgment (Pss. 2:4; 59:8[9]; cf. 37:13; 52:6[8]), never a prophet,” Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 84.

³ Von Rad comments, “Only Jahweh can speak in this way,” Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology: The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 444.

⁴ Viviers notes, “The three verbs (קנה - create, סכך - weave/form and חיל - to give birth to) indeed create ambiguity as to her exact origins, but here she is, of divine origin and intimately aligned to Yahweh,” Hendrik Viviers, “The ‘Body’ and Lady Wisdom (Proverbs 1-9),” *Old Testament Essays* 18, no. 3 (2005): 884.

⁵ Athanasius focused on Prov 8:22 and the interpretation of קנה which the LXX translated κτίζω (to create, bring into existence). The LXX’s translation here is dubious. קנה primarily means “to buy, acquire” and the meaning “to create” is questionable. Gregory of Nyssa also invoked the analogy of faith, Susannah Ticciati, “Proverbs 8:22 and the Arian Controversy,” in *Reading Proverbs Intertextually*, ed. Katharine J. Dell and Will Kynes, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 629 (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 180–81.

⁶ Robertson, *The Christ of Wisdom*, 54.

⁷ A case-by-case analysis of קנה reveals that the meaning “to create” is unnecessary. The espoused uses of קנה to mean “create” could easily be subsumed under the meaning “buy, acquire.” For further reading see Lipiński, “קנה” *TDOT*, 13: 58–65; Bruce Francis Vawter, “Prov 8:22: Wisdom and Creation,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99, no. 2 (June 1980): 208–14; Robertson, *The Christ of Wisdom*, 52–57.

8:24–25). The verb חיל refers to birth as is clear in Job 15:7. Eliphaz sarcastically mocks Job, “Were you the first man born (יִלֵּד)? Before the hills, were you brought forth (חִיל)?”⁸ The second rhetorical question builds upon the first, and the parallelism with יִלֵּד argues that חִיל concerns birth.⁹ Thus, wisdom had a beginning. Robertson’s appeal to Psa 2:7 and that this is a figure of speech is contextually unwarranted.¹⁰ Proverbs 8 describes the origin of wisdom before the creation of the world.¹¹

A careful reading of Prov 3 and 8 reveals that wisdom, while present with God at creation, did not create. The Hebrew Bible repeatedly presents the Lord alone as Creator (Isa 40–45, particularly 45:18). Proverbs 3 and 8 do not deviate from this thought—Prov 3:19 states, “The Lord by wisdom founded the earth;” Prov 8:26 reads, “Before He (the Lord) made the earth and fields;” and Prov 8:27 states, “When He (the Lord) established the heavens, I (wisdom) was there.” Robertson appeals to Prov 8:30 where presumably wisdom was “as the master craftsman.”¹² Yet this reading is based on a misinterpretation. The comparative particle “as” is not in the Hebrew text. The Hebrew אֲמִן is unattested in the Hebrew Bible.¹³ Waltke makes a persuasive case based on context, semantics, and parallelism that Prov 8:30 should be translated,

⁸ John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 245.

⁹ A. Bauman writes, “The OT contains hardly any descriptions of childbirth; from Isa 26:17f.; 66:7f., however, we can determine that *chil* begins with the first contractions and ceases with actual *yāladh* (cf. Jn. 16:21),” Bauman, “חִיל” *TDOT*, 4: 345.

¹⁰ Robertson, *The Christ of Wisdom*, 57 n.34.

¹¹ Waltke agrees, “The notion that Wisdom is eternally being begotten is based on Christian dogma, not on exegesis. Verses 22–26 represent Wisdom’s origin as a one-time event and action, not as an eternal birth and/or an eternal coming into possession,” Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 409 n. 104.

¹² Robertson, *The Christ of Wisdom*, 57.

¹³ For a diverging view see Cleon L III Rogers, “The Meaning and Significance of the Hebrew Word אֲמִן in Proverbs 8,30,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 109, no. 2 (1997): 208–221. Waltke persuasively argues that other presumed uses of אֲמִן are highly questionable. See Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 417–20. Even if one adopted the MT’s vocalization and translated אֲמִן “craftsman,” Rogers makes a persuasive case that “craftsman” is appositional to the pronominal suffix keeping God the creator, not wisdom. Thus, regardless of the textual issue, wisdom is not the creator in Prov 8:30.

“And I was beside him faithfully.”¹⁴ Thus חֲסִיד describes wisdom’s relationship to the Lord at creation. Wisdom was not active in creation.

Wisdom, rather, was God’s instrument in creation.¹⁵ It represents the *order* of creation.¹⁶

Wisdom was created first because the plans (order) of creation must be created before creation.

The sage, then, seeks to discern God’s order of creation and align his life with that order.¹⁷

Perdue explains:

Wisdom is the skill, plan, and knowledge God uses to secure and order the cosmos, depicted as a great building with pillars (mountains, Job 26:11; Ps. 18:7) to support the sky and with a foundation constructed over the cosmic ocean. Subsequently, divine wisdom continues to bring stability to the ongoing cosmic order. In the embrace of Wisdom (i.e., in the knowledge and actualization of sapiential teaching), the student embodies the same cosmic power of life and knowledge that God used in creating and governing reality. The same power that originates and sustains life in the world is offered to those who incorporate within their lives the teachings of the sage.¹⁸

God made the world in an ordered way, and that ordered way was wisdom. Representing God’s order of creation, Wisdom may then rebuke a young man or laugh at a fool just like the Lord.¹⁹

The words of the father to the son are the words of wisdom—the words of God’s ordered

¹⁴ Most convincing is the parallelism between “faithfully”, “daily”, and “at all times,” Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 417–22.

¹⁵ Ibid., 417.

¹⁶ Perdue writes, “God uses wisdom in creating and ordering the world,” Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 82. Bartholomew and O’Dowd write, “Wisdom is concerned with discerning the order that the Lord has built into the creation,” Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan O’Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 74.

¹⁷ Treier writes, “Wisdom teaches subsequent generation that life flourishes in a harmony of societal and creation orders. When this order breaks down due to the folly of waywardness—when the adulteress is pursued rather than Woman Wisdom—the consequences are deadly,” Daniel Treier, “Wisdom,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 845. Estes writes, “In the thought of Proverbs, wisdom is skill in living according to Yahweh’s order. Folly is choosing to live contrary to the order he embedded in the universe,” Daniel J Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1–9* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 26.

¹⁸ Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 83.

¹⁹ Waltke claims “wisdom comes from God’s essential being . . . [and] has an organic connection with God’s very nature and being,” Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 409. The origin, nature, and essence of wisdom falls outside the scope of this paper.

creation. Lady Wisdom speaks in the home through the father, at the gate through the sage (Prov 1:20–21), or through the mouth of the excellent wife (Prov 31:26).

Even though Lady Wisdom could speak through a man or a woman, she is portrayed as a woman because it is impossible to live in wisdom without an excellent wife.²⁰ If a man marries Dame Folly, her folly will create a dissidence in his life discordant with God's ordered creation (Prov 12:4; 14:1; 19:13; 21:9; 25:24; 27:15). Marrying the excellent wife becomes a synecdoche for being wise. The epitome of wisdom is marrying the excellent wife.

A REAL WOMAN

Correspondences between Lady Wisdom, the Virtuous Woman, and the female lover in the Song of Songs argue that these three women are the same composite woman—the ideal, archetypal wife. An analysis of Lady Wisdom's antithesis, Dame Folly, further substantiates this point. Just as Dame Folly is a composite character representing bad women, so also Lady Wisdom represents good women. The character of Ruth bridges these two women together. Ruth, who self-identified as the foreign woman (Ruth 2:10) would presumably been associated with Dame Folly (Prov 2:16; 5:10, 20; 6:24; 7:5).²¹ Through the mouth of Boaz, however, she is the excellent woman.

The Excellent Wife

The excellent woman represents a composite, ideal woman whom a man should desire to marry. Yoder explains that the excellent woman is a composite character,

Although based on real women, Prov 31:10–31 remains a portrait of the most desirable woman, an image of the ideal wife intended for a predominantly male audience. As the comprehensive expression, the “A-to-Zs” of all that is valued in and valuable about a

²⁰ The order of creation involved marriage and offspring (Gen 1:22; 2:23–24; 9:1).

²¹ The primary characteristic of Dame Folly is that she is a foreigner.

woman, the Woman of Substance is arguably a composite image of real women. She embodies no *one* woman, but rather the desired attributes and activities of *many*.²²

The excellent woman also shares multiple correlations with Lady Wisdom in Prov 1–9. Goswell acknowledges this connection, “The poem about ‘the good wife’ is a fitting end to the book, for the metaphor of *finding* a wife (= Lady Wisdom) forms the subtext of Proverbs 1 – 9. The ‘good wife’ of Proverbs 31 is the feminine embodiment of the wisdom ethic of Proverbs, but in contrast to Lady Wisdom depicted in Proverbs 1 and 8 – 9, she is a real-life woman and is realistically portrayed.”²³ Camp emphasizes the importance of this observation, “The preponderance of female imagery in Prov 1–9 and in Prov 31 assumes great significance. It becomes hard to ignore the possibility that these texts were chosen to begin and end the book of Proverbs by virtue of that imagery. Far from being mere coincidence, this imagery should have crucial literary and theological claims to make with respect to the material it surrounds.”²⁴ The literary and theological import of this inclusio becomes evident when one recognizes that marrying Lady Wisdom is the pinnacle of what it means to be wise.

Scholars have noted the thematic and lexical relationship between Lady Wisdom and the excellent wife.²⁵ Lady Wisdom is difficult to find and the man who finds her is blessed (2:1–4;

²² Emphasis hers. Christine Roy Yoder, “The Woman of Substance (‘ŠT-HYL): A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 31:10-31,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 3 (2003): 446. Yoder’s Persian-period setting is unnecessary as demonstrated in the pre-Persian character of Ruth.

²³ Gregory Goswell, “Is Ruth Also among the Wise?,” in *Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, ed. David G. Firth and Lindsay Wilson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 127.

²⁴ Claudia V Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, Bible and Literature Series 11 (Sheffield: Almond, 1985), 187–88. Dell argues that Proverbs 10–30 describe the moral character of the virtuous woman and connects these characteristics to Ruth, Katharine Dell, “Didactic Intertextuality: Proverbial Wisdom as Illustrated in Ruth,” in *Reading Proverbs Intertextually*, ed. Katharine J. Dell and Will Kynes, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 629 (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 103–14.

²⁵ McCreesh draws out several correlations between Lady Wisdom and the Prov 31 woman, Thomas Patrick McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10-31,” *Revue Biblique* 92, no. 1 (January 1985): 25–46. McCreesh’s belief that the Prov 31 woman is a symbol for Lady Wisdom is unwarranted considering the appeal for a young man to marry this woman. See also Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, 186–208; Yoder, “The Woman of Substance (‘ŠT-HYL)”; Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15 - 31*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 517–18.

3:13, 18). Similarly, the virtuous woman is difficult to find (Prov 31:10), and thematically, the one who finds her is blessed (Prov 31:28). The blessing is related to the profiting (סחר) of both ladies (Prov 3:14; 31:18). The value of Lady Wisdom and the virtuous woman exceeds rubies (פנינים) (Prov 3:15; 31:10). The husband can trust (בטח) the virtuous woman (Prov 31:11) just like Lady Wisdom (Prov 1:33; 3:23). Waltke notes, “Outside of this text and Judg. 20:36, Scripture condemns trust in anyone or anything apart from God/the Lord. . . . The present exception elevates the valiant wife, who herself fears the Lord, to the highest level of spiritual and physical competence.”²⁶ Life is frequently associated with Lady Wisdom (3:18, 22; 4:10, 13, 22–23; 7:2; 8:35; 9:6, 11). The virtuous woman’s industry provides life for her household (Prov 31:15, 21) and her generosity provides life to others (Prov 31:20). Yoder notes, “The nature and extent of lexical and thematic parallels between the Woman of Substance and Wisdom in Prov 1–9 indicate that, for the sage, the two women essentially coalesce.”²⁷

Table 1.1: Comparison between Lady Wisdom and the Virtuous Woman

Characteristic	Lady Wisdom	Virtuous Woman
Difficult to Find	Prov 2:1–4	Prov 31:10
Blessed (theme)	Prov 3:13, 18	Prov 31:28
Produces Profits (סחר)	Prov 3:14	Prov 31:18
Valuable exceeds rubies (פנינים)	Prov 3:15	Prov 31:10
Trustworthy (בטח)	Prov 1:33; 3:23	Prov 31:11
Builds her house (בית)	Prov 9:1	Prov 31:15, 21, 27
Preserves Life	Prov 3:18, 22; 4:10, 13, 22–23; 7:2; 8:35; 9:6, 11	Prov 31:15, 20–21

The Lover

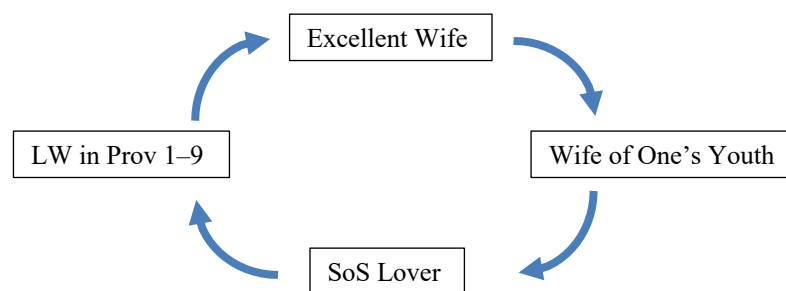
The excellent wife also corresponds to the “wife of one’s youth” in Proverbs 5:15–19. Lucas recognizes this correspondence, “The Woman of Worth can be seen as a filling out of the picture

²⁶ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 521.

²⁷ Yoder, “The Woman of Substance (’ŠT-HYL),” 446.

of ‘the wife of your youth’ (5:18–19) and is the strict antithesis of the Strange Woman, who incarnates some characteristics of Folly.”²⁸ Several scholars have noted the similarities between the “wife of one’s youth” and the Song of Songs lover²⁹ though few are willing to draw a direct comparison.³⁰ If Lady Wisdom is the virtuous woman, the virtuous woman is the “wife of one’s youth” (Prov 5:15–20), and the “wife of one’s youth” is the female lover in the Song of Songs, then the female lover in the Song of Songs is Lady Wisdom.³¹

Figure 1.1



Melton, however, goes too far and claims that Song of Songs is *only* a metaphor for Solomon’s pursuit of Lady Wisdom.³² Lady Wisdom, however, as a composite character that connects

²⁸ “The Woman of Worth can be seen as a filling out of the picture of ‘the wife of your youth’ (5:18–19) and is the strict antithesis of the Strange Woman, who incarnates some characteristics of Folly,” Ernest C. Lucas, “The Book of Proverbs: Some Current Issues,” in *Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, ed. David G. Firth and Lindsay Wilson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 50.

²⁹ Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 317–22; Michael V Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 18A (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 199–204; Lindsay Wilson, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 102–4; Rosalind Clarke, “Seeking Wisdom in the Song of Songs,” in *Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, ed. David G. Firth and Lindsay Wilson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 100–12.

³⁰ Steinmann attributes the shared terminology to Solomonic authorship, “These similarities are easily explained if the interpreter accepts that Solomon is the author of both the Song of Songs (as stated in Song 1:1) and the author of Proverbs 1–9,” Andrew Steinmann, *Proverbs*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 153–56. Kaiser believes Prov 5 is the interpretive key to the Song of Songs, Walter C Kaiser, “True Marital Love in Proverbs 5:15–23 and the Interpretation of Song of Songs,” in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, ed. J. I. Packer and Sven Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 106–16.

³¹ Fox notes that the Prov 5:15–19 wife “is a metaphor, albeit elusive, for wisdom,” Michael V Fox, “The Strange Woman in Septuagint Proverbs,” *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 22, no. 2 (1996): 35.

³² Brittany Melton, “Solomon, Wisdom, and Love: Intertextual Resonance between Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs,” in *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, ed. Katharine J Dell and Will Kynes (New York: T&T Clark, 2016), 130–41. Pope gives a history of this interpretation, Marvin H. Pope, ed., *Song of Songs*, The Anchor Bible 7C (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 110.

God's ordered creation (i.e. this is how you have sex) directly to one's wife makes better sense of the Song of Songs than only making it a metaphor for Solomon's pursuit of wisdom.

Song of Songs is a song (שיר), not a story or drama. As such, it is composed poetically as wisdom literature³³ with composite, archetypal characters.³⁴ This ideal, composite, female lover primarily instructs, according to Sparks, "young Jewish women propriety in matters of love and sex."³⁵ This female lover loves her husband according to the order of creation (wisdom). She is the eroticized Prov 31 woman. While women are the primary audience, the Song still contains a message for men.³⁶ If a young man desires to enjoy sex according to wisdom (God's ordered creation) then he must marry Lady Wisdom (Prov 31).

This correlation between Lady Wisdom and intimacy also exists in Proverbs. The son is exhorted to get (קנה) wisdom and understanding (Prov 4:5, 7). קנה means "to buy" and "in a weakened sense, to acquire as a wife."³⁷ Furthermore, the young man is exhorted not to abandon (עזב) her, another term that can refer to a relationship with a spouse (Prov 2:17; Isa 54:6; 60:15; 62:4).

³³ Clarke, "Seeking Wisdom in the Song of Songs," 101; Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 575. Contra Annette Schellenberg, "Questioning the Trend of Classifying the Song of Songs as Sapiential," in *Nächstenliebe Und Gottesfurcht: Beiträge Aus Alttestamentlicher, Semitistischer Und Altorientalistischer Wissenschaft Für Hans-Peter Mathys Zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Hans-Peter Mathys, Hanna Jenni, and Markus Saur, *Alter Orient und Altes Testament AOAT 439* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2016).

³⁴ Exum explains, "The Song's lovers are archetypal lovers—composite figures, types of lovers rather than any specific lovers. In the course of the poem, they take on various guises or personalities and assume different roles," J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 8. See also Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 577; Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, 98; Daniel Grossberg, "Two Kinds of Sexual Relationships in the Hebrew Bible," *Hebrew Studies* 35 (1994): 7; Tremper Longman, *Song of Songs*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 48; Mark McGinniss, *Contributions of Selected Rhetorical Devices to a Biblical Theology of the Song of Songs* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2011), 157–58.

³⁵ Kent Sparks, "The Song of Songs: Wisdom for Young Jewish Women," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (April 2008): 278. See also Clarke, "Seeking Wisdom in the Song of Songs," 101, 105.

³⁶ Clarke, "Seeking Wisdom in the Song of Songs," 105.

³⁷ HALOT, 3:1112. Cf. Lipiński, "קנה" *TDOT*, 13: 58–65. Ruth 4:5, 10 is the exclusive biblical use of קנה in the purchase of a wife. The Hebrew Bible takes an elevated view of women and typically distinguishes them from the other property of the man (Jack R. Lundbom, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 295–96.). Thus it is not surprising that the term קנה is not usually used in the taking of a wife.

The young man is exhorted to love (אהב) wisdom in Prov 4:6, and embrace (חבק) her in vs. 8. Embrace occurs two times in the Song of Songs and refers to a very intimate embrace (Song 2:6; 8:3). Commenting on Song 2:6, Estes notes, “The verb *hābaq* here, as in Prov. 5:20, refers to sexual touching.”³⁸ Estes recognizes the correspondence with Dame Folly in Prov 5:20 but overlooks the reference to wisdom in Prov 4:8. Just as Solomon presents Dame Folly as a composite evil woman who seeks the embrace of the young man, so also does he use intimate language to refer to the young man’s embrace of wisdom. By having sex with Lady Wisdom (Prov 4:8), the young man lives in accordance with God’s order of creation.

The father exhorts the son to call wisdom “sister” (Prov 7:4) just like the man of the Song calls his wife “sister” (Song 4:9, 10, 12; 5:1, 2). Habel notes, “‘bridal’ imagery dominates this portrait of wisdom,”³⁹ and Exum explains that brother and sister are “stock terms of endearment used in the Song.”⁴⁰ The significance of this term is lost on modern sensibilities, but the ancient world considered “sister” an intimate term of endearment.⁴¹ It is even found at one of the most intimate sections of the Song (Song 5:1). The young man’s intimacy with Lady Wisdom will help him resist the temptation of the seductress in Prov 7.⁴²

³⁸ Daniel J Estes, “The Song of Songs,” in *Ecclesiastes & the Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 16 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 322. Concerning the embrace of the strange woman in Prov 5:20, Fox notes, “To ‘embrace an alien’s bosom’ (v 20b) means having sex with her,” Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 203.

³⁹ Norman C Habel, “Symbolism of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9,” *Interpretation* 26, no. 2 (April 1972): 142.

⁴⁰ Exum, *Song of Songs*, 171.

⁴¹ Exum speculates, “As a term of endearment, ‘sister’ may represent a striving toward completeness or wholeness, whose realization the man can only imagine in his mirror-image from the opposite sex. The combination of sibling and marriage imagery in the epithet ‘my sister, bride’ epitomizes the desire to achieve oneness with the other,” Ibid., 172. Kalmanofsky similarly highlights the closeness of this term of endearment, “Although this term of endearment does not mark an actual familial relationship, it does evoke one to convey the intimacy, familiarity, and affection felt between the lovers,” Amy Kalmanofsky, *Dangerous Sisters of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 142. Kalmanofsky then comments on Song 8:1–2, “The Shulamite’s words offer a rare glimpse into the dynamics of the brother-sister relationship, which is portrayed as intimate (they suck the same breast), physical (they kiss), and relatively non-hierarchical,” Ibid. Kalmanofsky’s first two categories deserve merit, but the third, “non-hierarchical,” contradicts other passages in the Song (Song 1:5–6).

⁴² Waltke phrases this section in the context of marital commitment, “[The young man’s] commitment to wisdom in an endearing relationship will protect him from the dangerous enticements of the unrestrained wife.” Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 370.

In Prov 5:15–23, the father exhorts the son to enjoy the intimate pleasures of one’s wife instead of the intimate pleasures of Dame Folly. The antagonistic relationship between Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly is well attested.⁴³ Just as Dame Folly’s antithesis is Lady Wisdom (Prov 9), so also is Dame Folly’s antithesis the virtuous woman—one’s wife.

Table 1.2: Comparison between Lady Wisdom in Proverbs and the Female Lover in the SoS

Characteristic	Lady Wisdom	Female Lover
Marriage	Prov 4:5, 7	Song 1:2–4; 3:6–11
Love	Prov 4:6	Song 7:6
Embrace	Prov 4:8	Song 2:6; 8:3
Sister	Prov 7:4	Song 4:9, 10, 12; 5:1, 2
Antithesis to Dame Folly	Prov 9	Prov 5:15–23

The sexual antithesis between Dame Folly and Lady Wisdom is magnified in the Song of Songs. Just like Dame Folly, Lady Wisdom’s lips drip with honey (Prov 5:3; cf. Song 4:11), her scent is intoxicating (Prov 7:17; cf. Song 4:13–14), she invites the man to spend the night with her (Prov 7:18–20; cf. Song 7:11–13), she promises delight (Prov 9:17; Song 7:9–13), and she even goes in search of her lover in the city at night (Prov 7:6–23; Song 3:1–5).⁴⁴ Concerning the similarities between Prov 7 and Song 3, Grossberg writes, “The seeking, the finding, the grasping, the kissing, the locale of the search, the night setting and the sexual end are all elements of the common theme of amatory desire and quest appearing in Canticles and echoed in Proverbs.”⁴⁵

Table 1.3: Comparison between Lady Wisdom in the Song of Songs and Dame Folly

Characteristic	Lady Wisdom	Dame Folly
Lips	Song 4:11	Prov 5:3
Scent	Song 4:13–14	Prov 7:17
Invitation	Song 7:11–13	Prov 7:18–20

⁴³ Habel, “Symbolism of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9,” 141–43; Clarke, “Seeking Wisdom in the Song of Songs,” 108–9; Grossberg, “Two Kinds of Sexual Relationships in the Hebrew Bible”; Daniel J Estes, “What Makes the Strange Woman of Proverbs 1-9 Strange?,” in *Ethical and Unethical in the Old Testament: God and Humans in Dialogue* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 151–169.

⁴⁴ Clarke, “Seeking Wisdom in the Song of Songs,” 108–9.

⁴⁵ Grossberg, “Two Kinds of Sexual Relationships in the Hebrew Bible,” 11.

Delight	Song 7:9–13	Prov 9:17
Night Scene ¹	Song 3:1–5	Prov 7:6–23
¹ Seven points of correspondence exist here.		

Both women appeal to the man, “Lie with me!”⁴⁶ The sexual appeal of Lady Wisdom is even more pronounced in apocryphal and pseudepigraphal literature.⁴⁷ The one possesses a well of living waters (Prov 5:15; Song 4:15), the other the chambers of death (Prov 7:27; 9:18).

Dame Folly

It has already been established that Lady Wisdom is the antithesis to Dame Folly. This section demonstrates that Dame Folly is also a composite character thus adding to the evidence that her antithesis, Lady Wisdom, is also a composite character.

The two most common descriptors of Dame Folly is that she is strange (זר, Prov 2:16; 5:3, 20; 7:5) and foreign (נכרי, Prov 2:16; 5:20; 6:24; 7:5). This second term refers to the young woman’s ethnicity as a non-Israelite. While foreign women would have been a major concern to the father, Dame Folly represents a broader character than just a non-Israelite. The father is most concerned about the financial repercussions of her solicitations. The composite nature of Dame Folly’s character is most apparent in Prov 6:26 where the strange woman is identified by two different labels: harlot (זונה) and adulteress (אשת איש). Here, two different fees are described by the father, “For the price of a harlot is a loaf of bread, but an adulteress, she will hunt the precious life.” The harlot, comparatively speaking, is inexpensive—a loaf of bread, but the

⁴⁶ Melton argues for a metaphorical interpretation of the Song and that it is “Solomon’s pursuit of personified Wisdom,” Melton, “Solomon, Wisdom, and Love: Intertextual Resonance between Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs,” 135.

⁴⁷ The Hebrew version of Ben Sira 51:13–20 (11QPs^a 21:11–17) and Wis 8:2–16 contain provocative pursuits of Lady Wisdom. For more information see Anthony I Lipscomb, “‘She Is My Sister’: Sarai as Lady Wisdom in the Genesis Apocryphon,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 50, no. 3 (August 2019): 329–30; Sidnie White Crawford, “Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly at Qumran,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 5, no. 3 (1998): 358–59.

adulteress is going to take everything.⁴⁸ Dame Folly, as a composite character, could be either a harlot or an adulteress.

Nevertheless, the ethnic status of Dame Folly is her primary designation. Solomon himself was known to love foreign (נכרי) women who led him away from the Lord (1 Kgs 11:1–8). “Foreigner” functions as a synecdoche for the pagan/unbelieving character of Dame Folly as evidenced in Solomon’s women. Solomon, however, did not have dalliances with these foreign women; he married them. Thus, Dame Folly is broader than just a harlot or foreigner. She could be one’s wife.

Even more pronounced is the antithesis developed between Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly in Prov 9 where the sexual nature of Dame Folly is heavily muted.⁴⁹ In Prov 9, Dame Folly is not called the stranger, foreigner, harlot, or adulteress. She is only named Women Folly (אשת כסילות) (Prov 9:13).⁵⁰ Dame Folly compositely personifies not only real bad women, but the embodiment of folly—the disorder of God’s creation. Hauge, writing on Prov 7:24–27 notes that Dame Folly is mythic, representing more than just one woman.⁵¹ Streete correctly extends Dame Folly’s identity to the rest of the book of Proverbs, “Throughout the rest of the book of Proverbs, the figure of the Strange Woman persists, not as a full personification but in the persons of bad

⁴⁸ Waltke agrees, “The severity of the penalty is established by contrasting the price of the prostitute — a meal — with the price of the adulteress — one’s very life (v. 26),” Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 353. Similarly, Streete writes, “Intercourse with a prostitute (*zonah*) is preferable, because her price is not costly, whereas adultery with another man’s wife costs the lover his life, although the ultimate penalty is not death but dishonor, permanent disgrace, and the fury of the jealous husband (6:33–35),” Gail Corrington Streete, *The Strange Woman: Power and Sex in the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 108.

⁴⁹ Both women have a house (1, 14), offer food and drink (2, 17), call out (3, 15), appeal to the simple (4, 16), and more. See Estes, “What Makes the Strange Woman of Proverbs 1–9 Strange?,” Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 430.

⁵⁰ Estes correctly acknowledges the significance of “אשת כסילות” in 9:13–18, in which the Strange Woman is revealed for who she truly is, the personification of folly in antithesis to Woman Wisdom,” Estes, “What Makes the Strange Woman of Proverbs 1–9 Strange?,” 159.

⁵¹ Martin Ravndal Hauge, *Solomon the Lover and the Shape of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015), 156. Hauge also states, “The explicit personification of wisdom as the son’s beloved, set up as a counter-figure to the seductive strange Woman in 7.4–5, relates the Strange Woman perceived as an ‘another man’s wife’, to ‘your own wife’ as a counter-figure, and to the ‘mythological’ categories of Lady Wisdom with Lady Folly as her counter-figure,” Ibid., 155.

or foolish women, usually in contrast with good or wise women.”⁵² Just as Lady Wisdom embodies the created order, the essence of life, and one’s wife, so also does Dame Folly embody the grave, the essence of death, the strange woman. Dame Folly is more than a physical woman. She is a spiritual entity; she is death herself.⁵³

Ruth

Ruth characterizes Lady Wisdom. The phrase excellent woman (אִשָּׁת חַיִּל) occurs three times in the biblical corpus (Prov 12:4; 31:10 Ruth 3:11). Several scholars have indiscriminately connected Ruth to the excellent woman.⁵⁴ She does possess several of the qualities of the excellent woman (hard worker, kindness, etc.), but fails in other respects (businesswoman, luxuriousness, etc.).⁵⁵ Because the excellent woman is a composite character, however, Ruth does not have to display all the characteristics, only some of them. The essence of the excellent woman is that she fears the Lord.⁵⁶ Ruth’s kindness (חֶסֶד) to the widow Naomi and to the

⁵² Streete, *The Strange Woman*, 109.

⁵³ Dame Folly became a symbol for folly in later Judaism and Christianity. Goff writes, “While she can be understood in numerous ways, she represents a type of immoral female whom male addressees could encounter in their daily lives but should avoid. . . . At times it is not clear that these two texts are describing a ‘real woman.’ A trend towards allegorical and symbolic interpretations of the Strange Woman is evident in later periods of Judaism and Christianity,” Matthew J Goff, “Hellish Females: The Strange Woman of Septuagint Proverbs and 4QWiles of the Wicked Woman (4Q184),” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 39, no. 1 (2008): 22.

⁵⁴ L. Daniel Hawk, *Ruth*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 7B (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 110; Robert B Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013), 659–60; Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1999), 62; Robert L Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 216.

⁵⁵ Samuel T.S. Goh, “Ruth as a Superior Woman of חַיִּל?: A Comparison between Ruth and the ‘Capable’ Woman in Proverbs 31.10–31,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 38, no. 4 (June 2014): 487–500.

⁵⁶ Three observations from Proverbs 31:30 substantiate this point. First, the assertion that she fears the Lord is found in the conclusion of the poem to the virtuous woman—a climactic location, McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife,” 33. Second, the inclusion with Prov 1:7 creates, according to Bartholomew and O’Dowd, “a bookends indicating the centrality of the fear of the Lord to wisdom,” Bartholomew and O’Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, 81. Third, Prov 31:30 itself, highlighting only one characteristic of the woman, prioritizes this virtue. Waltke writes, “This woman’s itemized, self-sacrificing activities for others exemplify the fear of the Lord,” Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 536.

preservation of her dead husband's name distinguished her as an excellent woman (Ruth 3:10–11), one who feared the Lord.⁵⁷

The character of Ruth, however, is more complex. She, by her own mouth, identifies herself as a stranger (נכרִי, Ruth 2:10). Her foreign status is not missed by the narrator (1:4, 22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10).⁵⁸ At first appearance, Ruth appears to have more in common with Dame Folly than Lady Wisdom. Through the character of Ruth, the narrator instructs that the primary characteristic of Lady Wisdom is the fear of the Lord, not ethnicity. Contrasting the unfaithful wife of Prov 2:17 with Ruth, Goswell writes, “This woman [Prov 2:17] is an Israelite who acts like an outsider, but, in a variation on the theme, Ruth is an ethnic outsider who acts as a true Israelite (e.g. her Abraham-like oath to leave home and country [1:16–17; 2:11; cf. Gen. 12:1–3]), and she is shown to be a suitable wife for Boaz.”⁵⁹ Dame Folly “forgets the covenant of her God” (Prov 2:17), but Ruth seeks protection from the God of Israel (Ruth 1:16–17; 2:12).

Finally, the ordering of the Hebrew canon reflects a tradition of understanding Ruth as the excellent woman.⁶⁰ While the order of the Hebrew canon has undergone some changes, the current ordering is Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs. Ruth, the woman of virtue, directly follows

⁵⁷ Boaz's speech establishes this point (Ruth 3:10–11). It also corresponds to the virtuous woman, “the instruction of kindness (חסד) is on her tongue” (Prov 31:26). Sakenfeld connects the second act of kindness to Naomi rather than to Mahlon, Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, 61. Hubbard is more likely correct, “The point was that Ruth acted neither from passion nor greed. Rather, sacrificially setting aside personal preferences, she chose a marriage of benefit to her family. She reckoned her own happiness as secondary to provision of an heir for her late husband and Naomi,” Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 215. Ruth likely could have provided for Naomi through the marriage of any virtuous male. The preservation of the family, her husband's name (Ruth 4:5, 10), would have narrowed her options substantially.

⁵⁸ Queen-Sutherland notes, “The story names her Ruth the Moabite over and over again, as if a large M is imprinted on her forehead,” Kandy Queen-Sutherland, “Ruth, Qoheleth, and Esther: Counter Voices from the Megilloth,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 43, no. 2 (2016): 230.

⁵⁹ Goswell, “Is Ruth Also among the Wise?,” 128.

⁶⁰ This point has not been missed by scholars. See Timothy J Stone, *Compilational History of the Megilloth: Canon, Contoured Intertextuality and Meaning in the Writings*. (Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 133; Goswell, “Is Ruth Also among the Wise?,” 115–23.

Proverbs 31.⁶¹ Stone writes, “What is the effect of Ruth’s inclusion in the Writings directly after Proverbs? The primary implication . . . is the foregrounding of Ruth’s intertextual relationship to Proverbs 31:10–31. *This context interprets Ruth not only as the ideal wife, but also the embodiment of the wisdom ideal from Proverbs as a whole.*”⁶² Furthermore, Boaz, the man with a name (Ruth 4:11, 17–22; contra, “John Doe” in Ruth 4:1), provides the connection to the Song of Songs (Song 1:3). These three books create a full portrait of the excellent wife.

SOLOMON’S WOMEN

Understanding Dame Folly and Lady Wisdom as composite characters of real women but also representing creation order/disorder sheds further light on Solomon’s failure with women and the comments in Ecclesiastes 7:28 and Song of Songs 8:11–12. Solomon loved many foreign (נכרי) woman, having 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kgs 11:1–3). Intertextual resonance exists between 1 Kgs 11, Eccl 7:28, and Song 8:11 through the intertextual link of the number one thousand and women. These three texts recount Solomon’s foreign wives (1 Kgs 11), Solomon’s failure to find Lady Wisdom (Eccl 7:23–29), and Solomon’s advice to men on how to find Lady Wisdom (Song 8:11–12).

⁶¹ Goswell notes, “The canonical juxtapositioning of Proverbs and Ruth in the Hebrew canonical tradition is a *post-authorial* phenomenon, with biblical book order reflecting the perceptions and views of ancient readers, who were right, however to detect the presence of significant thematic connections between these two canonical portions,” Goswell, “Is Ruth Also among the Wise?,” 123. For a fuller discussion see Stone, *Compilational History of the Megilloth*. Queen-Sutherland also notes several correspondences with Ruth and Esther, the first and last books in the Megilloth, Queen-Sutherland, “Ruth, Qoheleth, and Esther.”

⁶² Emphasis mine. Stone, *Compilational History of the Megilloth*, 135.

A Woman's Secret (Eccl 7:23–29)

Qohelet recounts Solomon's personal search for wisdom in Eccl 7:23–29⁶³ creating resonance with Proverbs.⁶⁴

²³All of this I tested by/with wisdom

I said, "I will be wise." But it was far from me.

²⁴Far off is what has happened; Deep, very deep, who can find it?

The personal nature of the pursuit is reflected through the structural link with 1:12–2:3,⁶⁵ first-person pronouns, and the interjection "says Qohelet."⁶⁶ Solomon first decries his intention, "I will be wise!", but then notes his failure to be wise (7:23). Fox correctly notes, "There must be a difference between the wisdom Qohelet aimed at but did not reach (implied by *'ehkamah*) and the wisdom he *did* have."⁶⁷ Yet Fox fails to correctly identify the wisdom Solomon failed to acquire—the excellent wife. The very next verse (Eccl 7:24) describes Qohelet's difficult search which resonates with Lady Wisdom and the Prov 31 woman. Seow recognizes the resonance with Prov 31, "It is important to note that here in 7:24 the language of wisdom's elusiveness is in part reminiscent of the elusiveness of the ideal woman of Proverbs 31, who is the embodiment of Woman Wisdom herself."⁶⁸ Two lexical links connect Proverbs 31:10 and Eccl 7:24: (1) The

⁶³ The question of authorship cannot be answered here. Melton's correctly notes that the topic is moot for the purposes of this article, "Each book [Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs] recalls the character of Solomon in order to illustrate his infamy; for he is both the epitome of wisdom and love, the respective concerns of Ecclesiastes and Songs," Melton, "Solomon, Wisdom, and Love: Intertextual Resonance between Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs," 134.

⁶⁴ Daniel C. Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," in *Ecclesiastes & the Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 16 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 184; Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 271–72; Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 267.

⁶⁵ Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 181–82; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 270.

⁶⁶ Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 182–86.

⁶⁷ Emphasis his. Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 264.

⁶⁸ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 270. Bartholomew connects this text with the Prov 31 woman and Job, Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 265.

rhetorical question “Who can find?”, and (2) the adjective “far” (רחק).⁶⁹ Estes observes this intertextual connection and states that it “perhaps [indicates] an explicit quotation, or more likely, an allusion.”⁷⁰ In Eccl 7:23–24, Solomon searches for Lady Wisdom—the excellent wife, fails to find her (7:23), and states that she is near impossible to find (7:24).⁷¹

Solomon unintentionally marries instead Dame Folly (Eccl 7:26). Commentators have been too quick to disassociate Dame Folly in Eccl 7:26 from real women.⁷² Solomon then states, “What my soul seeks, but I could not find; one man out of a thousand I found, but a woman among all of these I have not found” (7:28). Solomon notes here what he has and has not found. He has found one man out of a thousand. This man is the privileged one who found Lady Wisdom; only one man out of a thousand is wise (cf. Prov 20:6).⁷³ Statistically, after marrying a thousand women, Solomon should have found her. Yet he does not. Solomon illustrates again the rarity of finding the virtuous woman, his own failure to be wise, his own failure to live according to the order of creation.

The implied question being answered in Eccl 7:29 is, “Why is Lady Wisdom so difficult to find?” Ecclesiastes 7:29 places the failure not upon God, but upon man’s schemes (השבון).

⁶⁹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 270.

⁷⁰ Daniel J Estes, “Seeking and Finding in Ecclesiastes and Proverbs,” in *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, ed. Katharine J Dell and Will Kynes (New York: T&T Clark, 2016), 126.

⁷¹ Contra Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 259, 270; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 275; Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 2d ed. (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 128–29. Qohelet is *not* saying that Lady Wisdom cannot be found, but that she is difficult to find, Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” 185. Just as Ruth was a virtuous woman whom Boaz found, so also the virtuous woman can be found.

⁷² Seow, for example, disassociates Dame Folly from real women, “The *femme fatale* is not, therefore, an individual woman. She is not necessarily a specific type of woman or women in general. Rather, she is a composite image of Folly herself (Prov 9:13–18),” Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 272.

⁷³ Estes notes the rhetorical questions in Proverbs emphasize the rarity of the faithful man and virtuous woman, “The positive evaluation of a wife is expanded in the final encomium of the excellent woman in Prov 31:10–31, introduced by the rhetorical question, ‘A woman of valor, who can find?’ This question is formally parallel to 20:6, but the context here yields a different nuance. The reader is prone to expect the negative answer ‘No one,’ but the passage proceeds to extol the exemplary qualities of the woman who is praised by her husband (31:28–31). Consequently, the implied answer to the question posed in Prov 31:10 is ‘Almost no one,’ because the woman who lives wisely does indeed exist, and even though she may be rare, when she is found she is a cherished treasure,” Estes, “Seeking and Finding in Ecclesiastes and Proverbs,” 125.

Solomon's failure to find Lady Wisdom is not disclosed but it is implied that he also plotted how to find her and was led astray. If this article's understanding of Song 8:11–12 is correct, then further insight may be found on Solomon's failure and how a man can find Lady Wisdom.

A Woman's Rejection (Song 8:11–12)

Lady Wisdom rejects Solomon as a lover in Song 8:11–12.⁷⁴ Through the voice of Lady Wisdom, Solomon teaches the reader how to find Lady Wisdom and enjoy intimacy the way God designed it—according to the order of creation.

¹¹Solomon had a vineyard at Baal Hamon
He gave the vineyard to keepers
A man would bring for its fruit a thousand silvers
¹²My vineyard, which is mine, is before me; the thousand to you, O Solomon
And two hundred to the keepers of its fruit

Solomon's possession of the vineyard represents his possession of women—his harem.⁷⁵ The vineyard is a regular metaphor for the woman's body in the Song (Song 1:5; 2:15; 4:10–5:1; 6:11).⁷⁶ The location Baal Hamon is geographically unattested.⁷⁷ Baal means “master, husband” and Hamon means “many, much;” thus, the name of this location is “Master/Husband of Many/Much”⁷⁸ and represents his harem.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ The identity of the speaker is in question here. Keel and Exum argue that the man is speaking particularly because the vineyard is “before me” (לפני) as in, right in front of me. The man is creating a contrast between his vineyard and Solomon's harem, Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs*, Continental Commentaries (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 282; Exum, *Song of Songs*, 260–61. If the man is the speaker, he could be comparing his acquisition of Lady Wisdom to Solomon's harem and thus articulating how Lady Wisdom is “more valuable than rubies. But the connection to the keepers would make little sense with this interpretation. More likely the woman, who spoke in 1:6, is also the speaker here. See Longman, *Song of Songs*, 219; Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 246–47.

⁷⁵ Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 199; Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 282. Contra Estes, “The Song of Songs,” 415.

⁷⁶ Exum, *Song of Songs*, 260.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 206. For a discussion see Pope, *Song of Songs*, 686–88.

⁷⁸ Exum explains, “No such place is known, and meanings of the name, ‘owner of wealth’ and husband of a multitude,” suggest that it was chosen to emphasize Solomon's affluence—his vast riches, his holdings of land, his many wives,” Exum, *Song of Songs*, 260.

⁷⁹ Yair Zakovitch, *The Song of Songs: Riddle of Riddles*, trans. Valerie Zakovitch, Library of Hebrew Bible. Old Testament Studies 673 (New York: T&T Clark, 2019), 28.

Solomon's harem, being so vast, required others to maintain it at great expense. Exum notes, "Two things are noteworthy about this vineyard: Solomon does not tend it himself, and its produce is very valuable."⁸⁰ The thousand silver coins refers to the extravagant expense of maintaining the vineyard to produce its luxurious fruit. "Fruit" is a metaphor for the sexual delight that the woman would offer. Considering the expensive nature of the fruit, the fruit would consist of a beautiful, supple, fragrant woman—the presumed ideal sexual experience. Esther completed one year of beauty preparations before going to King Ahasuerus (Esth 2:12). Only a king or extremely rich individual would be able to enjoy this kind of "fruit." "Thousand" creates resonance with 1 Kgs 11:3 and Eccl 7:28.⁸¹ While the "thousand" in those two passages refer to the quantity of Solomon's women, in Song 8:11 the thousand refers to the quality of his women. "Thousand" functions as a metonymy of cause which is the fiscal source of the beautiful maiden. Solomon was the man who loved the most (thousand women) and loved the best (thousand silvers).

The ones maintaining the harem are the keepers (נָטַר).⁸² The verb "keeper" occurs four times in the Song functioning as an inclusio to the book (Song 1:6 2x; 8:11–12) with both passages being concerned with feminine beauty.⁸³ In Song 1:6, the woman has been forced to work in vineyards resulting in her appearance presumably being diminished. Whereas, in Song

⁸⁰ Exum, *Song of Songs*, 260.

⁸¹ Murphy and Keel acknowledge the connection to 1 Kgs 11 but not Eccl 7, Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 199; Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 282. Zakovitch says Song 8 is an allusion to 1 Kgs 11, Zakovitch, *The Song of Songs*, 23. She later that "Song of Songs . . . left its mark . . . perhaps even in Eccles. 7:28 about the character of women," Ibid., 31. Unfortunately she fails to develop this link.

⁸² נָטַר means "to watch over, guard," (HALOT, 2:695). Zakovitch notes that נָטַר has encompasses both ideas, guarding and watching over, Zakovitch, *The Song of Songs*, 28. She unconvincingly argues that the "keepers" are helping themselves to the "vineyard" and the thousand silvers are hush money. This interpretation fails to take into account the inclusio with 1:6.

⁸³ Murphy recognizes the connection with 1:6 but notes, "There is no obvious reason why 'keepers' of the vineyard are mentioned," Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 199. Concerning the "keepers," Sparks states, "I must confess, along with many commentators, that I am at a loss to make complete sense of this metaphor, particularly its final comments about the garden tenders (נָטַרִים) and their share of the silver," Sparks, "The Song of Songs," 290.

8:11–12, the vineyard is lavishly maintained at great expense by hired helpers. Solomon learned that Lady Wisdom was not the most beautiful, softest, and most fragrant woman.

In Song 8:12, Lady Wisdom rejects Solomon. The three pronouns (*my* vineyard, which is *mine*, is before *me*) create a powerful distinction between Solomon's vineyard and Lady Wisdom. She then references again the keepers who are paid a large sum to watch over the fruit. Lady Wisdom cannot be pawned off upon keepers. Lady Wisdom must be personally nurtured, cultivated, and tended.

Recognizing his failure, Solomon instructs the young man to personally cultivate, maintain, and tend his Lady Wisdom (Song 2:15; 8:11–12). A distinction is made between Solomon and the maintenance of his vineyard with the male lover of the Song of Songs who maintains his own vineyard.⁸⁴ In Song 2:15, the female lover exhorts her husband to catch the jackals that spoil the vineyard.⁸⁵ The jackals represent the problems that arise in a relationship that must be addressed to enjoy intimacy according to the order of creation.⁸⁶ By addressing the issues in the relationship, the couple grows in wisdom, in fact, the female lover becomes more and more like Lady Wisdom. Clarke captures the message of wisdom from the Song:

“Here, then, is the wisdom of the Song: follow the example of the idealized Solomonic wisdom-seeker, by seeking a wise woman and making her your bride. It is in these activities of seeking and finding that the wisdom-seeker himself becomes wise. Perhaps the parallel descriptions and mirrored speech patterns of the male and female lovers in the Song indicate just this: that by loving wisdom and possessing wisdom, it is possible to take on the characteristics of wisdom and become truly wise.”⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Exum writes, “The motif of vineyard keepers allows the man to illustrate indirectly his sole responsibility for his vineyard,” Exum, *Song of Songs*, 261.

⁸⁵ Identifying the speaker here is fraught with controversy. Hess claims it is an intermezzo that both sing, Hess, *Song of Songs*, 97. Exum believes the woman is responding to the man's request in vs. 14, Exum, *Song of Songs*, 128–29.

⁸⁶ Hess explains, “The vineyard is a metaphor for the female's body as well as a picture of their union of love. Their mutual desire to share their love with one another is expressed by the use of ‘our.’ This is a powerful statement about the need to protect the love that the lovers possess,” Hess, *Song of Songs*, 98. Contra Exum, *Song of Songs*, 129–30. Similarly, Longman explains, “We should just adopt a general interpretation, associating the foxes with obstacles to the blossoming relationship,” Longman, *Song of Songs*, 124–25.

⁸⁷ Clarke, “Seeking Wisdom in the Song of Songs,” 112.

IMPLICATIONS

Several practical implications can be inferred after identifying Lady Wisdom as a composite character. First, Christians need to recover the biblical idea of happiness (אשרי). The sage understood that the best life was the one aligned with the order of creation. Trueman, responding to expressive individualism and the sexual revolution, argues that “Protestants need to recover both natural law and a high view of the physical body.”⁸⁸ Trusting the Lord, believing his Word, and aligning one’s life according to the order of creation regardless of the difficulty results in the best (אשרי) life.

Second, Christian singles must turn to Lady Wisdom for instruction on the acquisition of a spouse. Business, beauty, and fame lure young ladies to waste their lives on insatiable pleasures. A young woman should seek a faithful man (Prov 20:6) with a good reputation (Ruth 4; Song 1:3) who will be her provider and protector (Song 2:3, 15). Similarly, young men should seek to marry Lady Wisdom. Solomon’s women never brought sexual satisfaction. On the contrary, Ruth’s physical beauty is never mentioned. Lady Wisdom appears in many forms—most of them plain, perhaps working in a vineyard (Song 1:5–6). Most importantly, Lady Wisdom has given clear instructions concerning pre-marital physical affection (Song 2:7; 3:5; 8:4). Singles would do well to heed her warning. This is the good life; this is the order of creation.

Third, Christians need a biblical theology of sexuality. Women’s Bible studies frequent passages like Prov 31, but cringe before the Song of Songs. Lady Wisdom wants to have sex with her husband (Song 1:2–4). She takes the initiative (Song 3:1–4). She regularly and freely

⁸⁸ Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 405.

offers herself (Song 5:2–7) and rejoices in her husband’s delight over her (Song 7:10). She delights in sexual variety (Song 7:11–13) and is accessible only by her husband (Song 8:10).

Finally, Christian men need to be biblical men. The biblical man is a guard, tough and strong, protecting his vineyard (Song 8:12). He is also a cultivator, weeding and pruning, caring gently for the tender blossoms (Song 2:15). He possesses a good reputation (Song 1:3) and lives sacrificially by denying himself sexual pleasure even when he should enjoy it (Song 5:2–7). He rejoices in the beauty of his bride (Song 1:5–12), and, most importantly, is grateful and content with the sexual pleasures his wife provides (Song 8:11–12).

CONCLUSION

Truly, Lady Wisdom is difficult to find, but she is out there. Boaz found her and an occasional man found her as well (Eccl 7:28). Prov 8:17 claims that the one who searches diligently for wisdom will find her. Solomon’s diligent search, however, ended in disaster because he valued the wrong things in a woman. Furthermore, he instructs one how to not only find Lady Wisdom, but to create her. Through the selfless, sacrificial care of the vineyard, maybe you will find yourself married to Lady Wisdom.

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