

LADY WISDOM AND THE ANGEL  
ADDITIONAL NOTES

Peter James Cousins, 2017.

If you have read my book *Lady Wisdom and the Angel: Learning to Love the Book of Proverbs* I thank you and hope you found it helpful. As it is meant to stand as an introduction and study guide I opted to leave out the footnotes and references that might normally be expected in a theological work. However, here are some of my thoughts and the influences which guided me in writing the book.

Commentaries on Proverbs.

Although it arrived in my possession at the stage of revision I found Ernest Lucas' commentary to be very helpful:

**Ernest C. Lucas, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015)**

In fact it is much more than a commentary. It contains helpful essays on pretty much all the major points concerning *Proverbs* with a long section on the structure, authorship, and origin of the book (pp.1-48). As if that is not enough there is a good section on Wisdom and Christology (pp. 314-343). As he has background in Science it is no surprise to find a chapter on Wisdom and Creation (pp. 343-363).

Other commentaries I enjoyed using are:

**Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2004) 2 Volumes**

**R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1994)**

**Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs*, TOTC (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1964)**

My copy of Kidner's commentary still has the price tag of 99 pence from when I bought it over forty years ago. It has been much used and Kidner's works are always rich sources of sermon points.

There are many books of sermons and studies based on *Proverbs*, but I confess to owning only two of them:

**Bill Hybels, *Making Life Work: Putting God's Wisdom into Action* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988)**

**Anthony Selvaggio, *A Proverbs Driven Life* (Wapwallopen: Shepherd Press, 2008)**

I have no doubt that these two books have influenced my own.

Background.

Three books served me well as general background study:

**R.E. Clements, *Wisdom in Theology* (Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1992)**

**Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes* (London: IVP, 1989)**

**David F. Ford and Graham Stanton (eds.), *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom* (London: SCM, 2003)**

I feel very much that I would have liked to have gone into much greater depth in my book in three areas especially, so let me deal with them quickly here.

### 1. The Structure of *Proverbs*.

In succumbing to my own scatter-brained approach to the book, in order to stimulate the reader, I woefully neglected to point out the structures which appear in the text. These are as difficult to spot in the text as the text is difficult to translate into English. Bruce Waltke states “For the translator, Proverbs defies translation. s proverb depends on sound and sense. “A stitch in time saves nine” works because of its alliteration as well as its uncommonly obvious good sense. But the sounds and puns of the biblical proverbs cannot be caught in translation, and so, unlike an English proverb they are not usually memorable.” (*Proverbs*, Vol. 1, p.xxii). Similarly the loose organization of the sayings tends to get lost in our translations. This is not just the various collections (1;1-9:18, 10:1-22:16, 22:17-24;22, 25:1-29:27, 30:1-33, 31:1-31) but the way the authors use themes, antitheses, alliteration, etc. to hold stanzas together. Stuart Weeks (*Early Israelite Wisdom*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press,1994), p. 24) claims that 58% of the sayings are joined by some kind of linkage. Apart from his book, both Lucas and Waltke have enjoyable sections on this theme.

### 2. The Identity of the Wayward or Foreign Woman.

This is a very controversial topic and my version of her is one possibility among several. Although the majority of modern commentators seem largely to agree with me, there is by no means a consensus.

There are those who would disagree sharply with me and insist that she should be titled the Foreign Woman. The back story to this usage is the violent campaign in Ezra-Nehemiah in post-exilic Jerusalem when Israelite men were forced to separate themselves from their pagan wives because of the influx of idolatry into their homes and the cultural effect on their children of having ethnically different mothers. Some commentators are bluntly insistent on this point. Alastair Hunter, for example (*Wisdom Literature* (London: SCM Press, 2006) pp. 91-107) views any other version of ‘Foreign Woman’ as a straight mistranslation, based mainly on linguistic arguments and the assumed milieu of the Ezra-Nehemiah events.

I enjoyed the PhD thesis-turned-book by Nancy Nam Hoon Tan, *The 'Foreignness' of the Foreign Woman in Proverbs 1-9: A study of the Origin and Development of a Biblical Motif* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008). She begins with a good introduction to the various scholarly opinions which have been put forward (pp. 3-11). Some theologians have argued that the ‘Foreign Woman’ represents a pagan goddess and may even be associated with cultic prostitution in Israel. This latter point in itself is controversial because many commentators deny that such prostitution existed within the national boundaries. Tan also lists a number of commentators who feel that we should abandon the ethnic consideration in the title.

Whybray, for example and rather optimistically in my opinion, translates it as the ‘Adventurous Woman.’”

Turning to the feminist writers I found a variety of opinions. Claudia Camp offers more than one. In *Wisdom and Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, Bible and Literature Series 11, (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1985) pp. 265-71 she pictures her as a multi-faceted figure representing all that is bad in society. In *Wise, Strange and Holy: The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) she suggests that she is a temptress luring men away from the Torah. And finally in pp. 72-89 of this latter work she

offers the suggestion that she is some kind of ‘trickster’ causing mischief in society. Christl Maier in her chapter “Conflicting Attractions: Parental Wisdom and the ‘Strange Woman’ in Proverbs 1-9” in A. Brenner and C. Fontaine (eds.) *Wisdom and Psalms. A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (2<sup>nd</sup> Series) (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) pp. 92—108, suggests the character has three functions: adulteress, opponent of Lady Wisdom and as a parallel to evil men. She also argues that in Proverbs 5 she is linked to the Ezra-Nehemiah upheaval, in chapter 6 she is a common warning against adultery and in chapter 7 and 9:13-18 she stands as a denunciation of cultic prostitution.

It is worth mentioning in passing that in the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint (or the LXX) the word used has no ethnic connotation as such, and that when a later writer of the book known as the *Wisdom of Solomon* took up this figure he did not portray her as foreign. I am not sure how significant this is and the commentators are divided on the subject.

Obviously I had to choose a side in the argument and opted for a non-ethnic interpretation. In the end I was persuaded by the fact that the Wayward Woman has a husband. She is to be avoided because she is married. There is no direct link with idolatry at all in the passages and I find the connection to the Ezra-Nehemiah episode a little strained. It is hard to imagine why the reference to idolatry should be so distant if she is a foreign wife. All the passages read to me as warnings against the kind of mess humans get themselves into when they stray sexually. I would take up the anti-apostasy theme if I could only find it in the sections dealing with her.

Finally, I enjoyed the article by Mieke Heijerman, “Who Would Blame her? The ‘Strange’ Woman of Proverbs 7.” In Athalya Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995, pp. 100-109. She invites us to look out the window on this Wayward Woman. Are we maybe a mother, watching in horror as our son is attracted to her, and feeling our property and future security threatened by this gold-digger? Alternatively is she a threat to patriarchal society? Are we staunch defenders of the male supremacy dividing the female gender into Madonnas or whores? Or, instead, are we to look down on her with compassion, seeing her as an emotionally needy woman trying to survive in loveless marriage and a hostile world? In any of these options she is an invented character on which we project our own fears and prejudices.

Whether my suggestion that she would make a great carnival float in a procession is adequate or not I will let you decide.

### 3. Lady Wisdom and Christ

I make frequent references to this connection, but nowhere concede it the full treatment I would like to have done. The literature on this subject is vast, covering the whole concept of Wisdom in the Old Testament, its treatment in the New Testament and the Christology of the Bible and the Early Church. Waltke (Vol. 1) has a nice simplified introduction to the historical background on pages 127ff. The Early Church struggled with 8:22 which states “he created me”. This seemed to play into the hands of the Arian heretics who believed that Christ was a created being, not the eternal second person of the Trinity. Athanasius, the champion of what we now acknowledge as Orthodoxy argued that the verse refers to Christ's incarnation and to Wisdom's creation in human beings. If you consult the modern commentaries on this verse you will discover that they generally feel the better translation of the Hebrew text is ‘he possessed me’ rather than ‘created’. However, the pre-existence of wisdom before the foundation of the world and the pre-existence of Christ have proved rather irresistible to those who wish to identify the two. Waltke himself rejects this and argues that Lady Wisdom is supposed to represent Solomon's teaching, not some kind of “heavenly being who represents or stands for God and is independent from him.” I am

unconvinced by Waltke's position on this because it does not seem to do justice to the flamboyant, female Wisdom of Proverbs. But neither am I convinced that she is meant to be a heavenly being standing independent from God. I think she stands for the wisdom of God in general, manifested in various forms and in a diversity of situations. She is not the second person of the Trinity, but she is divine in some way. Remember that Jesus proclaimed himself to be greater than Solomon and his wisdom. Waltke discusses these issues in pp 127-133 and concludes that she is a type of Jesus Christ, and I am happy to concur on that point.

I appreciated the chapter by James H. Charlesworth, "Lady Wisdom and Johannine Christology" in James H Charlesworth and Michael A. Daise (eds), *Light in a Spotless Mirror*, (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International 2003) pp. 92-133. I also find it significant that Ben Witherington III chose to name his commentary *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995) (see p.53). I was struck by the statement by M. Scott, "Sophia and the Johannine Jesus" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992) p.77 : "In the *Wisdom of Solomon* Lady Wisdom is "effectively God in feminine form." While written centuries later than the book of *Proverbs*, it does demonstrate how stimulating the Biblical text is.

Every commentary I cited above have sections which discuss this theme and I enjoyed them all. Notably I wrote a note to myself that Waltke's section on Christology pp. 126-133 provides good material for a sermon or two.

In conclusion, then, here are just a few of the theological works which lay behind my simplifications. Lucas states that "there is a fairly widely held consensus that the Book of Proverbs is a collection of collections, the compilation of which probably stretched over a period of at least five hundred years. " (*Proverbs*, p.8) In the light of such diversity any book about *Proverbs* is going to leave a feeling of wishing one had space to say more.