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Ancient Words in Modern Times:  
Feminist Reinterpretations of Wisdom

by

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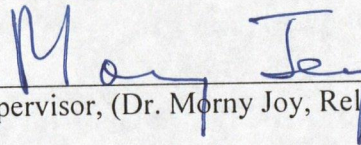
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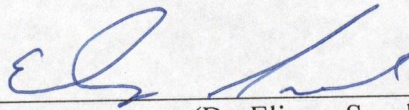
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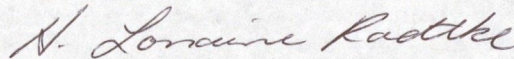
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## **Abstract**

This thesis seeks to expand scholarship regarding contemporary feminist interpretations of Wisdom's role in creation by examining the original Hebrew text in Proverbs 8:22-31, and pre- and post-second wave feminist analysis of that text by Christian scholars as well as secular academics. This study will thus address a missing facet of scholarship on Wisdom and feminism. By examining both the scriptural text and the reactions to it by differently positioned authors over approximately thirty years, this thesis will evaluate the extent to which feminist scholarship has been effective in influencing post-feminist interpretations on the subject of Wisdom.

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## **Introduction**

This thesis seeks to understand the way in which second-wave feminism and feminist theory has affected the mainstream interpretation of scripture. To that end, it seeks to expand scholarship regarding contemporary feminist interpretations of Wisdom by examining: 1) the original Hebrew text in Proverbs 8:22-31; 2) second-wave feminist interpretations; and 3) the analysis of that text by secular academics who wrote both before and after the most prominent feminist scholars. Specific components of this investigation include looking at the content and grammatical features of the primary text, the content of both both feminist and non-feminist interpretations of Proverbs 8:22-31, and consideration of the different ways in which feminist theory, practice and scholarship have affected non-feminist work. This analysis is limited to interpreters who are from scholarly or Christian backgrounds only. This limitation is because my own training is in Old Testament interpretation and Christianity, and does not extend to Judaism. I chose this particular passage concerning the role of Wisdom primarily because I have been fascinated by the passage as a whole and specifically the female character of Wisdom, as well as the potential implications of this figure, for years. The relevance of Proverbs 8:22-31 to this study is due to the contention among scholars regarding its meaning and its frequent interpretation by feminist and non-feminist scholars alike in the latter half of the twentieth century. The problems faced by scholars who focus on exegesis likely arise from a number of sources, one of which is the lack of clear and consistent definitions of key terms – such as wisdom itself (Von Rad, 1972, p. 33; 144). This study will thus address a missing facet of scholarship on Wisdom in that it will consider interpretations by scholars both before and

after feminist scholarship to determine what changes, if any, have taken place. By examining both the scriptural text and its interpretations undertaken by differently positioned authors over time, this thesis will investigate the way in which a movement (such as feminism) that is external to religions that use scripture, can affect the way that scripture is interpreted.

### *Methodology*

My methodological approach is interdisciplinary. It involves biblical criticism and literary theory in the analysis of the primary textual material, while a primarily comparative method is used in the analysis of feminist and non-feminist texts. This thesis is based upon a Hebrew text and its different interpretations – specifically Proverbs 8:22-31. As such, it is necessary to devote considerable time and space to the translation and grammatical analysis and commentary of this passage in order to provide a strong foundation for the remainder of the study. The existing literature regarding the passage also requires analysis, summation, and criticism. The analysis of such an ancient text in today's context is undertaken by a combination of approaches including: historical critical, literary theory and hermeneutics. Its treatment will thus be based again on literary theory, with additional layers of feminist biblical criticism. In evaluating the differences between the categories of text (feminist and non-feminist), it is necessary to use a comparative analytical method.

A hermeneutic approach informs this study and that of scholars who interpret Wisdom today. In this context, hermeneutics is generally regarded as a tool to assist in making ancient texts relevant today. According to the hermeneutic scholar Paul Ricoeur, texts are “atemporal” (1976, p. 91-2). By virtue of a text's atemporal nature, it has to a



certain extent, “cut its ties from all historical development” (1976, p. 91).<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that Ricoeur disregards the meaning of the original text in context – if accessible – but he argues that the contemporary task of interpretation is to make texts relevant for today. As a result, one may pursue the interpretation of this ancient text through a contemporary lens without the necessity for a complete, all-encompassing understanding of the text in its historical context.<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that one can merely gloss over the ancient text itself, as it is still vital that one have a working knowledge of the original text and its setting; however, it is acceptable for there to be on-going issues with regard to the interpretation of a text within different historical periods. The primary concern here is with contemporary interpretations of a text. Here, the ancient text and biblical interpretation both provide a background for the more recent considerations undertaken by late 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship.

### *Structure of Thesis*

In Chapter One, I will introduce the section of the Old Testament used as the basis for study in this thesis – Proverbs 8:22-31 – and discuss the historical context and how it fits within the genre of Hebrew poetry. Additionally, I will provide my own translation of the text, accompanied by a grammatical analysis. Finally, I will review some of the previous textual analyses and grammatical commentaries on this passage, while highlighting some of the major scholarly issues that arise with this passage.

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- 1 A contemporary scholar, Alan Cooper, argues similarly that “we do not understand a text by placing it in its ‘historical context,’ but in *ours*” (1987, p. 66). Furthermore, he contends that “the meaning of the work is not *in* the work, but in its actualization or conceptualization by interpreting communities” (1987, p. 66).
  - 2 There is often still a feeling among religious studies scholars – particularly those in biblical studies – that it is only the historical critical method that constitutes ‘real scholarship’, and represents this field at its scientific and value-free best. This view is problematic on account of “two hermeneutical errors: first, that *any* way of reading a text can be value free; second, even granting the possibility of such a method, that it would be worth reading texts in that way” (Cooper, 1987, p. 61).

In Chapters Two I examine the work of non-feminist scholars that was published prior to the rise of feminist biblical scholarship in the 1980's. In my consideration of these early non-feminist scholars, I consider specifically the work of both Gerhard Von Rad (1972), and Robert Wilken (1975). My examination will look at scholarly writings on Wisdom and provides the basis for the arguments regarding both the nature and role of the character of Wisdom.

In Chapter Three I consider the commentaries on the figure of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31 from those scholars who deliberately utilize a feminist approach to their work. My analysis of feminist work considers scholars such as Gale Yee (1992), Claudia Camp (1985), and Christine Yoder (2001). Again I focus on the various interpretations of the nature and role of the character of Wisdom as presented in Proverbs 8:22-31.

In Chapter Four, I discuss those post-feminist<sup>3</sup> interpretations that have arisen since the 1980's, and thus may have been influenced by feminist scholarship. This includes the work of Michael Fox (1996; 1997), R. Wybray (1995), and Leo Perdue (1994). My examination will consider if the rise of feminist scholarship affected the interpretation of scripture by non-feminist authors. I will then compare and contrast the post-feminist scholars with those of various prominent feminist academics, and will determine if these works have been influenced by feminist thought and scholarship.

In each chapter I am not looking at these analyses from the perspective of traditional biblical exegesis, but from the perspective of a more contemporary North American cultural and textual analysis. I am using this approach rather than hermeneutics because none of the

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<sup>3</sup> The use of the term post-feminist, I realize, can be misleading. However, it is a mere functional definition for the purposes of this thesis, as I do not think that we are living 'post-feminism'. I am using it to distinguish non-feminist male authors from their pre-feminist counterparts.

feminist biblical scholars explicitly identify themselves with this method of biblical scholarship. Instead, these scholars – for example Claudia Camp (1985) and Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983) – appeal to careful linguistic analysis, historically informed anthropology, and contemporary second-wave feminist theory in religion.

In my conclusion, I will consider the nature of the influence of feminist scholarship on post-feminist scholars based on my previous argumentation. In closing, I will consider the potential impact of this work on future research.

### *Thesis*

I am interested in examining the way in which a large political and social movement – in this case second-wave feminism – can affect the way that religious and secular academics interpret scripture. The character of Wisdom as interpreted by feminist scholars in Proverbs 8:22-31 provides a valuable example through which to examine and evaluate this phenomenon.

### *Justification*

The study of Proverbs 8:22-31 is an area of research within religious studies. This passage has a long history of analysis – from “Justin of Rome, Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria and Origen” (Kannengieser, 1999, p. 66) – and “has profoundly affected Western religious tradition” (Lenzi, 2006, p. 687). Specifically, the character of Wisdom is highlighted in this passage, making Proverbs 8:22-31 important both for its “remarkable picture of the role of Wisdom in creation” and its strong influence on both Jewish and Christian thought and theology (Scott, 1960, p. 213). These various features make this text an ideal starting point for contemporary analysis in terms of how contemporary groups

have used and interpreted it. Proverbs 8:22-31 is also a highly controversial passage. The primary “issues that have developed around this poem are due to its personification of Wisdom, suggesting that it is not merely a divine attribute but a seemingly independent and eternal entity from that of Yahweh” (Williams, 1999, p. 275-276). This idea that the character of Wisdom is a separate, possibly divine and autonomous entity, from YHWH,<sup>4</sup> has serious consequences for both Jewish and Christian monotheism.<sup>5</sup> While there has been much active discussion about this passage over the past few decades, there is still “no consensus on the significance and appropriate interpretation and employment of these images” (Foster, 1999, p. 94) of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31. The crux of the analytical and exegetical concern is this: what sort of creature or character does the hymn of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31 portray? Is Wisdom “a poetic personification” or “an attribute” (Wisdom, 1999, p. 21) of God or is she a separate entity entirely? This thesis will discuss concerns around the portrayal of Wisdom and other related areas, as it is in such areas that feminist and non-feminist scholars differ most.

In addition to its impact on religious scholarship, Proverbs 8:22-31 is a distinct and self-contained portion of the book of Proverbs, making it ideal for analysis separate from the remainder of the book and the genre of wisdom literature as a whole. Indeed, “it is reasonable to treat Proverbs 8:22-31 as a distinct poem with a separate genesis from the rest of the chapter” (Lenzi, 2006, p. 692). The distinctiveness of this section of Proverbs is

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4 Throughout this thesis I have endeavoured to be consistent in the term I use for the Jewish and Christian God. The scholars whom I cite employ a number of different terms, and as such I have kept to their terminology when citing them. Aside from that, I have chosen to use the transliteration of the Hebrew word commonly translated as 'The Lord', יהוה, or YHWH in order to maintain consistency and reduce the likelihood of causing offence.

5 Surprisingly, given that the theological implications are the same, there is very little to be found on Muslim interpretations of this passage.

one of the few traits of the passage that scholars agree upon - “there is perhaps no one who does not recognize a new section of Proverbs 8 beginning with v22. Yahweh is the first of that verse, and the principal agent in the ten lines that follow” (Skehan, 1979, p. 368).

Another distinctive feature of this text is the prominence it accords to the female character of Wisdom. This has made it a topic of special interest to feminist scholars, and thus provides a valuable pool of resources to draw upon for the purposes of this thesis. More generally, female figures – both symbolic and actual – are more heavily emphasized in the book of Proverbs than “in most of the books of the Old Testament” (Whybray 1995, p. 142). It is also the case that the “most profound personification of Wisdom ... [is] found in Proverbs 8:22-36” (Anderson, 1994, p. 22).

This emphasis on Wisdom and her femaleness provides fuel for feminist scholars who are concerned with the portrayal of women in the Bible. Additionally, it is of interest to non-feminist scholars, due to the uniqueness of its emphasis on the feminine. Over the centuries, there have been numerous academic theories regarding the exact nature of the origin and character of Wisdom, and while this thesis does not in any way intend to suggest a new version, it will take into account previous scholarship on this topic. Wisdom, in the form of a female person, only occurs in this chapter within the corpus of the Hebrew Old Testament. There have been many different explanations of the character of Wisdom in Proverbs 8 over the course of scholarship and she has gone through many forms, none of which have ever been completely agreed upon by scholars. All these forms – Wisdom's femaleness and the variety of explanations related to her – provide rich ground for the analysis of how interpretations have changed over the years, and how the influence of feminist scholarship may have shifted the predominant perspective and thus shed new light

on the topic.

## Chapter 1: Ancient Analysis

Proverbs 8:22-31

- 22 יהוה קנני ראשית דרכו קדם מפעליו מאז:  
The Lord begot me at the beginning of his works.
- 23 מעולם נסכתי מראש מקדמי-ארץ:  
From eternity, I was appointed,  
From the start, from before the earth was.
- 24 באין-תהמות חוללתי באין מעינות נכבדי-מים:  
When there were no deeps, I was brought forth,  
When there were not springs abounding with water.
- 25 בטרום הרים הטבעו לפני גבעות חוללתי:  
Before the mountains were settled,  
Before the hills, I was brought forth.
- 26 עד-לא עשה ארץ וחוצות וראש עפרות תבל:  
When he had not yet made the earth and the open fields,  
Or the first dust of the earth.
- 27 בהקינו שמים שם אני בחוקו חוג על-פני תהום:  
When he established the heavens, I was there,  
When he marked a circle upon the face of the deep.
- 28 באמצו שחקים ממעל בעזוז עינות תהום:  
When he made firm the clouds above,  
And fixed the springs of the deep.
- 29 בשומו לים חקו ומים לא יעברו-פיו בחוקו מוסדי ארץ:  
When he set the limits for the sea,  
So the waters would not transgress his command,  
And when he marked out the foundations of the earth
- 30 ואהיה אצלו אמן ואהיה שעשעים יום יום משחקת לפניו בכל-עת:  
Then I was beside him, as an artisan,  
I was his delight day after day  
Rejoicing always before him.
- 31 משחקת בתבל ארצו ושעשעי את-בני אדם: פ  
Rejoicing in his whole world  
and my delight was in the sons of man<sup>6</sup>.

### *History of the Text*

There are many areas scholars can consider when looking at the history of a text.

Three of these will be discussed here. Firstly, the dating of the text – a difficult task with

<sup>6</sup> Those who are very comfortable with Hebrew will notice that the original text provides little indication that the figure speaking is a female. Certainly, there are a couple of female verb endings; however, that is to be expected given the gender of the term *hokmah* (Wisdom), an abstract noun that follows the standard Hebrew convention for abstract nouns by being a feminine.

the book of Proverbs. Secondly, the authorship and historical influences on the text – this helps provide greater contextual information when examining the text. Finally, knowledge of the impact of a text, both when it was written and in contemporary society, can assist scholars in their consideration of the way a text may have been originally interpreted and what other possibilities of interpretation are today.

### **Dating**

The hymn of Proverbs 8:22-31, as well as the book of Proverbs as a whole, and the wisdom books of the Old Testament in general are incredibly difficult to date. With Proverbs, the difficulty arises mostly because the book “contains almost no obvious links with the normative faith of Israel” (Whybray 1995, p. 105). The earliest section of Proverbs (ch 1-9), also poses a similar problem, with suggestions for possible dates ranging “from the early monarchic period to the early post-exilic era, with perhaps the majority of scholars placing it in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE” (Hadley, 1995, p. 239). For Proverbs 8, there is general consensus that it comes from one of, if not the latest edition of the book of Proverbs – with scholars such as Alan Lenzi (2006, p. 688), Ronald Murphy (1981, p. 11), R.N. Whybray (1995, p. 105), W. Baumgartner (1956, p. 212), and Christine Yoder (2001, p. 112), all agreeing that this portion came into being during Persian times in the post-exilic period (around the fifth century BCE). Thus, it is likely safe to assume that, in the form currently available, Proverbs as a whole and Proverbs 8:22-31 more specifically, “is a product of a very late stage in Israel’s intellectual development” (Whybray 1995, p. 1).



## **Authorship and Influences**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars commonly adhered to the view that “Solomon was the author of the whole book” of Proverbs (Whybray 1995, p. 1). Over the past 50 years though, this view has shifted to support the theory that the book of Proverbs is most likely the “the work of a number of different authors of different periods” (Whybray 1995, p. 105). Most importantly for this paper is the idea that the various Wisdom poems in Proverbs – such as Proverbs 8:22-31 - “do not show signs of coming from one author” (Lenzi, 2006, p. 690). While this complicates how best to interpret the poem, it does shed some light on the variety of images used. What is also useful in considering the variety of language and imagery used in the poem is a discussion of the various influences that may have had an impact on the author(s) of the piece.

The book of Proverbs exhibits features common to both Israelite and other Middle Eastern cultures' writings. For example, the first section of Proverbs (ch. 1-9), is written in a didactic style – nothing unique there – but it starts with “an 'appeal for attention,’” which is a characteristic shared with the prophetic books of the Old Testament (Baumann, 1998, p. 46). In addition, many scholars claim that Proverbs 8:22-31 also shares traits with Middle Eastern mythologies, specifically when it comes to the origin and portrayal of the character of Wisdom. The most common proposed sources for Wisdom in the interpretations of contemporary scholars include: Ma'at (Whybray, 1965, p. 504; Camp, 1985, p. 510; Von Rad, 1972, p. 153) and Isis (Fox, 1997, p. 624) of Egyptian myth, and Ishtar of Babylonian myth (Whybray 1995, p. 73; Camp, 1985, p. 24). However, none of these other creation stories that scholars cite as possible sources for the origin of Wisdom in Proverbs closely resemble this biblical text in either “form or purpose” (Whybray, 1965, p. 510).

Furthermore, it is possible that Wisdom is based not on a mythological figure, but on “real world” women/figures such as: “a teacher, a prophet a herald, an angel, and various types of women (the wise wife, the lover, the provider, and the scorned lover)” (Fox, 1997, p. 625). At this time, however, it is unclear as to what, precisely, generated the impetus for the creation and portrayal of the character of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31 as “we do not at present possess any text, biblical or non-biblical, which bears a close literary relationship to [it]” (Whybray, 1965, p. 512-513). What is of greatest importance for the purposes of this thesis, is not the origin of the character, but what the result of her inclusion in the book has had on more recent theology and interpretation. For, whatever Wisdom's “models may be, that is not what she is *now*. ... Her story is a *mythos*”<sup>7</sup> (Fox, 1997, p. 626), and it is precisely that *mythos* and its contemporary interpretations that this thesis is concerned with.

### **Impact and Results**

The portrayal of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31 is unmatched within the Old Testament (Murphy 1981, p. 11). As a female figure, she is part of the host of women “whether symbolic or actual, [who] play a more prominent role in Proverbs than in most of the books of the Old Testament” (Whybray 1995, p. 142). In the beginning, it is likely that the authors of Proverbs considered Wisdom/wisdom merely as an “abstract quality” attributable to either divinity or humanity. With the depiction of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9 (and 24:7), however, this perception may have shifted as it is here that Wisdom is “described as a living person” (Whybray 1995, p. 71). In the history of the interpretation of

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<sup>7</sup> *Mythos*, as used by Fox is a narrative tool that “serves as an explanatory paradigm in areas where literal discourse must be supplemented by poetic imagination.” (Fox, 1997, p. 626) What this means is that Wisdom, and Proverbs as a whole, must not be taken literally and was not meant to be taken literally – it is something that requires a wider and more creative reading.

this passage, there have been many different ideas regarding the interpretation of Wisdom.

While readers in the fourth century B.C.E would have generally accepted that the personal language and first person perspective used in Proverbs 8:22-31 “indicated a divine person” (Dowling, 2002, p. 107), there are more elaborate theories propagated by contemporary scholars. Some of these scholars argue that this text “creates multivalent poetic possibilities in order to explain personified Wisdom’s origin and relationship to Yahweh, to polemicize against foreign gods of wisdom,<sup>8</sup> and to present personified Wisdom and Yahweh’s uniquely qualified, prophetlike messenger to humanity” (Lenzi, 2006, p. 687-88). Indeed, the relationship that Wisdom has with YHWH is the source of much concern for scholars – both ancient and modern. For example, Wisdom may either be seen as a threat to the monotheism of Judaism and Christianity, or she may be viewed as a precursor to the figure of Jesus (or in some cases the Holy Spirit) in the Christian trinity. Thus, during the development of the Massoretic<sup>9</sup> text and its subsequent translation and interpretation by scholars, there was a concern for maintaining the “image of Israel’s one God, who has no consort and is neither male nor female” (Foster, 1999, p. 96). Later theologians, such as Origen, understood Wisdom as “the beginning of all the ways of God,” and as not “an impersonal attribute of God but it in fact the first-born Son of God” (Dowling, 2002, p. 102-103).

There is also one final possible result (and reasoning) for the portrayal of Wisdom in Proverbs. This is that Wisdom may be read as a literary device. During the post-exilic

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8 While it may be that the hymn of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31 was meant to turn people away from foreign gods, it is also possible that the purpose of creating the figure of Wisdom and portraying her as something closely associated with the divine was to present her as “an attractive substitute for the goddess” (Whybray 1995, p. 72).

9 The Masoretic text is considered to be the oldest and most authoritative version of the Hebrew Bible.

period, when this text was most likely composed, there may have been the feeling of an increasing distance between the Israelites and their national god YHWH. The character of Wisdom then, may have been a literary device used to help “bridge the growing gap between a transcendent deity and the world of human beings” (Whybray, 1995, p. 5). Each of the depictions of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31 – her relationship with God, and her relationship with humanity – have fuelled contemporary scholars' discussions and interpretations of the character of Wisdom. As a result, they are dependent on different elements from the previous centuries of scholarship. One important element to take into consideration in this context is the influence of the form and content of biblical Hebrew poetry.

### *Hebrew Poetry*

Hebrew poetry relies upon three key features to convey its message to readers/listeners. The first is the language and imagery used in the poem. The specific choice of words aids in enhancing the imagery of the poem and provides a foundational layer of meaning to the poem for the reader. Secondly, the structure of the poem is also very important. Ancient Hebrew poetry relies upon devices such as parallelism and acrostics to aid in both memorization and reinforcing the content of the piece. Finally, the overall content and feel of the poem – or more specifically in the case of Proverbs 8:22-31, the hymn – serves, as in English poetry, as a key component for fully understanding the piece. This text is considered by scholars to be part of the “traditional wisdom books” of Proverbs, Job, and Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) (Sheppard, 1980, p. 5). As such, this passage is key for the understanding of Wisdom not just due to its inclusion within the wisdom

literature of the Old Testament but also because it contains the “most intensive reflection on wisdom” within the book of Proverbs (Fox, 1997, p. 613).

### **Language and Imagery**

Studying the language and imagery of the poem in Proverbs 8:22-31, particularly that concerning the character of Wisdom is a challenging activity. This is in part due to the possibility that the terms chosen may have been used strictly because of their multiplicity of meanings. Such would not be surprising given that this passage is part of wisdom literature (a genre known for deliberate multiple interpretations). In addition there is a note in Proverbs 1:6 that the proverbs related in the book are intended “to teach one how to understand riddles” (Hurowitz, 1999, p. 398). Furthermore, this passage is heavily laden with metaphors, thus adding another layer of complexity for interpreters. While there can be little doubt that the genre of wisdom literature was also “cultivated in the ancient Near East, notably in Egypt, Sumeria, Babylon, and other parts of the Fertile Crescent” (Bakon, 2008, p. 222), the version created within Israel “underwent some metamorphoses in the development of this genre of creativity” (Bakon, 2008, p. 222). Hence there are both similarities and differences in terms of both themes/content and language to those other civilizations.

Another problematic aspect, according to Gale Yee, are the metaphors in the text, as they provide “the primary linguistic means through which we conceptualize Deity” (1992, p. 85), and, as such, within Proverbs 8:22-31 they are used heavily in the description of creation, YHWH, and Wisdom. She cautions though, that “metaphors by their very nature cannot define God; they cannot and should not be taken literally” (Yee, 1992, p.

85).<sup>10</sup> Again, this brings another challenge to interpretation – how are contemporary scholars to deal with ancient metaphors and language with deliberate multiple meanings? This aside from the challenges brought simply due to working in another language, as well as with themes likely drawn from many sources. Some of these concerns are addressed by examining the structural traits of the poem, in addition to considering the content of the poem with regards to the figure of Wisdom.

### **Structure and Form**

The poem of Proverbs 8:22-31 is a distinct section within the chapter. According to Shimon Bakon, it is the third section in a four-part hymn to Wisdom in chapter 8 of Proverbs (2008, p. 223). However, according to Patrick Skehan, the poem is part of the greater structure of the chapter which consists of a “unique” system of “seven uniform stanzas of five lines each” (1979, p. 366). It exists as part of the opening lectures within the book, which are “constructed on careful schema” (Fox, 1997, p. 617). In and of itself, the poem “has its own literary structure” (Anderson, 1994, p. 22). However, as alluded to above, there is only nominal agreement among scholars as to what precisely that structure is. Most often, scholars divide the poem into three sections – 8:22-26, 27-29, and 30-31 – often noting the unusual aspects of verses 30 and 31 (Matlack, 1988, p. 425-6).<sup>11</sup> The poem builds up to a climax in verses 22-31. In the earlier portions of the chapter, Wisdom invites the people she listens to her, and extolls the virtues of her accessibility and the benefit that comes to those who heed her call (Bakon, 2008, p. 225). It is in this third section, though,

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<sup>10</sup> Such statements as those in Proverbs 8:22-31 cannot be taken literally, despite this passage providing the richest and deepest personification in the Old Testament (Murphy, 1985, p. 11), as there is “no single human type or role with all the characteristics of Lady Wisdom” (Fox, 1997, p. 625).

<sup>11</sup> Matlack claims that verses 30 and 31 are “totally unlike parts one and two of the poem and anything else in Hebrew literature” (1988, p. 426).

where her “exalted position” as “the Lord's handmaiden” is revealed (Bakon, 2008, p. 225).

The disagreement over the precise structure of the poem is understandable as “recognition of the formal structure of this chapter is hindered to a limited degree by textual flaws (in vv 11, 13a, 30-34)” (Skehan, 1979, p. 368). The concern over the structure of the poem and the implications of the specific placement of key terms and grammatical phrases is evident in the volume of grammatical analyses that exist on this passage (and will be discussed in some detail later). In the interim, it must suffice to provide one brief example of the concern for structure provided by R.N. Whybray. Whybray claims that the 'when not' and 'before' of verses 24-26 can be considered “reminiscences of a stylistic tradition” that was unique to Israel (1965, p. 508). Furthermore, Whybray states that this passage has “several distinctive features” related to the structure of the poem that are “characteristically biblical” (1965, p. 508-9). This leads him to argue that the concept of Wisdom as depicted in Proverbs 8:22-31 is therefore a specifically Israelite idea (1965, p. 508-9) – something that other scholars take issue with. From the above discussion it is obvious that there are a number of disparate views regarding the exact structure of this passage.

### **Content and Ideas**

The general contents of this passage also influence how scholars interpret it. The poem relates a version of a creation story. It does so however, in the style of a hymn, honouring one who was there during creation. Such a feature differentiates this poem from the more well-known creation accounts in the book of Genesis within the Old Testament. Again, Whybray offers some insight, arguing that not only is Proverbs 8:22-31 “reminiscent of the style of a creation hymn,”<sup>12</sup> but also that this hymn uses words and phrases that are

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<sup>12</sup> Gerlinde Baumann also agrees that Proverbs 8:22-31 “is a hymn” (1998, p. 46).

similar to those of “Egyptian and Babylonian texts of creation” (1965, p. 504). He goes on to note that while there are some striking similarities in content to sources outside of Israel, ultimately the ideas as they are presented, (on the basis of content, not just structure), “point to a common Israelite stock of ideas and vocabulary” (1965, p. 512-513). Indeed, it is plausible that the idea behind the poem in Proverbs 8:22-31 could have come from an outside source and been modified to suit the tastes and needs of the Israelite population, and that one of these requirements may have been a creation story involving a character in addition to YHWH. Unfortunately, this does not ultimately answer the question of what is meant by this passage, nor fully explain how such a potentially heretical piece found its way into the final version of Proverbs. Some of these problems and concerns are highlighted by examining a sample of the grammatical issues raised in the translation of this passage, in addition to regarding the passage as a whole when considering the origin and role of Wisdom in creation.

### ***The Origin, Nature, and Role of Wisdom in Creation***

Since the bulk of this thesis is taken up with a detailed discussion of the various scholarly opinions on the exact nature and role of Wisdom, it is useful to provide a brief overview of these perspectives at this time that will help to familiarize the reader with these ideas that are directly relevant to the text being analyzed. Within the tradition of a personified Wisdom poem, the character of Wisdom is depicted in a number of different ways, and there is no reason to assume that every author of a Wisdom poem had the same ideas in mind while writing (Lenzi, 2006, p. 690), or that the author of Proverbs 8:22-31 did not deliberately use words that had more than one meaning (Scott, 1960, p. 221). This has



given rise, in part, to the many different scholarly opinions on the nature of Wisdom. Additionally, the creation story of Proverbs 8 bears grammatical similarities to both the creation account of Genesis 2:4 and the *Enuma Elish*, a Babylonian creation story (Hurowitz, 1999, p. 393). Indeed, the depiction of creation discussed in this thesis may be seen as “a poetical paraphrase” of the Genesis story (Landes, 1974, p. 279). These similarities result in scholars wondering how the character of Wisdom came to be included in the Proverbs version and just what her role in creation may have been according to the author(s). Finally, there is the issue of Wisdom being portrayed as a female figure. This too, is a strange feature of the text, as it is difficult to reconcile the image of a positive female figure related to YHWH as part of a text “that is patriarchal in source and monotheistic in perspective” (Young, 2001, p. 221). This points to the idea that, perhaps in the post-exilic period in which this text was likely composed, the position of women within Israelite society could not have been that of purely subordinate, second-class citizens. This is because if this were the case, then “a female personification like the Wisdom Figure would not have made sense” (Baumann, 1998, p. 72). With each of these factors in mind, I will now consider some of the interpretations of the origin, nature, and role of Wisdom in creation based on Proverbs 8:22-31.

## Origin

Wisdom's origins in Proverbs 8 are fairly clearly defined from a textual perspective. She is, undeniably, the “first act of creation” (Matlack, 1988, p. 425; Young, 2001, p. 221). Wisdom occupies a place of “absolute chronological priority” (Lenzi, 2006, p. 697). The manner in which Wisdom was created, however, is something about which scholars are not

in complete agreement. The majority of contemporary scholars accept that within the text there is a conspicuous and strong use of birth language to describe how Wisdom came into being. The use of birth language is something that is especially striking, particularly given the use of the masculine pronoun for God. It seems clear, however, that the author(s) deliberately chose to use “the metaphor of a woman giving birth” (Matlack, 1988, p. 427) when describing the origins of Wisdom. As “God's daughter” (Yee, 1992, p. 91; Anderson, 1994, p. 58), Wisdom is a transcendent being who is at least partially divine. The metaphor of birth, and the specific verb used (יָלַד) (Hurowitz, 1999, p. 394), also harkens back to the birth of Cain in Genesis 4:1 – the first human born of a woman – and reinforces Wisdom's point about her existence since the very beginning. The alternative view, of God giving birth to Wisdom, is to claim that YHWH “acquired wisdom” as the prerequisite for creating the universe (Lenzi, 2006, p. 697). This perspective has far fewer supporters within the academic community, and relies on a very rigid reading of the text.

Outside of the text itself, there is the question of the source of the inspiration for the character of Wisdom. Two primary options arise within the literature – she may be based upon Israelite women (Yoder, 2001, p. 8), or she may be based upon other Middle Eastern goddesses (such as Astarte from Mesopotamia and Ma'at from Egypt). It is likely that there would have been the exchange of ideas among the various groups living in the region. Therefore, it is unsurprising to find that some aspects of the style of Egyptian poetry is echoed in Proverbs 8:22-29 (Von Rad, 1972, p. 153), in addition to the portrayal of Wisdom being informed by imagery from foreign mythologies (Baumann, 1998, p. 44; Scott, 1960, p. 213; Perdue, 1994, p. 330). Ultimately though, the academic search for a

“clear-cut *origin* of the female figure of Wisdom personified proved fruitless” (Camp, 1985, p. 284-285) as there is no obvious data to support any of the interpretations that argue for exclusivity of meaning. Despite some conflict regarding the origin of the character of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31, it is still necessary to consider the exact nature of the figure – i.e. who she is in relation to YHWH.

### **The Nature of Wisdom**

Integral to the interpretation of Proverbs 8:22-31 is the question of what precisely does this passage reveal about Wisdom (Wisdom, 1999, p. 21)? The question of who or what exactly Wisdom 'is' is one that scholars have also wrestled with for some time. At this point, there are three main scholarly theories regarding the nature of Wisdom, she is: 1) an attribute of YHWH or an hypostatization, 2) a poetic personification, or 3) an alternative to a goddess (Davidson, 2006, p. 37-41). In brief, the hypostatization theory argues that Wisdom is a self-existent being (Scott, 1960, p. 213-4) that exists separate but related to YHWH, and that she may also be a unique entity that also represents the wisdom of YHWH (Yee, 1992, p. 90-91; Hadley, 1995, p. 242; Connor, 1991, p. 92; Von Rad, 1972, p. 147; Yoder, 2001, p. 7-8; Lenzi, 2006, p. 705). The poetic personification theory argues that the portrayal of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31 is purely metaphorical, and that instead of seeing Wisdom as a separate entity from YHWH, one should read the discussion of Wisdom purely as a representation of YHWH's own wisdom (Baumann, 1998, p. 60; Judisch, 1983, p. 49). Finally, there is the argument that Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31 is actually an independent and separate goddess alongside YHWH, and that instead of being a subordinate, passive being, Wisdom is a representation of a goddess with all the powers and

rights that go along with that title (Dowling, 2002, p. 107; Pentiu, 2001, p. 256; Grey, 2001, p. 103; Camp, 1985, p. 25; Perdue, 1994, p. 121, 331, 337; Fox, 1997, p. 633; Whybray, 1995, p. 72; Engelsman, 1979, p. 81; Ruether, 1983, p. 100; Scott, 1960, p. 223; Davidson, 2006, p. 54). Regardless of how one interprets the nature of the character of Wisdom, there can be little doubt that her personification has “no rival in the Old Testament” (Burns, 1997, p. 141) in terms of depth, breadth, or overall complexity. She seems to embody the features of many different goddesses and women (Murphy, 1985, p. 8), and even if these traits were not intended to point to Wisdom as a goddess nor as a poetic device, they still come together to create a dynamic portrait of the character of Wisdom.

### **The Role of Wisdom in Creation**

The role of Wisdom in creation is closely tied to the manner in which one interprets her nature. Ultimately though, the question boils down to whether she was active or passive during the creation of the cosmos. Those who favour the theory that Wisdom is simply a poetic personification also argue that Wisdom would necessarily have had to have been passive during creation, since she is not something that can physically act, although Wisdom must have been present alongside YHWH at the time of creation (Matlack, 1988, p. 426). Those who support the hypostatization theory can argue either side of the point, saying alternatively that it is YHWH who was the active agent during creation (Lenzi, 2006, p. 698; Fox, 1997, p. 628; Yee, 1992, p. 85; Dahood, 1968, p. 520) or that it is possible that Wisdom “took part in creation alongside” YHWH (Lenzi, 2006, p. 714; Weeks, 2006, p. 433). Those who support the theory that Wisdom is a divine being (a

goddess) who was created by YHWH, clearly support the extension of that theory to the conclusion that she also worked alongside YHWH during the creation of the cosmos (Connor, 1991, p. 89; Williams, 1999, p. 276; Wisdom, 1999, p. 26). The role of Wisdom in creation is further detailed and muddled by the term *'amon* (variously translated as: child, artisan, and faithful, among others) in verse 30. While it is clear that Wisdom was present during creation (Laporte, 1975, p. 115), it is far less clear how she participated in creation, if at all. How scholars interpret *'amon* is linked to their resultant analysis of both the nature and role of Wisdom in creation, just as a scholar's theories regarding the origin, nature and role of Wisdom colours their interpretation of *'amon* – given, of course, that they deal with the text in Hebrew.

### ***Grammar in Translation***

There are numerous interesting grammatical tidbits within Proverbs 8:22-31. I have chosen to highlight a few areas which I consider to be key to a greater understanding of the poem from a grammatical perspective. Thus, the purpose of this section is to give the reader a glimpse into the complexities and nuances of Hebrew poetic grammar as presented in Proverbs 8:22-31.

According to Stuart Weeks, “complicated constructions are characteristic of this work” (2006, p. 437). Additionally, there is little else to draw comparisons with within biblical literature, especially with relation to the character of Wisdom, as these texts do not provide a “uniform glimpse” of Wisdom (Bergant, 1984, p. 5). Adding further complications is the apparently deliberate “accumulation of ambiguous terms” within this section of Proverbs (Baumann, 1998, p. 70). Each of these factors add to the density of

meaning, and result in a grammatically interesting and complex passage.

### **The Interpretation of *Qana***

The verb *qnh* (קנה) is most frequently translated as 'to possess' and, along with '*amon* (אמן), is one of the most frequently discussed aspects of Proverbs 8:22-31 (Whybray, 1995, p. 74-5). It appears in verse 22, as קָנַנִּי (*qanani*), in pause in the 3<sup>rd</sup> masculine singular perfect Qal (i.e. simple active) form, with a 1<sup>st</sup> person singular ending (GKC, 1974, §59f). The possible translations for the term vary from 'acquired' to 'created,' to 'possessed,' and to 'bought' (Whybray, 1995, p. 75). For interpretation of the term in this context, there are two competing schools of thought. The first argues that the most appropriate interpretation of this term in this context is to translate it as 'created me.' This reading is based on examining the use of the word *qana* in the Old Testament. While in most instances the best interpretation is thought to be 'to buy', in some of these instances the term "could only mean 'to create'" (Whybray, 1995, p. 75). Another author argues that to translate קָנַנִּי as 'created me' has no evidence within the context of the Old Testament, despite also rejecting the most common alternative of YHWH's possession of Wisdom as either a figure or a personal trait (Vawter, 1980, p. 208, 213). The result of all this scholarly discussion is that *qana* is translated in the manner that best suits the interpreter's view of the text.

### **Language Patterns**

While not integral to the complete understanding of the passage, there are a number of grammatical and lexical trends that occur throughout the poem. These enhance the

reading of the poem and often point out unique features of the poetry itself. In a number of places a pattern of alliteration or initial labials (m, b, w) occurs. In verses 23-26, these initial labials set the tone for the next stanza of the poem, in which they are “universal” (Skehan, 1979, p. 371). Also in the stanza from verses 23-26, there are syntactic bookends that assist in setting the boundaries of the section – *re šit* in verse 22a, *ro š* and *‘ares* in verse 23b, and *‘eres* in verse 26<sup>13</sup> a and *ro š* in verse 26b (Skehan, 1979, p. 371).

The next stanza (verses 27-31) also picks up on the labial alliteration mentioned previously and enhances it to encompass the majority of the segment. According to Patrick Skehan, it is “syntactically the closest knit,” due in part to the alliteration, and “strong assonance with *ō* ... supported by recurrent *u*-vowels” (1979, p. 372). Also in these verses there is an expansion of a structure used in verse 23 – that of “when – then – when”, though in the case of verses 27-29,<sup>14</sup> it is “when – then –“ followed by five “whens” (Weeks, 2006, p. 437). The pattern of alliteration is carried through to the final stanza (verses 30 and 31), though in this section, it is sustained mostly through “frequently recurring *m*’s” (Skehan, 1979, p. 372). As previously mentioned, none of these facts are necessary in order to gain the basic meaning of the poem; however, they do help to enhance one’s understanding and appreciation for the piece.

### ***Hapax Legomenon***

In addition to the interpretive challenges posed by the ambiguous terminology mentioned earlier, there are also a few *hapax legomena* – words that only appear once

13. Also of interest is the phrase 'לֹא-עִי' in verse 26; while literally it is translated as 'not with', it is best translated as 'before' as the preposition עִי "can indicate that something occurs up to the time indicated by its object." (Williams, 2007, §311)

14 Verses 27 and 29 also contain rather rare *ayin-ayin* verbs, both in the Qal infinitive form. (GKC, 1974, §67r, Juöun, 1993, §821)

within the Hebrew Bible. There are three that I will discuss here - נִסְכָּתִי (generally 'I was brought forth') and מִקְדָּמֵי-אָרֶץ (generally 'I was there before the earth') in verse 23, and אָמוֹן in verse 30. The first – נִסְכָּתִי – is a passive form of the verb נָסַךְ (*nsk*) commonly translated as 'to pour'. The use of this root verb “in Canaanite texts suggests that the biblical sage, when employing *nsk*, was borrowing the concept of the divine emanation of Wisdom from Canaanite sources (Dahood, 1968, p. 515). The second *hapax legomenon* – מִקְדָּמֵי-אָרֶץ (which roughly translates as: 'I was there before the earth') – has little commentary available, and can only “be interpreted on its own merits” (Dahood, 1968, p. 515) – i.e. one must consider the term only within the context in which appears. Finally, the term '*amon* – אָמוֹן – is possibly one of the most discussed terms from the Hebrew Bible, and certainly one of the greatest points of contention among scholars of Proverbs. The problems that arise from '*amon* are many-fold, and as such it will be discussed on its own. However, at a minimum, it is necessary to state that there are a number of ways in which one may interpret this term. In addition, the term also poses a grammatical problem<sup>15</sup> by not taking the gender one expects based on the gendered nature of the preceding verses. At this time, there is no widespread scholarly agreement on how to correctly or more appropriately translate this term.

### **'Amon**

It is not the purpose of this thesis to propose a final and decisive interpretation of the term '*amon*. Indeed, at this time it is likely impossible for such a proposal to be put

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<sup>15</sup> See Weeks (2006, p. 434) for a more detailed description.



forth for this sentence for Proverbs 8:30a “presents one of the great puzzles in the Hebrew Bible” (Fox “*Amon*” 699). This term “seems to have confused even the earliest translators and commentators, and its interpretation continues to divide modern scholars” (Weeks, 2006, p. 433). Indeed, it is not even clear whether “the word is a part of the verb itself, an adverb, and adjective, or a noun” (Weeks, 2006, p. 439). Furthermore, there is little available to prove that academics are even approaching the interpretation of this term in the correct manner (Lenzi, 2006, p. 706). Indeed, it is quite possible – given Proverbs penchant for puns, and its place within Hebrew wisdom literature more generally – that multiple simultaneous meanings were intended by the author(s). Regardless, it is still necessary to spend some time considering what modern scholarship has determined are the most appropriate interpretations in order to provide further background for the analysis of this passage's interpretation by both feminist and non-feminist scholars alike.

There are two primary interpretations for the word *'amon* (אָמוֹן) that appears in Proverbs 8:30. One is that of child/ward/nursling, and the other is that of master craftsman/architect (Lenzi, 2006, p. 705; Fox, 1996, p. 699).<sup>16</sup> The repercussions of these two very different translations should not be overlooked (Von Rad, 1972, p. 152), as behind them lies the answer to the question of what, precisely is the nature of Wisdom and how (if at all) did she participate in the creation of the cosmos. Furthermore, if Wisdom is found to be an active participant, this word also has implications for the monotheistic theology of both Judaism and Christianity. Depending on which of these two translations one follows, the image of Wisdom provided differs drastically – from either a child playing before YHWH during creation, to a skilled artisan helping YHWH with the planning and

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<sup>16</sup> Fox also offers a third “main explanation” of ‘constant(ly)’ (1997, p. 699).

execution of the work of creation (Anderson, 1994, p. 58).

### Child and Ward

The main argument for translating *'amon* in verse 30 as 'child' (or something similar), is based on scholars understanding of the birth language that occurs earlier in the passage.<sup>17</sup> Such scholars argue that to consider Wisdom a 'child' during the creation of the cosmos is a fitting metaphor “since Wisdom is 'fathered' and 'begotten' earlier in the poem” (Perdue, 1994, p. 91). To position Wisdom in the role of a child places her in a passive role. This is fitting, both because of the preceding references to her birth, but also the subsequent statements describing her playing joyfully (Weeks, 2006, p. 433).

Grammatically, there are a couple of different ways in which the term may be parsed for the result to be related to Wisdom being conceived as a child. It may be read as an infinitive absolute, meaning “being raised” or “growing up” (Hurowitz, 1999, p. 391-2; Weeks, 2006, p. 433). Or, it may be taken as a passive participle of the verb *'mn* (מנן), meaning “nursling” or “child” (Weeks, 2006, p. 433). The final grammatical option requires repointing<sup>18</sup> it to *'amun*, making it into a different passive participle found in Lam 3:5, where it is translated as 'brought up (a child)' (Whybray, 1995, p. 76). According to V. A. Hurowitz, the depiction of Wisdom as a child “practically precludes her role as an architect or advisor [sic], unless she was a precocious prodigy” (1999, p. 399-400).<sup>19</sup> Michael Fox also follows this line of thought by arguing that it is the emphasis on Wisdom's play or joy

17 On some occasions, academics simply put this theory forward as an assertion, stating “the principal connotation of [*'amon*] in this passage is nursling, fledgling, novice, ward, or the like;” (Hurowitz, 1999, p. 391) or “the only proper understanding of *'mn* is "nursling".” (Hurowitz, 1999, p. 396)

18 To 'repoint' a word in biblical Hebrew is to change the vowels ('points') that are beneath the consonants of the term. Thus, the written term *'amon* can be repointed to *'amun* in order to provide a greater range of possible interpretations.

19 To this statement I must respond with the question: given that Wisdom is the first-born of God, would it not be reasonable to expect that she would be a prodigy?

that not only supports the reading of her as a child but also “seems to be a deliberate refutation of the notion that wisdom had an active productive role in the work of creation” (1996, p. 700). Other scholars disagree with the above reasoning. R. B. Y. Scott, for example, states that “the thought of Wisdom as a child playing is not really congruous with the total context of Prov. viii, and this suggestion, based on the metaphors of birth and play, is superficial” (Scott, 1960, p. 218). Thus it is clear that while there is support for the view of Wisdom as a child, there are some unresolved issues with this perspective.

### **Architect and Craftsman**

The support for reading *'amon* as architect or craftsman comes primarily from other textual sources.<sup>20</sup> While *'amon* as it appears in verse 30 is a *hapax legomenon*, it does appear in a related form in Jer 52:15, where it is thought to refer to artisans as a group, and possibly related to an Akkadian noun with a similar meaning (Whybray, 1995, p. 76). It is also possible, as scholars in this camp may argue, that it is a variant on or error of the noun *'mn* (ימנ) from Cant 7:2, “where it is generally taken to mean “master craftsman” (Weeks, 2006, p. 433). Scholars also find support for reading ימנ as master craftsman from the Wisdom of Solomon (7:22, 8:6, and 14:2), where Wisdom is called “*technitis*, or crafts(wo)man” (Muphy, 1985, p. 5). Similarly to the translation of 'child,' there are syntactic grounds on which to base a translation of 'artisan'. This reading is supported on morphological grounds based on the Massoretic vocalization and arguing that the noun is one that refers to professions (Hurowitz, 1999, p. 392). Further support for this reading

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<sup>20</sup> However, such textual arguments do not preclude academics simply putting forward their theory as an assertion, stating that Wisdom “existed before the creation of the world, and she participated in it as a major artisan” (Connor, 1991, p. 91).

comes from the ancient scholars who studied it. Based on the Targum, “the Rabbis understood the meaning of Prov 8:30 to be ‘architect’. ... [while] the Masoretes [as previously mentioned] understood the word to mean ‘craftsman’” (Davidson, 2006, p. 45). Finally, it is possible to argue that *'amon* as it appears in Proverbs 8:30 should be read as craftsman or architect because her presence there not only implies activity, but also because, in other situations within the Old Testament, creation is considered a process of building (Hurowitz, 1999, p. 399) – not something where a child would be present.

### Other Options

There are two other less popular, but not less unlikely possibilities available in the literature for the translation of *'amon*. These are: 'constantly'/'faithful', and 'adviser'/'guide'.

The support for a reading of 'constant' comes from reading *'amon* as a possible derivative of *'mn*. This also can be used to support a reading of 'child'. This, however, is a comparatively rarer translation of the term, with the most common being an implication of “constancy and fidelity” (Weeks, 2006, p. 439). Thus, Wisdom may be seen as existing “(as) a faithful one” or “(in) faithfulness” (Weeks, 2006, p. 440). One may also parse *'amon* in verse 30 as an infinitive absolute which may then be read adverbally, resulting in a meaning related to the German sense of *'beständig'*, i.e. 'constant(ly)', 'faithful(ly)' (Fox, 1996, p. 700).

Scott supports an interpretation of 'guardian' through the overall feeling of the poem, arguing that it is a reading that “is particularly congenial to the larger setting of Prov. viii ... [and is] suitable in the immediate context” (1960, p. 219). It is also argued that this is an appropriate reading based on another statement in Proverbs 3:19 that YHWH made

the world by wisdom, thus interpreting Wisdom as YHWH's guide or adviser allows her to be seen as “personifying the principle of harmony or coherence in the world that he has made” (Whybray, 1995, p. 77). For the most part, the arguments for this interpretation come primarily from context within the text (Hurowitz, 1999, p. 399);<sup>21</sup> although there is some linguistic support. In this case, it comes from “Akkadian and Aramaic cognates meaning advisor [sic] and designating important court officials” (Hurowitz, 1999, p. 392). This is supported by evidence from Mesopotamian literature, and “is the only interpretation that has not been challenged because of morphological difficulties” (Hurowitz, 1999, p. 392). Thus, this option too, appears to be a viable possibility when considering the nature and role of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31.

Ultimately, a case can be made for any of the above possible interpretations (Scott, 1960, p. 220) as none are “unequivocally demanded or excluded by the text” (Cooper, 1987, p. 75). It simply comes down to which reading is preferable and which evidence seems most compelling to the author at the time. Indeed, it is quite possible that the author of Proverbs 8 may have deliberately “used a word capable of more than one meaning” (Scott, 1960, p. 221). “The fact that divergent interpretations of *'amon* are both possible and plausible suggests ... that no single interpretation can contain the ‘real meaning’ of the text” (Cooper, 1987, p. 74). While such vagueness does not lead us any closer to the perfect translation, it does provide, as this entire chapter was intended to, a well rounded background on some of the varieties of interpretation that this passage has received during the course of the latter part of the twentieth century. As a result, in Chapter Three I intend

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<sup>21</sup> Although, as always, there are still some scholars who simply provide their assertion that this is the correct interpretation, stating that the “preferred” reading of *'amon* is “confidant.” (Burns, 1997, p. 141)

to discuss the analyses put forth by those who label their work as 'feminist' in order to examine some of their methods, theories, and issues that arise so that I may better compare them with non-feminist works and so determine if the rise of feminist scholarship has impacted scholarship as a whole within the realm of scriptural interpretation. Firstly however, it is appropriate to consider the work of those non-feminist scholars whose work came before feminist scholarship, thus providing the backdrop for the later scholarship on Proverbs and Wisdom.

## Chapter 2: Pre-Feminist Approaches to Wisdom

This chapter will undertake the analysis of Proverbs 8:22-31 from a thematic perspective. That is, I will provide a summary of the work done by non-feminist scholars prior to the rise of feminist scholarship in the 1970's and 1980's with regard to their interpretations of the nature and role of Wisdom – specifically the nature of the character of Wisdom, as well as her perceived role in/during the creation of the universe. I also include the work of some more recent scholars in this discussion who still conform to the pre-feminist interpretations of Wisdom as presented in Proverbs 8:22-31.

### *Background*

Gerhard Von Rad was one of the first contemporary scholars to compile a thorough analysis of the place of Wisdom/wisdom in Israelite mythology. Von Rad is a traditional scholar, in the mode of biblical historical criticism which in this instance involves: considering the possible origins and development of the text, paying close attention to the original text and possible translations, and examining the historical context of the text. His 1972 book *Wisdom in Israel* is thus the epitome of the 'traditional' scholarly interpretation of Wisdom – both in the Old Testament as a whole, and Proverbs 8:22-31 specifically. While the text I have used is a translation from the original German, on the whole it is clear what Von Rad is proposing. As such, it has provided a foundation for many – if not all – future scholars' approaches to Wisdom in the Old Testament. Even almost forty years later, his text is still considered required reading for those interested in Israelite Wisdom. Within his commentaries on Proverbs 8:22-31, Von Rad highlights a number of issues that are still being debated among the scholarly community today. He notes that there are

numerous linguistic problems with the passage due in no small part to the various ambiguous terms I have referenced previously; arguing that the texts “present problems of exegesis” (1972, p. 144). Additionally, Von Rad notes the possibility of reading the role of Wisdom as being not just a child, but also an architect. Ultimately however, he utterly disregards that reading as for him, it “fits so ill with all that we otherwise seem to know of early Yahwism” (1972, p. 152). This reading of Wisdom as inactive is one which remains prominent and only in recent decades has been challenged by feminist scholars.

Furthermore, his analysis also considers the possibility of foreign influence on the character of Wisdom as she is presented in Proverbs 8:22-31. Again however, he disregards any interpretation that would interpret Wisdom herself as a goddess, despite finding influence in her speech patterns from other local goddesses (1972, p. 153). This interpretation too, remained unchallenged until greater analysis was undertaken by feminist scholars as I will discuss later. Ultimately, Wisdom for Von Rad is a vague thing – she has the potential to be interpreted as a child (1972, p. 152), but for him she is also a personification – “an attribute of the world” (1972, p. 154, 171). This tendency to avoid using specific terms and attributes when attempting to discuss or describe Wisdom remains evident in much of the scholarship on Wisdom, particularly that of non-feminists. The influence of Von Rad's interpretations in Wisdom has been widespread, and his work is still referenced by scholars today, including many of those cited here. Additionally, even if his work is not directly referenced, many scholars have expanded and qualified his theories in order to provide further analysis of Wisdom in ancient Israel.



## *Theories*

The work done by non-feminist scholars uses language that is, on the whole, somewhat generic if not vague. As a result, the categories put forward by scholars for the nature and role of Wisdom as presented in Proverbs 8:22-31 are not as obvious, clearly defined, or easily labelled as those theories put forth by feminist scholars – as will become apparent in the next chapter. This section will consider both the nature and role of Wisdom as proposed by non-feminist scholars. Overall, there are two ways of interpreting the nature of Wisdom: firstly as a concrete/living being, or secondly, as an abstract figure. It is these two possible interpretations that will be discussed here.

### **The Nature of Wisdom: Living Being**

The most common manner in which non-feminist scholars present Wisdom is as a concrete, living being. While the descriptions and interpretations provided of this being are often vague and/or generic, the one exception is when non-feminist scholars use the classification of a child in connection with a specific role. Furthermore, these scholars find “strong support” within the text that Wisdom is “pictured as a distinct being and not simply as a personified attribute or function of Yahweh” (Scott, 1960, p. 214). As a result, there is much discussion within the literature to support the idea that Wisdom is more than a mere personification.<sup>22</sup> Thus, while there is much support within the Old Testament text for

Wisdom/wisdom to be conceived of a merely “an abstract quality that can be attributed

<sup>22</sup> The idea that Wisdom did not need to be a goddess in order to be a physical being who was conceived within the poem arose in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, “biblical scholars began to speak of a theological process known as hypostatization, defined as a ‘quasi-personification’ of certain attributes proper to God, [occupying] an intermediate position between personalities and abstract beings” (Young, 2001, p. 223). This perspective clashes with the more traditional biblical scholarship that views the personification of Wisdom as a strange development within Israelite thought. For these traditional scholars, “the idea of the age-old existence of wisdom, thought of as a person and speaking self-confidently, is so strange and fits so ill with all that we otherwise seem to know of early Yahwism” (Von Rad, 1972, p. 152).

either to God or man,” in the case of Proverbs 1-9 (and 24:7), nevertheless, some scholars argue that Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31 is “described as a living person” (Whybray, 1995, p. 71). It is this perspective that this section will consider.

### *Generic Traits of Wisdom*

Those scholars who do choose not to make strong claims about the precise nature of Wisdom, but who still argue that she is a separate and distinct figure, do so by making vague claims. As an example of this tendency, such scholars argue that Wisdom was born on the basis of the use of “passive verbs of birthing” that exist in Proverbs 8:22-31 (Matlack, 1988, p. 425). They speak of Wisdom's existence at the very beginning of creation, arguing that Wisdom is “a graphic personification” (Von Rad, 1972, p. 154), a “self-existent being” (Scott, 1960, p. 213), or the “self-revelation of creation” (Murphy, 1985, p. 9). These claims all point to an interpretation of Wisdom as a distinct being, without giving Wisdom any particular purpose or form. As a result, for these scholars, the character of Wisdom is somewhat featureless (but a physical being nonetheless), capable of taking on whatever attributes seem necessary or appropriate. In keeping with these rather vague claims, while still maintaining that Wisdom is a distinct entity, there is the further interpretation that Wisdom is more than a mere attribute of the divine (YHWH), but an “attribute of the world,” and a “creature above creatures” (Von Rad, 1972, p. 153-154). Again, this argues for a view of Wisdom that is abstract in nature but still depicts her as a individual character within the text. For scholars who argue that Wisdom is not an abstraction, she is viewed as “clearly... a concrete being, self-existent beside God.” Thus, while Wisdom may once have been “simply a divine quality” some contemporary scholars

have interpreted the text in such a way as to argue that the different author(s) of Proverbs have modified Wisdom in some way, and so made her an object - “a distinct being worthy of devotion” (Whybray, 1995, p. 74).

### *Wisdom as Child*

The view of the character of Wisdom as a child is the only personal option that non-feminist scholars envision. As with most interpretations of Wisdom, this one too, is hotly debated. In the role of a child, Wisdom was birthed by God, and is at God's side throughout creation as a playing infant (Young, 2001, p. 221).<sup>23</sup> Wisdom, perceived as a child, plays a sort of dual role – she is “at once a child to God and a patron to humans” (Fox, 1997, p. 629) – which positions Wisdom in both a place of subordination (due to her role as child) and a place of power (as a patron and guide for humans). Those scholars who argue for Wisdom to be conceived of as a child, greatly emphasize the birth language at the beginning of the poem (verse 22). Wisdom is “from God and absolutely prior to the visible creation” (Laporte, 1975, p. 115), indeed, she exists before all things and is “beside God at the time of creation” (Matlack, 1988, p. 426). She is still a child at the time the cosmos is created, and as such, she “has no duties; she silently witnesses the majesty of God’s creative activity” (Matlack, 1988, p. 426). As a child, Wisdom is a companion to God, (Laporte, 1975, p. 115) but not an equal to God. Thus, non-feminist scholars tend to view Wisdom as subordinate to God.

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<sup>23</sup> William Young's work is in a somewhat problematic category. While he is a male, and does not claim that his work is feminist in any way, his views often tend towards those of feminists, leading me to ultimately consider him as a 'sympathetic male', and use his work as an example of feminist work. Even though he does not claim that his work is feminist in nature, I think that it is still appropriate to consider his analysis in this 'non-feminist' section. This does not imply, however, that there was no feminist influence on his work.

### **Nature of Wisdom: Abstract**

Unlike those non-feminist scholars who envision the character of Wisdom as a child and thus as a physical, concrete being, there are those who interpret the character of Wisdom in a far more abstract manner. These scholars consider Wisdom to be a poetic and/or theological figurative device.

When interpreted as a poetic and theological device, scholars position Wisdom as an abstract being that is part of Israel's theological development. As part of this theological development, Wisdom, is seen by these scholars “as part of the ‘theologizing’ of human wisdom” (Young, 2001, p. 224) within the Israelite tradition. By viewing Wisdom as a poetic personification, or a poetic device, these scholars show appreciation for the poetic nature of the poem itself while also highlighting the very “abstract theological meaning of the texts” (Young, 2001, p. 224). Wisdom then, while “immanent in the world is considered less from the point of view of the economic order than from an aesthetic point of view” (Von Rad, 1972, p. 157). She is an abstract being; a decorative bauble that adorns the serious work of the creator God. From this perspective, Wisdom has no influence on the created world, but merely serves as a step along the way to greater theological development. Within this interpretation, Wisdom is a mere abstraction, not a being with any tangible presence or power. She is “poetic only and not ontological” (Davidson, 2006, p. 40). This view has been criticized in recent years by scholars who point out that those who support this perspective “recognize her [Wisdom] as a personal presence, but fail to take her seriously enough to identify her as a woman” (Young, 2001, p. 224). This claim highlights the potential gender bias inherent in the traditional view by pointing out that the feminine nature of Wisdom is utterly ignored by this particular abstract interpretation.

From this traditional perspective, Wisdom is depicted solely as a device, not something or someone to be looked to for guidance. If Wisdom is thus viewed as an abstract poetic and theological construction, then the language used must obviously be poetic – it is theological language and “theological language is metaphorical ... it has to be, for it attempts to capture within words the nature and character of God, who is not directly accessible to human perception” (Perdue, 1994, p. 60). Nevertheless, even as an abstract being, Wisdom still has some connection to divinity, even if it is of a subordinate nature.

### **Role in Creation: Passive**

Wisdom's role in creation may be considered as either active or passive. The view of Wisdom as an active participant in creation however, only began with the rise of feminist scholarship and, as such, will be discussed in later chapters. Those scholars who read the text as placing Wisdom in an passive role, consider both the role Wisdom played during creation (since she wasn't actively doing any of the creating), and the manner in which she undertook those actions during the time of creation.

If she is viewed as one who was not active in the creation of the world, scholars must still describe Wisdom's role during the creation of the universe, as there is no doubt that she was present. For scholars in this camp, Wisdom's role is one of passivity, not maturity or activity. Basically, she is regarded as subordinate to God – “it is obvious that the text explicates Wisdom’s relationship to Yahweh... as one of subordination... it is clear that whatever that role may be, it is in fact Yahweh who is the active agent in the process of creation, not Wisdom” (Lenzi, 2006, p. 698). For these scholars, the text provides additional support for their position. They argue that the interpretation of Wisdom as an

artisan or craftsman (as proposed by those who view Wisdom as active in creation) is “deliberately repudiated in 8:30-31, which reiterates that Wisdom played while God worked. God alone (as in Genesis 1 and Job 38) brings order into chaos” (Fox, 1997, p. 628). Indeed, the idea for these scholars of a character of Wisdom who is separate and active during creation is “is so strange and fits so ill with all that we otherwise seem to know of early Yahwism” (Von Rad, 1972, p. 152). Continuing to use the text and others' interpretations as the starting point for their arguments, scholars who interpret Wisdom as being inactive in the creation of the universe point to “the midrash [which] insists that God has no 'partner' in creation” (Fox, 1997, p. 628), and argue that “it is easy to see that a scribe would wish to read ‘infant’ or ‘child’ instead of ‘master-craftsman’ out of concern for monotheism” (Davidson, 2006, p. 46).<sup>24</sup> Thus Wisdom is construed as a passive being mainly out of concern for established religious doctrine.

Yet even if Wisdom did not actively take part in the creation of the universe, does this mean that she did nothing? Her behaviour during that time must be accounted for, and scholars have their own various interpretations as to what Wisdom did do during creation. Principally, some scholars argue that Wisdom's main activity during creation was sitting passively by and witnessing and observing the act of creation – the interpretation of Wisdom as being purely passive during creation is not echoed in the feminist literature. There are, however, some scholars who continue in this pre-feminist vein. For these scholars, Wisdom witnesses creation at the side of God (Hurowitz, 1999, p. 395; Burns, 1997, p. 141). In addition to sitting silently and observing the “wonder and majesty” of

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Davidson's work, like William Young's also falls into the category of being somewhat feminist in its perspective as he too puts forward theories that are both compatible with and reminiscent of feminist interpretations.

creation, Wisdom also plays during creation (Matlack, 1988, p. 430). This inclusion of Wisdom's play in the interpretation of her activities during creation is something that only occurs during more recent scholarship. Wisdom is still viewed as being passive in creation, however, she is given life through playing while God created the universe. While Wisdom is at God's side during creation, only recently born, and still a child, she “also frolic[s] on earth, delighting in humans” (Young, 2001, p. 221). This play, while still positioning Wisdom in a passive role with regards to creation, “introduces a dynamic into the theology of creation that has long been overlooked – a theology of divine play” (Davidson, 2006, p. 53), and also emphasizes the role and interaction of Wisdom with humanity. In introducing this depiction, I am aware that this emphasis on play as a positive feature is clearly a later interpretive development, and is one that may well be reliant on earlier feminist scholarship. As a result, it is necessary to now consider the approaches and interpretations of Wisdom by feminist scholars. It is clear from the above analyses of the different pre-feminist interpretations of Wisdom, that for those scholars cited, Wisdom is most often viewed in generalized terms that describe an abstract being, and that it is only the more recent works that put forward support for a more graphic, specific description of Wisdom. In this interpretation, Wisdom was not an active participant in creation and that at best, she functioned as a little child – the one and only physical role attributed to her by these pre-feminist scholars.

### Chapter 3: Feminist Analysis

This chapter focuses on contemporary North American feminist responses to Proverbs 8:22-31 – including the scholarship of Gale Yee (1992), Rosemary Ruether (1983), and Claudia Camp (1985). Here I will consider the approaches taken by these scholars to the text, and provide a detailed description and analysis of their interpretation regarding the nature and role of Wisdom. In addition, I will discuss some of the issues and conflicts that arise with these interpretations.

#### *Background*

Within feminist religious scholarship there are two main schools of thought that have been described somewhat simplistically as those who are considered 'radical' and those who are considered 'reform'. Radical feminist scholars include Mary Daly who advocates leaving one's respective religious tradition and joining a lesbian community (Joy, 1996, p. 602-3). The work of such radical feminist scholars such as Daly include certain trademarks. These trademarks include a radical reinterpretation of gender and sex,<sup>25</sup> a desire to distance themselves and their work from other more mainstream scholarship, and an unwavering focus on emancipation in all areas – religious, societal, and political (Joy,

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25 When early feminist scholars in biblical studies were writing in the 1980's, they had a less complex understanding of gender. A more sophisticated interpretation did not arise until Judith Butler's 1990 book *Gender Trouble*. The ideas of these early scholars are rather general in comparison in that they used term like the "female gender" to refer to women, as well as using "gender" to express ideas regarding "feminine" characteristics that were often imposed or regarded as norm. The use of the term and the concept of gender or sex (which for some indicates two different things), is one that is somewhat contentious and open to interpretation (Joy, 2006, p. 8). Indeed, there has been much confusion in recent scholarship as to that the term "gender" actually means. For the purposes of this paper, I am interpreting gender as a "historical variable" that can be used in the interpretation of ancient texts, and considers how females and feminine images are treated within texts (Joy, 2006, p. 17). By doing this, I hope to avoid essentialism and focus on what the texts used here (both ancient and modern) prescribe for the female character of Wisdom.



1996, p. 602-3). Radical feminists are a minority within feminist scholarship, but a very vocal minority. In contrast, reform feminists (sometimes referred to as liberal feminists) often work within existing social and academic constructs. Some examples of reformist feminist religious scholars include Mary Ann Tolbert (a Protestant), Phyllis Trible (a Protestant), and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (a Catholic). The hallmarks of reform feminist religious and biblical scholarship include the desire of these scholars to work within the existing frameworks of religion(s) so as to create an egalitarian space. They undertake intensive work with primary religious texts in order to re-examine the implications of the texts, and the desire to reformulate women's roles within religious contexts (Joy, 1996, p. 605-6). In addition to these hallmarks, reform feminist scholars also engage in the practice of hermeneutics, although they may not acknowledge it. As briefly mentioned in the introduction, hermeneutics involves the in-depth examination of a text in its own historical and societal contexts so as to arrive at an interpretation that is appropriate for one's own context. Feminist hermeneutics, as described by Mary Ann Tolbert, involves the explicit use of a hermeneutics of suspicion (1983, p. 113), a term that originates in the work of Paul Ricoeur, who called the three thinkers – Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud – the 'masters of suspicion,' whose questioning of obvious meanings he adapted to the reading of texts. A hermeneutics of suspicion as practised within feminist hermeneutics and biblical studies entails a desire to understand the biases that shape a text. The second-wave feminist religious and biblical scholars referenced in this paper do not explicitly describe their work as utilizing hermeneutical methods including that of suspicion; however, in closely reading their work, there can be little doubt that this is a tool that these scholars employ.

Specifically, a hermeneutics of suspicion assumes that all interpretations have a subjective component and that there is no such thing as complete objectivity within scholarship. Thus the use of a hermeneutics of suspicion helps to detect both the author's and the interpreter's bias (Tolbert, 1983, p. 114; 117). The specific questions associated with a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion are as follows. Firstly, what, if anything, is said about women? Secondly, how does one decipher the use of 'feminine' symbols and metaphors. Thirdly, if no women are explicitly mentioned in the text, where are they? And finally, one must admit to one's own bias – where the intention is not to be objective *per se*, but to clearly state one's own presuppositions. A hermeneutics of suspicion is a deliberate and cautious method of reading and interpreting a text. It seeks to expose the underlying assumptions, interests, and biases, while requiring the interpreter to be aware of their own position in relation to the text. Thus, feminists do not presume that there is a neutral stance, but neither do they force interpretations that are at variance with the text.

### *Approaches*

There are a number of different approaches taken by feminist biblical scholars when analyzing texts. Some scholars argue that feminist exegesis has not developed its own methods, but instead has simply adopted the existing tools available (Schroer, 2003, p. 1; Bietenhard, 2003, p. 126). While this argument is not without its merits, it is more useful at this time to consider some of the approaches that are either unique to or applied by feminist scholars. These approaches include the interpretation and application of metaphors, textual analysis, as well as gender-based feminist analysis.

## **Metaphor**

The in-depth examination of metaphor in the Old Testament is a modern method of interpretation, and one that is unique to feminist interpretations of the Bible. Gale Yee is the primary proponent of the use and analysis of metaphor in the feminist analysis of biblical texts. According to her, while it is through metaphors that humans most frequently conceptualize divinity, “metaphors by their very nature cannot define God; [and] they cannot and should not be taken literally” (1992, p. 85). Thus, when considering the creation story of Proverbs 8:22-31, Yee brings attention to not only the metaphoric language used, but the relationships among the various characters, which the metaphors express (1992, p. 89). Supplementary to Yee's work, Chava Weissler contends that by looking for and through the metaphors used within biblical texts, feminist scholars can deepen their own understanding, and increase the scope of the characteristics by which God can be described (2007, p. 51). Additionally, the use and interpretation of metaphor allows feminist scholars to make known more varied images of divinity (i.e. the male god YHWH 'giving birth' to Wisdom) in contrast to more traditional models. Perhaps the most vital aspect of their approach is that they accept that divinity can and should “be addressed in multiple images” (Weissler, 2007, p. 52).

## **Textual Analysis**

When undertaking textual analysis and interpretation, feminist scholars add a specific feminist flavour to traditional textual interpretations. Reform feminist biblical scholars use the “Bible as a foundational text for feminist biblical hermeneutics” (Reinhartz, 2003, p. 41). They maintain that the Bible can be an “instrument of both oppression and liberation” (Reinhartz, 2003, p. 42). Feminist scholars do not shy away

from carefully analyzing biblical stories. This involves both comparative and critical examination of traditional interpretations of the primary texts. The form of textual analysis undertaken by feminist scholars also takes into consideration the wider context of biblical stories – not just their historical setting, but their application to the contemporary context as well. Consequently, these scholars take into consideration the results of removing biblical text from their original historical, anthropological, and cultural context (Camp, 1985, p. 167), while balancing that concern with how biblical models and metaphors work in modern times (Yee, 1992, p. 89). As a result, in analyzing biblical texts, feminist scholars are well equipped to “discern a norm within Biblical faith by which the Biblical texts themselves can be criticized” (Ruether, 1983, p. 23). Thus, the concerns of feminist biblical scholars are not simply situated within the grammatical and lexical realm (though these elements are not excluded), but also include concerns for how to best interpret these texts outside of their initial biblical context.

### **Gender Roles and Attributes**

One of the most noticeable features about feminist theory in general is its focus on gender issues and analysis, most often those that are of concern to females. Thus, much of the analysis done by these scholars revolves around gender roles and the position and role of women – making the text of Proverbs 8:22-31 with its distinctly evident gendered depictions, fertile ground for feminist scholars. Feminist theology – a field related to feminist biblical scholarship – strives for “the promotion of the full humanity of women,” and considers any biblical work that “denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women... not redemptive” (Ruether, 1983, p. 18-19). As previously mentioned, while

reform feminist biblical scholars do look critically at biblical texts, they still have “a deep respect” for tradition (Millen, 2007, p. 28), though they may well disagree with certain aspects of the tradition that they consider misogynistic. Additionally, feminist theology – which can work alongside feminist biblical studies – works to discover what can be regarded as a “spiritual role” for women within the biblical religions in addition to highlighting the potential for interpreting a “feminine aspect of divinity” (Weissler, 2007, p. 57-58). Based on their concern for tradition and misogyny, feminist scholars work to balance their concerns for gender equality with respect for tradition while they maintain close ties to the text and its myriad of possible meanings.

### *Interpretations of Wisdom*

The theories put forth by feminist scholars regarding the nature of Wisdom do, understandably, overlap with the most popular theories mentioned in chapter one (hypostatization, poetic personification, and goddess). However, there are some differences, and it is the purpose of this section to discuss the common theories put forward by feminist scholars regarding the nature and role of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31. The theories regarding the nature of Wisdom include considering her as a goddess, as a personification, and as God's daughter (not a goddess *per se*, but still divine). Additionally, I will now consider the role of Wisdom<sup>26</sup> in the world as depicted by feminist scholarship.

For feminist scholars, Wisdom is often conceived as a independent being. She is “autonomous from God” (Yee, 1992, p. 91), and a “personal being” (Camp, 1985, p. 284). This makes interpreting her as a simple attribute of God an impossibility. Additionally, she

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<sup>26</sup> When discussing Wisdom's role, I am more concerned with how Wisdom interacts with humanity and the cosmos, not simply her title.

poses a considerable challenge for interpreters, as it is difficult to fathom what precisely “the function of a highly exalted female figure in a canon that is patriarchal in source and monotheistic in perspective” (Young, 2001, p. 221)<sup>27</sup> might be. Nonetheless, feminist scholars have proposed a number of different possible interpretations of Wisdom that either expand on or differ from common non-feminist views. In the following section I will discuss the most prominent of these feminist interpretations.

### **Goddess**

Wisdom, Hokma, Sophia – each of these are names of a goddess according to certain feminist scholars. Some find that in the imagery of the hymn(s) in Proverbs an “expression of the great feminine archetypes,” and from this claim that it is “evident that Sophia [Wisdom] possesses the duality of attributes shown to be typical of the [ancient] goddesses” (Engelsman, 1979, p. 81). There can be little doubt that there is “goddess-imagery at work in the presentation of female Wisdom” (Camp, 1985, p. 283). Whether it is foreign mythological influence or local is uncertain; however, “it is clear... that this imagery is in some way transformed” (Camp, 1985, p. 283). Another scholar appreciates that Wisdom's background lies in goddess imagery and language, and even though in Hebrew thought she may appear as dependant upon the male YHWH, she is in fact an “autonomous, female manifestation of the divine” (Ruether, 1983, p. 57). For other feminist scholars, Wisdom is a liberating force – she is a counterpart of the divine, not a subordinate figure (Davidson, 2006, p. 54). Wisdom as goddess is also a way for feminist

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<sup>27</sup> William Young and Richard Davidson, despite not identifying their work as 'feminist', put forward a number of feminist-compatible ideas and theories within their respective works. Thus, as sympathetic males I have judged it to be appropriate to include their contributions in the discussion of feminist interpretations. However, there is no reason to assume that their work has not been influenced by feminist scholarship.

scholars to find “another face of the embodiment of God” (Grey, 2001, p. 107). The image of a goddess, for some feminist scholars also “can be the image of a strong, wise woman, ageing, elderly or old, thus liberating women from enslavement to fashion, the idealizing of youth and slimness, and the fear and revulsion of old age and death” (Grey, 2001, p. 106). Thus goddess imagery is a distinct perspective from which to interpret the nature of Wisdom. These interpretations have the potential to profoundly impact the understanding of divinity not only as it has been portrayed in the ancient texts but also for the understanding of divinity today.

There are, unsurprisingly, a number of conflicts that arise within and between the feminist literature on the character of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31. In considering interpretations of Wisdom, it is also important to consider the conflicts and disagreements that have arisen among feminist scholars regarding the view of Wisdom as a Goddess. The interpretation of Wisdom as a goddess in her own right has caused some turmoil within the feminist academic community. While the proponents of this theory claim that Wisdom is an “autonomous, female manifestation of the divine” (Ruether, 1983, p. 57), or even “another face of God” (Grey, 2001, p. 107), there are those within the academic community who argue that the goddess language used in Proverbs is only borrowed from other cultures and has clearly been “transformed” in some way (Camp, 1985, p. 283). The value of such transformation is unclear, as for these scholars it is simply indicative of influence from other cultures being present in the text. Additionally, there are those within the feminist community that argue that Wisdom is not divine consort, but simply a creation of YHWH (Yoder, 2001, p. 7-8), and therefore it is not appropriate or warranted to consider Wisdom as a goddess. Those who support an interpretation of Wisdom that

positions her as a goddess alongside YHWH generally do so for more theologically based reasons. According to Joan Engelsman, there has long been a conspicuous absence of “the feminine in Western religion” (1979, p. 149). Furthermore, she claims that it was not until “the promulgation of the Dogma of Assumption of the Virgin Mary in 1950 and the beginnings of the feminist movement in the 1960’s” (1979, p. 149) that this lack became apparent and open to criticism. This criticism and new opportunities for analysis has allowed some – feminists and non-feminists alike – to see the character of Wisdom as the new face of female spirituality within both Christianity and Judaism. Indeed, the examination of Proverbs 8:22-31 and the rediscovery of the character of Wisdom has led some to hope that she is the way to a new spirituality that allows for and encourages female images of the divine (Davidson, 2006, p. 39). This perspective though, is challenged by those who argue that to view Wisdom as a goddess transforms Judaism and Christianity into polytheistic religions. The use of feminine imagery when speaking of God, and the interpretation of Wisdom as a goddess, and YHWH's consort and co-creator of the cosmos, is seen by some as “ridiculing Christianity and ... replacing it with goddess-worship” (Anderson, 1994, p. 22). While there are a number of scholars who consider the interpretation of Wisdom as a goddess as plausible, there is still disagreement among scholars as to how precisely Wisdom should be viewed.

### **Personification**

According to other feminist scholars, the character of Wisdom is a personification (Burns, 1997, p. 141; Engelsman, 1979, p. 74; Yee, 1992, p. 90; Yoder, 2001, p. 8). The perception of Wisdom as a personification differs from the interpretation that positions her



a poetic device in the form of a metaphor. The position that Wisdom functions as a metaphor argues that the figure of Wisdom should be read at least in part as a linguistic device that allows for the use of broader interpretations of divinity. This is different from those who claim that Wisdom as a character is a literal and physical personification, although it is not incompatible with this view. The following are some examples of those who support a reading of Wisdom as a personification. Wisdom is more than “just a transcendent figure,” she represents “a knowledge of God's world order” (Baumann, 1998, p. 67). Wisdom does not simply personify God's wisdom, but also human wisdom (Yee, 1992, p. 90). She may also be seen as a personification of all wisdom and thus as a source of true knowledge (Camp, 1985, p. 222). It would seem important for these scholars though, not to lose Wisdom's femininity in examining what she personifies, as all of them accept and encourage interpreting Wisdom as a female figure. Wisdom as presented in Proverbs is a “female figure [who] became an authoritative religious symbol in the kingless society of the post-exilic period” (Yee, 1992, p. 91). In contrast to viewing Wisdom as a personification or symbol, one may also consider Wisdom as a real woman. Nonetheless, there are those who are more cautious, reminding the reader that when dealing with this text it is important to remember that Wisdom is not a representation of “women as they actually exist in the world, but [she is a stereotype] of femininity as men envisioned it” (Connor, 1991, p. 87). Thus it is also possible to consider Wisdom as a “harmful” or negative figure because of her traditional stereotypical nature (Connor, 1991, p. 87).

That being said, it is possible that Wisdom is based on a combination of influences – both mythological and real. According to Christine Yoder, it is likely that Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31 is “a composite figure of real, albeit exceptional, Persian-period women”

(2001, p. 113).<sup>28</sup> Thus, some feminist scholars argue that not only is Wisdom a personification, but also that she is based on divine and/or human inspiration. It would appear that Wisdom as a personification is somewhat less contentious than the interpretation that positions Wisdom as a goddess. If Wisdom is seen as a personification, it is important to consider what images and beings that her inspiration is being drawn from. For example, for some scholars, Wisdom represents real women (Yoder, 2001, p. 113) who existed, lived, and worked during the Persian period (approximately the fifth century BCE) when this poem was written.

If the interpretation of Wisdom as a personification of the trait of wisdom is accepted, it rules out the other possibilities – of Wisdom as a stereotype of real women and thus harmful, and Wisdom as a representation of a king. The interpretation of Wisdom as a literary device (i.e. personification) is mutually exclusive in relation to the interpretations that move Wisdom to the human realm (i.e. stereotype or goddess). Indeed these other two interpretations are not particularly compatible with the idea that Wisdom is a representation of actual women. One response to the interpretation of Wisdom as a personification is that while the character of Wisdom may be based on real women, she is a stereotype of real women (Connor, 1991, p. 87). If viewed as a stereotype, Wisdom is actually a harmful figure, as her lofty status – as an ideal, as a divine figure, or as a king – is utterly unattainable by ordinary women. Furthermore, some feminists argue that as a stereotype,

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28 As this text was likely composed during the Persian period, it is logical to extend a reading of Wisdom as a personification or possible stereotype as being based on the women of the Israelite and foreign communities of the time. During this period, Persian women could wield considerable influence in their marriage as much political and social power came with her when she married, depending on the state of her dowry (Yoder, 2001, p. 113). Additionally, Yoder, who examined the socioeconomic implications within Proverbs 1-9, argues that there is also evidence to suggest that women did participate actively in the Persian economy (2001, p. 113).

Wisdom is a projection of what the male writers at the time would have seen as an ideal woman; thus further reducing her usefulness as a figure for actual women.

Finally, there is the view that Wisdom as a personification is also a stand-in for the head of the community – an Israelite king (Yee, 2001, p. 91) – which the community would have been lacking at the time this hymn was composed. To view Wisdom as a surrogate religious and political leader poses some issues for those in the other two schools of thought that regard Wisdom as a personification. Primarily it is the issue of gender. While it is quite possible that women during the time this poem was written did hold some clout within society, they certainly were not public leaders or political or religious leaders. Additionally though, by positioning Wisdom as a surrogate ruler for the Israelite community, she also partially usurps YHWH's role as the divine head of the people. The interpretation of Wisdom as a personification – which leads to other potential interpretations of her as a stereotype of actual women or as a surrogate leader of the Israelite community – is one that encompasses many disparate views and is an oft debated perspective.

## **Daughter**

Another theory that seems to only feature strongly within feminist scholarship is the idea of Wisdom as God's daughter. As daughter, Wisdom is a stand-alone figure, not necessarily a metaphor or personification. This theory is first grounded in the birth language of verse 22. In that verse, Wisdom is described as “as an offspring [i.e. daughter] of God, ... brought forth from God before the beginning of the earth” (Ruether, 1983, p. 57). As God's daughter, Wisdom functions as the manifestation of God in the created world

allowing YHWH to maintain distance/transcendence (Yee, 1992, p. 91). As the manifestation of God, Wisdom too has divine authority, and thus her instructions carry greater weight and “cannot be considered a purely human activity” (Camp, 1985, p. 221). Furthermore, this theory is supported by the language of play - “rejoicing” - that is employed later in the poem (8:30-31). It is appropriate that play should characterize the relationship between a parent and child, thus one may view Wisdom as God's daughter (Yee, 1992, p. 94). Drawing from the metaphors used in the hymn, Yee views Wisdom's relationship with God as a daughter as a “metaphor for the Divine’s continuing presence in the social order” (1992, p. 87), in order to provide further divinely inspired instruction to humanity, in whom Wisdom delights. To view Wisdom as God's daughter also leads to viewing Wisdom as an active participant in creation, as she is in a “co-creative relationship” with both God and humanity (Yee, 1992, p. 85).

The view that Wisdom is best perceived as the daughter of God is also not without its problems. For those who support this view, Wisdom is a child, who's actions and relationships with both YHWH and humanity are characterized by play (Yee, 1992, p. 94; Ruether, 1983, p. 57, 100). This view, however, runs into conflict with the idea that Wisdom is a figure that has some (if not considerable) divine authority (Yee, 1992, p. 91). While there is no doubt that the child of a high god would have some authority, it would come nowhere near the amount credited to Wisdom by other feminist scholars – particularly those who elevate her status to that of a goddess. Furthermore, this image of Wisdom as God's daughter clashes with the view of Wisdom as a surrogate king for the Israelites (Camp, 1985, p. 291; Young, 2001, p. 224). As a child whose actions and relationship are characterized by play, the image of Wisdom as a powerful leader simply

does not fit. Others argue that to view Wisdom as a child of YHWH is to make her subordinate to YHWH, which “would be false, keeping in mind the whole context of [chapter] 8.... [Wisdom] is a counterpart for YHWH, a divine counterpart,” not subordinate (Davidson, 2006, p. 54). As a result of the disparity in the perception of Wisdom's position in relation to YHWH, it is clear that there is tension between the possible interpretations of the nature of Wisdom – not just as a child or daughter of YHWH, but also as a potential goddess as previously discussed, or as a personification.

### **Role in the World**

Many feminist scholars are concerned not only with the nature of Wisdom, but also with her role in the universe. The feminists academics cited above argue that Wisdom played an active role in creation and human life. Wisdom's role in creation is attested to primarily by virtue of her existence during the act and her act of speaking about it afterwards (Connor, 1991, p. 89, 91). The specific role Wisdom in human life as perceived by feminist scholars is far more interesting though. The relationship between humanity and the divine posits Wisdom as a human figure that “indicates the intimacy of our relationship with God” (Burns, 1997, p. 144).<sup>29</sup>

For many feminist scholars, it is the relationship between Wisdom and God and Wisdom and humanity that provides fruitful ground for analysis and consideration. For Yee, play is of the utmost importance – as God's daughter, play characterizes Wisdom's relationship with God; but such play also “characterizes the relationship between Wisdom and humanity” (Yee, 1992, p. 94). In this interpretation, Wisdom's relationship with

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<sup>29</sup> Positioning Wisdom as a human figure does not reduce her importance as a divine being, indeed she is given double billing and more weight because she is placed in both divine and human/mortal guises.

humanity is not all fun and games, as Wisdom is also the principal mediator between humanity and God. As a semi-divine being (at the least for certain other feminist scholars), Wisdom's teachings carry religious weight when she speaks to humans. Thus, Wisdom serves to both instruct and “theologically [validate] the human tradition” (Camp, 1985, p. 141). As the chief mediator between mortals and the divine “it is Wisdom who spans the distance between God, the world, and human beings” (Connor, 1991, p. 89).<sup>30</sup> In part, Wisdom functions as a religious and theological mediator through her femininity. Through the female association with the physical and the body, Wisdom can be appreciated as mediating “the fall into bodiliness and also the escape from creation into redeemed spiritual life” (Ruether, 1983, p. 100). Wisdom also fulfils a less theological and more practical purpose in her perceived role as a substitute for a political leader to a community away from their homeland.

In the post-exilic context in which Proverbs 8:22-31 was composed, Wisdom may also be understood as possessing the “symbolic role of king as the mediator between divine and human realms” by providing a competent buffer and source of guidance to mold the community's “view of Yahweh’s universal rulership in wisdom with their own diminished political stature” (Young, 2001, p. 224). Wisdom has many roles laid out for her within the ancient text of Proverbs, and given that she fulfils all of them – counsellor, lover, administrator of divine justice – Wisdom effectively “assumes the functions and images once belonging to the king and his court” (Camp, 1985, p. 291). Thus for some feminist scholars, not only does Wisdom function as a mediator between God and humanity, but she

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<sup>30</sup> Richard Davidson argues that Wisdom mediates between these disparate parties (humans and the divine) out of love. Wisdom is the beloved of God and the “lover of both men and God, [thus] she also joins them in her love.... In this way, she mediates, in her own way, the gulf between humanity and God” (2006, p. 51). Such views are in keeping with a feminist perspective.

also serves as the iconic and functional head of Israelite society. In taking up these roles, Wisdom actively goes against conventional wisdom regarding the proper role of women in society. For the 'good' woman, it is her husband who is "known at the gates. She is not to be known in public. She is to remain invisible" (Ruether, 1983, p. 261). Wisdom though, does not conform to this, she proclaims her message loudly in public spheres.

Based on the interpretations of Wisdom as she is presented in Proverbs 8:22-31 offered by various feminist scholars, Wisdom is an active and many faceted character who fulfils many different roles that are not often associated with female biblical figures. Thus, Wisdom "appears to offer woman a niche of their own" (Connor, 1991, p. 87) within a text and traditions that are often considered patriarchal at best and openly hostile towards women at worst by feminists. The work of feminist scholars and theologians is a relatively modern area of study that has gained increasing amounts of attention since the 1980's, particularly with respect to the portrayal of Wisdom in Proverbs 8 (Davidson, 2006, p. 39). In Wisdom, Christian theologians have been "exploring the possibilities of this figure becoming the foundation for a new Christian spirituality" (Davidson, 2006, p. 39), while secular feminist scholars have found new ways of interpreting ancient texts and finding a source of inspiration and strength. All of this work though, is not without its challenges, and as a result there are some conflicts and other issues that arise within this field of scholarship.

The view that Wisdom is best perceived as the daughter of God is also not without its problems. For those who support this view, Wisdom is a child, whose actions and relationships with both YHWH and humanity are characterized by play (Yee, 1992, p. 94; Ruether, 1983, p. 57, 100). This view, however, runs into conflict with the idea that

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The proposals for how Wisdom functions in the universe, and what her role is with regards to humanity is also ground for scholarly conflict. If Wisdom is seen as a child, then it is primarily through play that she interacts with the world (Yee, 1992, p. 94). This idea is in direct conflict to how Wisdom interacts with humanity if she is perceived as a political leader or king (Camp, 1985, p. 291; Young, 2001, p. 224; Yee, 1992, p. 91) – or even as the primary mediator between YHWH and humanity (Ruether, 1983, p. 100). If Wisdom is taken as one who is in this type of leadership role, then play is an inappropriate way for her to find her primary mode of expression and interaction. Others argue that it is through and in love that Wisdom's relationships and interactions are shaped (Davidson, 2006, p. 51). If one views love and the primary characteristic of Wisdom's relationships, then again,



viewing her as a stand-in for Israel's leader is problematic. Additionally, this perspective of love is also questionable when one tries to reconcile it with the image of Wisdom as God's daughter. As a child, it is unlikely for the character of Wisdom to be mature or developed enough to function principally from a place of love. Thus again, one may see that there are conflicts that arise when feminist scholars consider both the nature and role of Wisdom, as in many instances the differing theories that these scholars have proposed are mutually exclusive or at the very least not entirely compatible with one another.

### ***Defining Features of Feminist Scholarship on Wisdom***

There are several features of the approach taken by feminist scholars that differentiate their methodology from that non-feminist scholarship; these features include how metaphor is emphasized, the specific use and interpretation of texts from a female perspective, and the emphasis on gender analysis and gender roles. The latter two of these components are both part of an overall hermeneutic of suspicion that is employed – if not explicitly stated – by the feminist scholars discussed in this thesis.

Some feminist scholars have relied heavily on the use, function, and interpretation of metaphor when considering texts. For those who use this approach, metaphor is the key to broadening their perspective and the perspective of the text in order to find new ways of interpreting the text (Yee, 1992, p. 85). The analysis of metaphor is also used to create space within an analysis and a text for a different view of God (Weissler, 2007, p. 51). Finally, an emphasis on examining the metaphors within a text has a distinctly feminine flavour, and also assists scholars in realizing and considering the relationships present between the various characters within a text.

The manner in which the texts are analyzed by feminist scholars is somewhat different at times to that of the 'traditional' biblical studies approach even though the feminist approach is grounded in the classic methodology. As previously mentioned, feminist scholars approach biblical texts using a different lens than non-feminist scholars – feminist scholars see the Bible not just as an historical, religious, and cultural document, but also as a tool of “both oppression and liberation” (Reinhartz, 2003, p. 42). This perspective results in feminist scholars being somewhat wary and occasionally outright hostile towards biblical texts and traditions. It also however, pushes these scholars to evaluate more than just the text and its historical, religious, and cultural context – it pushes them to consider the modern implications of the stories.<sup>31</sup> By considering the contemporary applications of these stories, feminist biblical scholars position themselves on the outskirts of biblical scholarship. Julia Foster claims that within biblical scholarship as a whole, “consciousness of feminine terminology has been raised,” due strongly in part to the work of feminist scholars; and that this increased awareness also assist modern translators in their work so as “this aspect of the biblical heritage” is not lost (1999, p. 102).

The most pronounced trait of feminist scholarship – both within and outside of biblical studies – is its emphasis on gender analysis. Within biblical scholarship, feminist scholars want to encourage readers to both consider and accept potentially useful female roles and feminine characteristics as active and positive elements within biblical texts. Certain feminists would even go so far as to reject those texts that are deemed harmful to females (Rueher, 1983, p. 19). Others seek to evaluate if such texts can be reinterpreted in

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31 Some of these implications include introducing alternative images of the divine, changing the view of women within Christianity, and changing the view of women's roles and strengths.

modern times without causing harm or facilitating the oppression of any person. This desire to see no harm also lies in the rediscovery and application of non-sexist language. As “it really does make a difference to many [when others use] sexist or non-inclusive language. It has the power to cause harm” (Wuchter, 1992, p. 68).

The aim of feminist biblical scholarship is a change to the traditional, biased, and harmful readings of biblical texts – the results can “[radiate] out in shockwaves which leave no area undisturbed” (Jobling, 2002, p. 1). As a result it is useful to now turn to the work of late twentieth century non-feminist biblical scholars to determine if and/or how their work has been affected by the work of feminist scholars.

## **Chapter 4: Contemporary Post-feminist Analysis**

This chapter considers the analysis of Proverbs 8:22-31 from a thematic perspective. I examine the work of non-feminist male scholars who have engaged with the character of Wisdom since the mid-1980's and the rise of feminist scholarship. Specifically I will look at their interpretations regarding the nature of the character of Wisdom, in addition to her possible active role during the creation of the universe. I will then examine these scholarly opinions regarding the above areas from a chronological perspective with a comparative eye as to how they may or may not coincide with some of the theories put forward by feminist scholars; thus, I am using a comparative method by comparing and contrasting post-feminist work with feminist interpretations. This will help to determine if there has been a change in scholarly opinion over time and furthermore, if that change coincides with, and possibly has been influenced by, feminist thought and scholarship.

As previously mentioned, the work previously done by non-feminist scholars uses language that is, on the whole, far more non-specific than that used by feminist scholars. Consequently, categorizing the various interpretations put forth by post-feminist male scholars is a somewhat challenging task. The result is a series of categories that are not as obvious, clearly defined, or easily labelled as those theories put forth by feminist scholars. This section will consider both the nature and role of Wisdom as proposed by post-feminist scholars. Young observes that overall, there are “three basic lines of enquiry in interpreting Woman Wisdom that are prevalent among contemporary biblical scholars: as a goddess, as a hypostasis of attributes of Yahweh, as a poetic personification” (2001, p. 221). However, I would argue that many other changes in the interpretation of Wisdom can be detected

within post-feminist scholarship. As a living being, Wisdom is given a greater range of attributes as a mature female being, she may also be interpreted as a goddess (as Young pointed out), as an authority figure, or a lover (of both God and humankind). Furthermore, post-feminist scholars argue that Wisdom took an active role in creation – a view that is not present in the literature prior to feminist scholarship. Finally, for the first time in non-feminist scholarship, Wisdom's relationship with humanity is considered and she is placed as an intermediary between humanity and the divine.

### **The Nature of Wisdom: Living Being**

The most common manner in which contemporary post-feminist scholars present Wisdom, as with the pre-feminist approach, is as a concrete, living being. While the descriptions and interpretations provided remain amorphous, post-feminist scholars have recently begun to use the classification of goddess (or another authority figure) in connection with specific roles and attributes. It is this perspective that this section considers.

#### *Wisdom as Authority Figure*

Those post-feminist scholars who view Wisdom as a goddess, or at the very least a divine being, generally consider three areas: 1) Wisdom's authority, 2) her position as a divine being, and 3) her position as a goddess. Each of these areas needs not be mutually exclusive. Yet those who argue that she is a divine being also argue that she is *just* a divine being, not a goddess. Additionally, Wisdom's high position is supported by her speech in Proverbs 8:22-31, which is “striking” due to its “self-defining” nature (Kannengiesser, 1999, p. 65). For these scholars, Wisdom definitely is a distinct figure or being, not an

attribute.

Other those scholars who are concerned with Wisdom's authority, it is of the utmost importance to stress her connection and closeness to God. Wisdom's speech is given authority, according to these scholars, not simply because she offers ethical and practical instruction, but because her advice “originated with and is found in God” (Williams, 1999, p. 276). It is Wisdom, for these scholars, who speaks to humanity and the rest of the cosmos with the voice of God. Thus, her call is also “the voice of the Lord,” and Wisdom herself is “the revelation of God, not merely the self-revelation of creation” (Murphy, 1985, p. 9). As a divine authority – the voice of God – Wisdom is the one who provides humanity with “understanding and insight into the nature and characteristic of God, reality, and human existence” (Perdue, 1994, p. 121). As a divine authority, Wisdom spoke to the sages of ancient Israelite society, and for them it was Wisdom who created and ordered the world, originated and sustains life, and “embodied in sapiential language, teaches those who take up the path to sagehood” (Perdue, 1994, p. 332). She may not be a fully divine being, and she is certainly not a goddess in these interpretations, but Wisdom is a source of considerable authority.<sup>32</sup>

Those scholars who read more into Wisdom's authority than the previous scholars mentioned, interpret Wisdom as a fully divine being. For scholars in this camp, Wisdom is “a heavenly creature, residing in angelic proximity to God” (Fox, 1997, p. 633). As such, she is decidedly divine (Davidson, 2006, p. 41-42), not just an authority figure. These

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<sup>32</sup> For Wisdom, as a female being to have such authority is source of some concern among scholars. Given that YHWH is presented as the divine parent in Proverbs 8:22, then Wisdom, a female, is his firstborn; and “the firstborn in Israelite society, normally a son, held a privileged rank, ... receiving a double portion of the inheritance... and at his father's death replacing him as head of the family. ... And Wisdom, a female, holds this high position, shattering social convention” (Perdue, 1994, p. 90).

scholars argue that within Proverbs 8:22-31, Wisdom is “depicted as sharing the same divine nature with the Creator himself” (Pentiuc, 2001, p. 256). Thus, Wisdom is interpreted as being a divine presence and being. Other scholars have phrased it thusly: “The ancient Israelite sages asked, ‘where is wisdom to be found?’ In part, their answer was that Wisdom is a divine, feminine presence, to be found at the heart of all reality, beckoning all to hear her teachings so that they might live with integrity in a world in danger of losing its center” (Young, 2001, p. 231). Again, this points to the character of Wisdom perceived as more than an authority figure, but decidedly less than a goddess.

Finally, there are those scholars who take Wisdom's authority and divinity another step farther, and position Wisdom as a fully-fledged goddess. The perception of Wisdom as a goddess is, in part, based on the perceived influence of other cultures on ancient Israelite religion. According to Richard Davidson, the numerous parallels between the Egyptian goddess Ma'at and Wisdom as she is presented in Proverbs 1-9 signify that Ma'at is “the ancestor of Lady Wisdom in Prov 1-9” (2006, p. 38). Other scholars claim that it was not necessarily Egyptian mythology that provided the primary influence on the positioning of Wisdom as a goddess. These scholars argue that it was the author(s) of Proverbs who “appropriated the fertility metaphor [as presented, for example, in Babylonian mythology] to speak of Woman Wisdom as the lover and consort of God” (Perdue, 1994, p. 330). Aside from the possible Egyptian influence, for example Ma'at, others argue that Wisdom is the result of the conscious borrowing of mythological ideas from the surrounding cultures (for example Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Persian, and Canaanite). It is also argued that “popular religion in Israel gave Yahweh a fertility goddess, most often Astarte [a Canaanite goddess], to be his consort” (Perdue, 1994, p. 330). This consort was then transformed into the

character of Wisdom. Yet, it is also possible that the idea of Wisdom as a goddess is something that was internal and arose strictly within Israelite culture. For scholars in this latter line of thought, it is conceivable that Wisdom may have been understood as just another goddess, as “most ancient Israelites were likely polytheistic, worshiping their national god, Yahweh, along with other gods” (Young, 2001, p. 222). Positioning Wisdom as one goddess among many also puts her in place where perhaps she was “understood in her original manifestation as a goddess who is Yahweh’s wife or consort” (Young, 2001, p. 222). Regardless of her mythological origins, for these scholars it is clear that Wisdom is a divine authoritative being in her own right – a goddess, who as the “Queen of Heaven, Woman Wisdom” had the ability to rule as a monarch “over the cosmos and nations” (Perdue, 1994, p. 337). Though the contribution of feminist scholars is not referenced here, it is worth observing that this attribute (of Wisdom as an authority figure or goddess), only arose after feminist scholarship had introduced such interpretations.

### **Nature of Wisdom: Abstract**

In contrast to those post-feminist scholars who interpret the character of Wisdom as a physical, present being, there are those who still understand Wisdom in a far more abstract manner. These scholars fall into one of two camps – those who consider Wisdom to be an amorphous being who represents the order of time and space, and those who consider Wisdom to be a poetic and/or theological figurative device.

For those scholars who view Wisdom as a vague force pervading the universe and as one who brings order to it, Wisdom is described as “the primeval order itself, or as the order-mystery ... or as the order-producing force ... with which God informs the world (Fox,



1997, p. 627). Wisdom then, does not seem to directly affect the course of history, despite being “everywhere at once, she somehow remains aloof, preaching and observing rather than affecting and shaping events” (Fox, 1997, p. 629). Wisdom then, is more a force of nature than a physical being active during the course of creation and in the lives of humans. Wisdom as an abstract ordering force in the universe, for contemporary scholars, creates a character that is “atemporal... [and] unlocalized, unbound by space” (Fox, 1997, p. 629).<sup>33</sup> However, Wisdom still fulfills the role of organizing and ordering the universe and assisting in the lives of humans.

Other scholars continue to interpret Wisdom as an abstract figure or concept. Such scholars utilize contemporary literary theory, to interpret the possible meanings and uses of Hebrew poetry. They position her as a purely poetic and/or theological device, such as a metaphor or personification, and instead of viewing Wisdom as a formless abstract being now interpret her as being an ordering force in the universe. For these scholars, Wisdom's importance is as a poetic device that is best “understood to be an extension of the mind of God” (Williams, 1999, p. 279). This implies that they understand Wisdom to be a poetic expression of part of God, and thus a tool to be used to better understand the divine. In this context, Wisdom is viewed as a poetic device because scholars argue that in the post-exilic context of Jewish monotheism, the image of the goddess Wisdom “was redefined as ‘a purely poetic figure, a simple personification that could not endanger the true religion’” (Young, 2001, p. 222). This theologically-based move away from a concrete figure (such

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<sup>33</sup> This view is problematic. The idea of anything being atemporal or “unbound by space” did not exist until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, any implications that it was implied within an ancient text is preposterous. The revelation that space and time are connected was such a revolutionary thought that even those physicist who did understand the mathematics behind it, still did not accept the theory for many years. The proposal that the book of Proverbs explores this concept is purely a product of a 20<sup>th</sup> century academic projecting modern possibilities onto an ancient text.

as a goddess), to a poetic device with very little discernible power or influence, is a core characteristic of the view of Wisdom as an abstract figure. The interpretation of Wisdom as an ordering force in the universe is a new take on the view of Wisdom as an abstract literary device.

### **Role in Creation: Active**

In post-feminist scholarship, Wisdom's role in creation may be considered as either active or passive. When post-feminist scholars read the text as placing Wisdom in an active role, they consider both the role Wisdom played in creation as well as the actions she undertook during that process.

Firstly, as an active participant in creation, Wisdom may be appreciated as having functioned as a craftsman or as a companion to God. While the exact contribution and precise role of Wisdom to creation is ambiguous, based on the text of Proverbs 8:22-31, other passages (Wis 7:22; 8:6; 14:2) provide some clarification - "by calling her a *technitis*, or crafts(wo)man" (Murphy, 1985, p. 5). Furthermore, Wisdom's purported authority, deriving from her origin directly from God, also speaks to her potential for playing an active role in creation. Laporte claims that Wisdom's preexistence to creation argues that she "has a role to play in creation, but Proverbs is content to assert her presence at creation with only a vague suggestion of an active role" (1975, p. 115). As a result, Laporte argues that Wisdom's role in creation is minor or minimal at best. Nevertheless, the role for Wisdom in creation for post-feminist scholars is undeniably active and rarely only minor, thus Wisdom has changed from the pre-feminist passive view to hold an active role, even if some scholars do not interpret it as a strong one. In contrast to Laporte's view, other

scholars who argue that Wisdom had an active role in creation do so on the grounds that she is best viewed as a goddess. Leo Perdue, for example, states that “popular religion in Israel gave Yahweh a fertility goddess, most often Astarte, to be his consort” (1994, p. 330), and that, as a result of Wisdom's position as a goddess, she would have automatically had an active role to play in creation (at the very least as the consort of YHWH). It is to the nature of that active role that I now turn my attention.

As has become clear, there are many different role(s) that Wisdom may have undertaken during creation that are not explicitly stated but implied within the text. As a result, scholars have come up with a number of options. Again I turn to the work of Perdue who provides the most detailed post-feminist description and analysis of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31. Wisdom, in Perdue's view “takes up the tradition of the creation of the world with Yahweh through wisdom's establishing, designing, and ordering the cosmos” (1994, p. 26). These activities are related to the 'traditional' “images associated with a monarch, who, together with a consort – the Queen of Heaven, Woman Wisdom – ruled over the cosmos and nations” (Perdue, 1994, p. 337). Moving from the divine realm to the human realm, Wisdom's role in creation is also evident in the human world, when the Israelite sages of the time viewed Wisdom as the one who “creates and orders the world, originates and sustains life” (Perdue, 1994, p. 332). From the above description it is evident that some post-feminist scholars find in Wisdom a feminine figure that was active in the creation of the universe as distinct from the mainly passive role depicted in pre-feminist scholarship.

### **Role in Relation to Humanity**

Wisdom has more than just a role to play during creation, she is also active in human life and existence. Wisdom is a many-faceted figure who is “playful, hospitable as a banquet table, a teacher and prophet, a lover among the trees of the wood” (Burns, 1997, p. 145). In light of these multiple images, there are many modes of interpreting her role with reference to humanity. Furthermore, it is argued that Wisdom “needs humanity” as it is only in relation to humanity that Wisdom's full potential can come to fruition, as before there were people, “she could only frolic before God, waiting for her real mission to start” (Fox, 1997, p. 631). For post-feminist scholars, there are two main possible roles available to Wisdom, that of a mediator and the keeper/maintainer of the relationship between humanity and the divine, and that of a teacher whose purpose is to further humanity's understanding of life, morality, and the divine.

Wisdom, when understood as a mediator, can also be viewed as humanity's link to the divine. This is strengthened by the views of other scholars who view Wisdom as she appears in Proverbs 8 “as one of the devices employed in the post-exilic period to bridge the growing gap between a transcendent deity and the world of human beings” (Whybray, 1995, p. 5). Regardless of whether she indicates humanity's closeness to the divine, or is a tool to bring humanity closer again to the divine, Wisdom still functions as mediator and link between humanity and God. Furthermore, Wisdom may also be viewed as “a communication of God” (Murphy, 1985, p. 10). In this way, the image of Wisdom as the primary link between humanity and the divine is strengthened. In fact, there did not appear to be any reference to this dimension of the character of Wisdom in pre-feminist biblical literature.

Finally, it is worthwhile to return to the idea of metaphoric language and imagery for changes have occurred here too, as noted earlier with regard to the change in the interpretation of Wisdom as simple metaphor to Wisdom as representative of order in the universe. In Proverbs 8:22-31, YHWH “is depicted in images of parent and husband, while Wisdom is construed as child and lover (cf. Prov. 8:22-36). Humans [then] are the children of God and Wisdom and Wisdom's lovers” (Perdue, 1994, p. 338). Again, this points to Wisdom as a divine link and communicator between humanity and God. As a link between the mortal and divine realms, Wisdom thus also has the potential to provide humans with instruction from God in her role as a teacher.

Wisdom, in the role of a teacher, “invites the unlearned to take up their course of study with her and to experience the fullness of life” (Perdue, 1994, p. 80). She offers instruction in the ideal manner of conducting one's life, and plays an important role in instructing humanity “in the moral life” (Perdue, 1994, p. 78). Her speeches, not just in Proverbs 8, but also in Proverbs 1:20-33 and 9:1-6, are public speeches made by Wisdom, and in these situations “the didactic style of the teacher is reflected in her discourses,” this can be read as positioning Wisdom “as the personification of Israelite school wisdom” (Murphy, 1981, p. 51). Finally, Wisdom as teacher is also the divine authority spoken of earlier, and as such “is the voice of God who gives understanding and insight into the nature and characteristic of God, reality, and human existence” (Perdue, 1994, p. 121). Thus, Wisdom in relation to humanity, now provides a more accessible link to the divine, and is the teacher who aids humans in their understanding of life, the divine, and morality. All of these above interpretations exhibit changes and development along a number of lines. My task will now be to consider the possibility of feminist influence that may have

shaped these changes.

### ***The Influence of Feminist Interpretations***

It is obvious that there would be some exchange of ideas between the scholars in the field of biblical studies. What this section is interested in, is the examples of the way in which some of the theories that were presented within the pre-feminist analysis of Proverbs 8:22-31 have shifted over time to accommodate the contributions that would appear to have a feminist provenance. In this section, I intend to examine the influence, if any, of feminist theory on the interpretation of Wisdom. The following examination will discuss the nature and role of Wisdom as presented by post-feminist interpretations of Proverbs 8:22-31. I will pay particular attention to the post-feminist analyses that argue for Wisdom as a living and physical being; for Wisdom as having an active role in creation; and for Wisdom's relationship to and with humanity and God. I believe that it is from the changes evident in these specific areas that an argument for the influence of feminist scholarship on biblical studies as a whole can be made. Overall, feminist scholarship has influenced the interpretation of Wisdom by providing her with a greater range of attributes as a mature female being – including positioning her as a goddess, an authority figure, or a lover (of both God and humankind). Additionally, feminist scholars introduced the interpretation of Wisdom as being active during the creation of the universe as well as mediating the relationship between Wisdom and humanity.

### **Wisdom as a Living Being**

For those scholars who interpret Wisdom as a character in her own right, there are two main interpretations of her most appropriate title: child or goddess. In this regard, both

non-feminist and feminist scholars agree, but they disagree on the qualities or roles attributed to each.

In the analysis that places Wisdom as a child, non-feminist scholars can envision her birthed by God and playing at his side during creation as an infant (Young, 2001, p. 221). As an example, Jean Laporte, writing in 1975, placed the child Wisdom, as a companion to God, and not an equal (115). This is in contrast to the perspective put forward more recently by Michael Fox in 1997, who gives the child Wisdom a dual role – “a child to God and a patron to humans,” this position puts Wisdom in a place of power (629) as a mediator, something that does not occur in pre-feminist interpretations. There is also a view of Wisdom that emphasizes her life cycle and allows her to grow up that is also a recent post-feminist interpretation (Young, 2001, p. 221). This more recent reading meshes quite well with feminist interpretations of Wisdom as a child. For feminist scholars who interpret Wisdom as a child, Wisdom is “an offspring of God, ... brought forth from God before the beginning of the earth” (Ruether, 1983, p. 57); and it is Wisdom who plays during the text of Proverbs 8:22-31, which is considered desirable in “the relationship between a parent and child, thus one may view Wisdom as God's daughter (Yee, 1992, p. 94). Then, as God's daughter, Wisdom is given an exalted place within the cosmos and is in a “co-creative relationship” with both God and humanity (Yee, 1992, p. 85). The idea of the child Wisdom as a co-creator with God is something that is uniquely feminist; however, there is still some overlap between the idea of Wisdom as the child of God from both post-feminist and pre-feminist perspectives. Both perspectives will interpret Wisdom as a child of God; but while the pre-feminist scholars are content to leave Wisdom as a little child, post-feminist scholars allow Wisdom to mature and interpret her position as a child of God as

one of considerable power and potential influence.

The other perspective that overlaps between feminist and post-feminist analysis of Proverbs 8:22-31 is the vision of Wisdom as a goddess. This is one of the earliest ideas put forward by feminist scholars (Joan Engelsman proposed it in 1979, with Claudia Camp providing more support in 1985) and one that only begins to appear in non-feminist literature during the mid-1990's. Feminist scholars argue that it is "evident that Sophia [Wisdom] possesses the duality of attributes shown to be typical of the goddesses" (Engelsman, 1979, p. 81). Additionally, these feminist scholars use the ancient text and imagery to support their claims, stating that it is "clear that there is goddess-imagery at work in the presentation of female Wisdom" (Camp, 1985, p. 283). They also admit that "this imagery is in some way transformed" (Camp, 1985, p. 283) by the authors of the text, which creates a larger space in which interpretation may occur. In viewing Wisdom as a goddess, feminist scholars found a new way of looking at Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31, in addition to finding "another face of the embodiment of God" (Grey, 2001, p. 107).

Post-feminist male scholars take a similar approach to that of feminist scholars in their viewing of Wisdom as a goddess. As such, Wisdom is now described as "a heavenly creature, residing in angelic proximity to God" (Fox, 1997, p. 633). Though these scholars also recognize the possibility of foreign mythological influence (Davidson, 2006, p. 38), they are still willing to position her as a divine authority figure (Davidson, 2006, p. 41-42) within the Israelite context. For example, Wisdom is described as sharing "the same divine nature with the Creator himself" (Pentiuc, 2001, p. 256), and as having the ability to rule as a monarch "over the cosmos and nations" (Perdue, 1994, p. 337). Therefore, it would appear that the way in which Wisdom is interpreted by post-feminist scholars illustrates the



impact of feminist scholarship. This influence is particularly evident in the interpretation of Wisdom as a goddess or authority figure by post-feminist scholars, as this specific reading did not exist prior to feminist scholarship on this passage.

### **Wisdom as Active in Creation**

In the case of the interpretation of Wisdom as being active in the creation of the cosmos, both feminist and non-feminist scholarship proposed this view in the early 1980's – although it did not gain widespread support it in the early 1990's. There is, however, some evidence to support the idea that feminist scholarship has influenced the more recent post-feminist interpretations that take this stance. Rosemary Radford Ruether argued that Wisdom played an active role in creation beside God in her 1983 text (57). While Ronald Murphy, in his 1985 article “Wisdom and Creation”, was the first post-feminist to argue for Wisdom's activity in creation on the basis of textual analysis and other Old Testament passages (5), he is picking up on Ruether's earlier interpretation. Later feminists further expanded on Wisdom's active role in creation. In 1991, Kathleen Connor argued that Wisdom's role in creation is attested to primarily by virtue of her existence during and prior to the act of creation and her act of speaking about it afterwards (89, 91). Additionally, Gale Yee argued in 1992 that viewing Wisdom as God's daughter – i.e. begotten and born of God – necessarily leads to viewing her as an active participant in creation (85). Finally, in Leo Perdue's 1994 book, he argues that Wisdom's authority and origin directly from God speak to her potential for playing an active role in creation. Indeed, Wisdom, in Perdue's view “takes up the tradition of the creation of the world with Yahweh through wisdom's establishing, designing, and ordering the cosmos” (1994, p. 26). This is a decidedly active

role, and Wisdom's authority to take part in it simply via being born of God is something that echoes previous feminist scholarship. Clearly then, there is evidence of the influence of feminist biblical scholarship in contemporary post-feminist interpretations of Wisdom's role in creation based on Proverbs 8:22-31. The interpretation of Wisdom as playing an active role in creation is one which did not arise until feminist scholarship supported it. Thus, one can argue that any post-feminist interpretations that support this view were likely influenced by previous feminist scholarship.

### **Wisdom's Relationship with Humanity**

The idea the Wisdom is in relationship with humanity and with God, is one that only appears in the literature in the 1990's. The first to mention the idea of Wisdom as the chief mediator between mortals and the divine “who spans the distance between God, the world, and human beings” (1991, p. 89) was Kathleen Connor. Connor's work was published in 1991, four years prior to Whybray's statement that Wisdom, as she appears in Proverbs 8 is “one of the devices employed in the post-exilic period to bridge the growing gap between a transcendent deity and the world of human beings” (1995, p. 5). There are still differences of interpretation however, as to the nature of Wisdom's relationship to humanity by feminist and non-feminist scholars. For example, in 1997, Michael Fox argues that Wisdom “needs humanity,” as it is only with humanity that Wisdom's full potential can come to fruition. This is because before there were people, “she could only frolic before God, waiting for her real mission to start” (631). That same year, Camilla Burns argued that Wisdom by virtue of being portrayed as a human figure “indicates the intimacy of our relationship with God” (1997, p. 144). The idea that the relationship between humanity and God is an intimate one

is a uniquely feminist theory, and one that has not been strongly argued elsewhere. These two positions – that Wisdom needs humanity and that Wisdom is indicative of humanity's relationship with God – are not incompatible. Indeed, if Wisdom's role is viewed as being a mediator between humanity and God, then she both needs humanity in order to fulfil that role but she would also serve to indicate the strength of humanity's relationship to God. It was feminist scholars who first interpreted Wisdom as having an important role to play with regards to humanity, and this perspective has since been elaborated on by post-feminist male scholars. Clearly then feminist scholarship has influenced post-feminist interpretations of Wisdom and her role in relation to humanity.

What this section strives to illustrate was that there has been influence in the way in which some of the theories from early non-feminist analyses of Proverbs 8:22-31 have shifted over time to accommodate the increasing contributions of feminist analyses. To accomplish this, I considered how feminist scholars have interpreted Wisdom and how later post-feminist male scholars have echoed the work of the feminists in a number of areas. Firstly, I considered the interpretation of Wisdom as a living being, as put forward by feminist scholars. These feminist scholars include such readings of Wisdom as an authority figure and a goddess – which have in recent years been incorporated into post-feminist interpretations of Wisdom. Secondly, I examined the role of Wisdom in creation – specifically, the active role that feminist scholars assign. Again, the primary evidence for this view appears in post-feminist scholarship but not prior to the work of feminist scholars who first seriously proposed this idea. Finally, I discussed the theory that Wisdom is in a relationship with both humanity and the divine, and she also functions as a mediator between those two realms. This interpretation also, has been repeated by post-feminist

scholars who also argue that Wisdom and humanity have a close bond. Through each of these examples, I think that there is sufficient evidence to claim that feminist ideas have influenced scholarship as a whole.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to consider the poem in Proverbs 8:22-31, and investigate not only how it has been interpreted over time, but also how that interpretation may have changed due to influences by feminist scholarship. Coming to this task, I took a highly interdisciplinary methodological approach. I drew from both biblical criticism and literary theory in the analysis of the primary textual material, while a primarily comparative method was used for the analysis of the influence of feminist scholarship on non-feminist literature presented in the last portion of the paper. Examining the interpretation of the primary text, I used literary analysis combined with a comparative model to examine how feminist biblical scholarship may have affected non-feminist biblical scholarship. By using this combination of methods, the ancient text and contemporary biblical criticism provided a basic framework for a comparative consideration of late 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship.

After examining the primary text in Chapter One, I considered the interpretations of Proverbs 8:22-31 that were prevalent prior to the rise of feminist scholarship in Chapter Two. In Chapter Three, I then examined the feminist scholarship on the passage, in particular how feminist scholars interpret the nature and role of Wisdom. I also considered some of the conflicts that have arisen within feminist scholarship on this topic – which consisted of a difference of opinions among scholars regarding the different facets of Wisdom. I also examined some of the defining features of contemporary feminist biblical interpretation. After looking at the feminist commentaries on Proverbs 8:22-31, I then moved to examine the interpretations of non-feminist scholars that arose after the rise of feminist biblical scholarship in the 1980's in Chapter Four. Again I examined how these

scholars interpret the nature and role of Wisdom as she is presented in Proverbs 8:22-31. Finally, I considered how certain aspects of these two lines of scholarship overlapped and considered how the work of non-feminist scholars shows indications of being influenced by the work of feminist biblical scholars. I cannot claim that only female scholars made changes to the interpretation of Wisdom. As noted previously, there are some male scholars (most notably Davidson and Young) who do support feminist ideas in their work. Both scholars argue for a broader and more active interpretation of Wisdom, although Davidson does so out of concern for trinitarian theology. The contribution of these two scholars does not, however, diminish the case that I have made for the influence of feminist scholarship on post-feminist scholarship; and as I observed earlier, it is quite possible that they were influenced by feminist scholarship and ideas.

Based on my analysis, it is clear that there has definitely been some influence by feminist biblical scholarship on non-feminist biblical scholars and their work. The majority of this influence appears in the scholarship of the mid to late 1990's, indicating that it has taken some time for there to be any influence of 1980's feminism on 'mainstream' scholars. While there are no non-feminist scholars who actively admit to being influenced by feminist theories, the work of Claudia Camp is frequently cited, although it may be the case that the interpretations of other feminist scholars have been absorbed without attribution.

Throughout this paper I was interested in examining the idea that a large political and social movement – in this case feminism – can affect the way that religious and secular academics interpret scripture. The character of Wisdom as interpreted by feminist scholars in Proverbs 8:22-31 provided a valuable example through which to examine this phenomenon. Through the analysis presented in this thesis, there is evidence to suggest

that feminist theory has had an effect on biblical scholarship. It is not all-pervasive, but nonetheless the influence of feminist scholarship has shifted and broadened the perspectives by which Wisdom has been described within 'traditional' biblical studies. Indeed, "consciousness of feminine terminology has been raised, so that modern translators do not so easily 'lose' this aspect of the biblical heritage" (Foster, 1999, p. 102). Through the use of existing methodologies and a willingness to revisit ancient texts, feminist scholars produced a more expansive way of incorporating feminist theories and positive 'feminine' imagery, into biblical interpretations. This has resulted in a view of Wisdom as a fully realized and alive being who is in an intimate relationship with the divine and humanity, who plays an active role as mediator between the divine and humanity, and who was active as co-creator of the universe.

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