

FINDING LADY WISDOM: THE EXCELLENT WOMAN (אשת חיל) AS A SYNECDOCHE FOR THE ORDER OF CREATION AND INTERPRETING ECCLESIASTES 7:28

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Abstract: *Intertextual resonance within the wisdom corpus presents Lady Wisdom as a composite character composed of the created order, excellent woman, and female Song of Songs lover. Representing the entire created order, Lady Wisdom functions as a synecdoche for the most important and most difficult component of wisdom—an excellent woman. The man who failed to find the excellent woman failed to find Lady Wisdom. Marriage to Dame Folly would create such a dissonance in his life that he would be unable to live according to wisdom—the order of creation. The composite nature of Lady Wisdom becomes apparent through (1) a lexical and thematic study of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9, the excellent woman, the wife of one’s youth, and the female lover of the Song of Songs; (2) the composite nature of the antagonist to Lady Wisdom—Dame Folly; (3) the character of Ruth; and (4) Solomon’s women in Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. In Ecclesiastes 7, Solomon, though wise, failed to find Lady Wisdom because he failed to find the excellent wife. Solomon had a thousand women, but none of them were Lady Wisdom (Ecc 7:28). Intertextual resonance between 1 Kings 11, Ecclesiastes 7, and Song of Songs 8 reveal that Solomon not only was unable to find Lady Wisdom but was metaphorically rejected by her (Song 8:11–12).*

Keywords: *Lady Wisdom, Solomon, Ruth, Delilah, excellent wife, Proverbs 31, Ecclesiastes 7, wisdom, Dame Folly, Song of Songs 8*

Intertextuality concerns resonance that can manifest itself through direct citation, thematic coherence, repetition of similar ideas, and support from other interpreters.¹ Textual and thematic links connect Lady Wisdom to the excellent woman, Ruth, and the Song of Songs female lover; other scholars have acknowledged these connections as well. While many intertextual studies connect texts diachronically with one text borrowing another, the connection between these women appears synchronically.²

An intertextual analysis of Lady Wisdom (Prov 1–9), the excellent woman (Prov 31), and the female lover in the Song of Songs reveals that these women depict an ideal, composite, archetypal woman who is enfolded in the character of Ruth.

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¹ Hays presents seven criteria for identifying echoes. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 29–32.

² For a distinction between diachronic and synchronic intertextual studies, see Gary Edward Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use of Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Guide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021), xxxiv–xxxvi.

First, this article argues that Lady Wisdom is a personified representation of God's order in creation. Second, lexical and thematic parallels argue that the pinnacle of Lady Wisdom, the excellent woman, and the Song of Songs female lover are the same character. Lady Wisdom is idealized in the excellent wife and eroticized in the Song of Songs. Third, through a study of Lady Wisdom's antagonist, Dame Folly, and Lady Wisdom's corresponding physical manifestation, Ruth, the composite characterization of Lady Wisdom becomes even more evident. Finally, understanding Lady Wisdom as an ideal, composite, archetypal character explains Solomon's failure to find [Lady] Wisdom (Eccl 7:28), and [Lady] Wisdom's rejection of Solomon (Song 8:11–12). The man who failed to marry/cultivate this woman failed to be wise.

I. THE LORD AND LADY WISDOM

Lady Wisdom is often identified as divine. Robertson writes, “Encountering wisdom is not dealing merely with an abstract idea. Encountering wisdom means interacting with a person, who is none other than God himself.”³ Robertson's assertion seems logical considering that wisdom rebukes the young man just as the Lord rebukes him (cf. Prov 1:25–26; 3:11), laughs at the destruction of the simple/rebel just like the Lord (cf. Prov 1:26; Ps 2:4),⁴ and states that whoever finds her finds life (Prov 8:35).⁵ At other times, however, the Lord is superior to wisdom: the Lord possesses (הָיָה) wisdom (8:22), weaves (בָּרַךְ) her (8:23), and gives birth (יָלַד) to her (8:24). This inferiority of wisdom has sparked discussions and controversies for centuries. The early church fathers assumed that Jesus the Messiah was Lady Wisdom. Arians argued from Proverbs 8:22, 24 that Jesus (Lady Wisdom) was created by God the Father. The church fathers responded in multiple ways, employing the analogy of faith instead of exegeting through Proverbs 8.⁶ Athanasius believed Prov 8 referred to Jesus's incarnation and argued that “created” and “begotten” in Prov 8 do not refer to origin but relationship, citing Psalm 2:7 and 110:3 for support.⁷ This

³ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of Wisdom: A Redemptive-Historical Exploration of the Wisdom Books of the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017), 51.

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

⁵ Von Rad comments, “Only Jahweh can speak in this way.” Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology: The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 444.

⁶ Several views are discussed by Andrew Steinmann, *Proverbs*, ConcC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 225–29.

⁷ Athanasius wrote, “[The Arians] seem to me to have a wrong understanding of this passage also; for it has a religious and very orthodox sense, which had they understood, they would not have blasphemed the Lord of glory. For on comparing what has been above stated with this passage, they will find a great difference between them.” Athanasius, *Defense of the Nicene Definition* 3.13 (NPNF² 4:158). Athanasius then quotes Genesis 1:1, Psalm 110:3 and 2:7, Proverbs 8:25, and John 1:3, concluding, “If then son, therefore not creature; if creature, not son; for great is the difference between them, and son and creature cannot be the same, unless His essence be considered to be at once from God, and external to God” (3.13 [4:158]). Thus, Jesus is the son, and so he cannot be part of creation. This point then raises the question concerning the meaning of Proverbs 8. Athanasius anticipates this objection and responds, “It is true to say that the Son was created too, but this took place when He became man; for creation belongs to man”

discussion continues today. Robertson exegetes Proverbs 8 and explains, “This personified wisdom suitably represents in old covenant form the Word that was face to face with God in the beginning. The wisdom-Word was God, and all things were made by him (John 1:1–3).”⁸

Interpreting Lady Wisdom, however, as God the Father or Jesus strains the language of Proverbs 8. While the verb קנה likely does not mean “to create,”⁹ the focus of Proverbs 8:22 concerns a time—“at the beginning” and “before his works.”¹⁰ At this time wisdom was born (חיל) (8:24–25). The verb חיל refers to birth (cf. Job 15:7). Eliphaz sarcastically mocks Job, “Were you the first man born (ילד)? Before the hills, were you brought forth (חיל)?”¹¹ The parallelism with ילד argues that חיל concerns origins.¹² Proverbs 8 describes the origin of wisdom before the creation of the world.¹³

A careful reading of Proverbs 3 and 8 reveals that wisdom, while present with God at creation, did not create. The Hebrew Bible repeatedly presents the Lord alone as Creator (Isa 40–45, esp. v. 18). Proverbs 3 and 8 do not deviate from this thought—3:19 states, “The Lord by wisdom established the earth”; 8:26 reads, “Before He [the Lord] made the earth and fields”; and 8:27 states, “When He [the Lord] established the heavens, I [wisdom] was there.” Robertson appeals to Proverbs 8:30, where presumably wisdom was “as the master craftsman.”¹⁴ Yet this reading is based on a misinterpretation. The comparative particle “as” is not in the Hebrew text. The

(3.14 [4:158–59]). Thus, Athanasius connects Proverbs 8 to the incarnation of Jesus. He states again later, “And as to the character, it is indeed the Saviour’s, but is said of Him when He took a body and said, ‘The Lord created me a beginning of His ways unto His works’ [Prov 8:22]. For as it properly belongs to God’s Son to be everlasting, and in the Father’s bosom, so on His becoming man, the words befitted Him, ‘The Lord created me’” (3.14 [4:159]). Gregory of Nyssa came to a similar conclusion; see Susannah Ticciati, “Proverbs 8:22 and the Arian Controversy,” in *Reading Proverbs Intertextually*, ed. Katharine J. Dell and Will Kynes, LHBOIS 629 (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 180–81. Steinmann notes that the “fathers generally did not rely on the Hebrew text . . . [and] easily overcame [the challenge of identifying Wisdom as Christ] by using the analogy of faith” (*Proverbs*, 219). For further discussion on the church fathers, see Steinmann, *Proverbs*, 219–29.

⁸ Robertson, *The Christ of Wisdom*, 54.

⁹ The LXX’s translation here is dubious. קנה primarily means “to buy, acquire” and the meaning “to create” is questionable. A case-by-case analysis of קנה reveals that the meaning “to create” is unnecessary. The supposed uses of קנה to mean “create” can easily be subsumed under the meaning “buy, acquire.” See further E. Lipiński, “קנה,” *TDOT*, 13:58–65; Bruce Francis Vawter, “Prov 8:22: Wisdom and Creation,” *JBL* 99.2 (1980): 208–14; Robertson, *The Christ of Wisdom*, 52–57.

¹⁰ Steinmann claims that if the church fathers had consulted the Hebrew, they would have seen that קנה meant “possessed” and Proverbs 8 supported orthodox trinitarian doctrine (*Proverbs*, 228). The exegetical issues, however, are greater than just one Hebrew verb.

¹¹ Hartley acknowledges the sarcasm. John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 245. Eliphaz sarcastically tells Job that he is not Wisdom.

¹² Bauman writes, “We can determine that *chil* begins with the first contractions and ceases with actual *yaldah* (cf. Jn. 16:21).” A. Bauman, “חיל,” *TDOT* 4:345. Job 15:7b and Proverbs 8:27b concern origin.

¹³ Waltke agrees, “The notion that Wisdom is eternally being begotten is based on Christian dogma, not on exegesis. Verses 22–26 represent Wisdom’s origin as a one-time event and action, not as an eternal birth and/or an eternal coming into possession” (*Proverbs 1–15*, 409n104).

¹⁴ Robertson, *The Christ of Wisdom*, 57.

Hebrew אִמּוֹן is unattested in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁵ Waltke makes a persuasive case based on context, semantics, and parallelism that the verse should be translated, “And I was beside him faithfully.”¹⁶ Thus אִמּוֹן describes wisdom’s relationship to the Lord at creation. Wisdom was not active in creation.

Wisdom, rather, was God’s design for creation.¹⁷ It represents the *order* of creation.¹⁸ Wisdom was created first because the plans (order) of creation must be created before creation. The sage, then, seeks to discern God’s order of creation and align his life with that order.¹⁹ Perdue explains:

Wisdom is the skill, plan, and knowledge God uses to secure and order the cosmos.... In the embrace of Wisdom (i.e., in the knowledge and actualization of sapiential teaching), the student embodies the same cosmic power of life and knowledge that God used in creating and governing reality. The same power that originates and sustains life in the world is offered to those who incorporate within their lives the teachings of the sage.²⁰

God made the world in an ordered way, and that ordered way was wisdom. Representing God’s order of creation, Lady Wisdom may then rebuke a young man or laugh at a fool just like the Lord.²¹ Lady Wisdom may speak through the father (Prov 1:8–19), at the gate through the sage (Prov 1:20–21), or through the mouth of the excellent wife (Prov 31:26).

II. A REAL WOMAN

Even though wisdom represented more than a real woman, the pinnacle of wisdom was marital union with an excellent woman (Prov 31:10–31). The order of

¹⁵ For a diverging view, see Cleon L. Rogers III, “The Meaning and Significance of the Hebrew Word אִמּוֹן in Proverbs 8,30,” *ZAW* 109.2 (1997): 208–21. Even if one adopts the MT’s vocalization and translates אִמּוֹן “craftsman,” Rogers makes a persuasive case that “craftsman” is appositional to the pronominal suffix, which means God is still the creator, not wisdom. Thus, regardless of the textual issue, wisdom is not the creator in Proverbs 8:30.

¹⁶ Most convincing is the parallelism between “faithfully,” “daily,” and “at all times.” Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 417–22.

¹⁷ Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 417.

¹⁸ Perdue writes, “God uses wisdom in creating and ordering the world.” Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 82. Bartholomew and O’Dowd write, “Wisdom is concerned with discerning the order that the Lord has built into the creation.” Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan O’Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 74.

¹⁹ Treier agrees, “Wisdom teaches subsequent generations that life flourishes in a harmony of societal and creation orders. When this order breaks down due to the folly of waywardness—when the adulteress is pursued rather than Woman Wisdom—the consequences are deadly,” Daniel Treier, “Wisdom,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 845. Estes writes, “In the thought of Proverbs, wisdom is skill in living according to Yahweh’s order. Folly is choosing to live contrary to the order he embedded in the universe.” Daniel J. Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1–9* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 26.

²⁰ Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 83.

²¹ Waltke agrees, noting, “Wisdom comes from God’s essential being ... [and] has an organic connection with God’s very nature and being” (*Proverbs 1–15*, 409).

creation involved marriage, sex, and offspring.²² In Genesis 2:18, God said, “It is not good that the man is alone.” God created woman because something was missing. The order of creation (wisdom) involved a man/woman one-flesh union. If a man marries Dame Folly, her folly will create a dissonance in his life discordant with God’s ordered creation (Prov 12:4; 14:1; 19:13; 21:9; 25:24; 27:15). Marrying the excellent woman became a synecdoche for being wise; marriage to an excellent woman was the pinnacle of wisdom.

This section analyzes the textual and thematic links between Lady Wisdom, the excellent wife, the female lover in the Song of Songs, and Dame Folly. Just as Dame Folly is a composite character who represented bad women, so also Lady Wisdom is a composite character who represented good women. The character of Ruth bridges these two women together. Ruth, who self-identified as the foreign woman (Ruth 2:10) would have presumably been associated with Dame Folly (Prov 2:16; 5:10, 20; 6:24; 7:5).²³ According to Boaz, however, she is the excellent woman.

1. *The Excellent Woman*. Five points of evidence support the conclusion that the excellent woman is a composite character. First, the excellent wife’s activities encompass more than what one individual woman would be able to accomplish. She rises before the sun (15) and works into the night (18). This indefatigable, industrious woman serves not only her own household (12, 15, 21, 27) but also the poor and needy (20). She not only manufactures and distributes homemade clothing (19–22) but also purchases and plants a vineyard with her own profits (16). McCreech recognizes that her deeds surpass the deeds of a single woman; she is a “whirlwind of activity and achievement.”²⁴ Second, the poem is written as an acrostic presenting a picture of an ideal/complete/perfect woman. No physical woman would ever be able to attain this ideal, nor was she expected to attain it. Yoder agrees, “As the comprehensive expression, the ‘A-to-Zs’ of all that is valued in and valuable about a woman, the Woman of Substance is arguably a composite image of real women. She

²² The Old Testament man was expected to marry and have children. The Talmud contended that the unmarried twenty-year-old man was living in sin and/or cursed (Qidd. 29b). Köhler comments, “It goes without saying that the Hebrew will marry, for that is the natural course of events.... It corresponds to the divine ordering of creation.... The Arabs still call the bachelor *aḏab*, ‘forsaken, lonely.’ The Old Testament has no word for this at all, so unusual is the idea. Nor is there known the woman who remains single.... Were there no unmarried people? We do not know.” Ludwig Köhler, *Hebrew Man*, trans. Peter R Ackroyd (New York: Abingdon, 1953), 75–76. Jeremiah’s call to a life of celibacy was something unique (Jer 16) that God used for a specific purpose and specific time. John A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 403. Concerning Jeremiah’s celibacy, Goldingay writes, “In a traditional society, people do not deliberately stay single, so Yahweh’s instruction is countercultural.... Yahweh’s command to Jeremiah would seem unscriptural and theologically incomprehensible.” John Goldingay, *The Book of Jeremiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 398.

²³ The primary characteristic of Dame Folly is that she is a foreigner.

²⁴ Thomas Patrick McCreech, “Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10–31,” *RB* 92.1 (1985): 26–27. He writes, “This particular portrait of a busy, industrious wife is intentionally one-sided because it is meant to describe not just any wife, not even the ideal wife, but a very special, unique wife.... The wife is primarily a symbol [for Wisdom]” (28–30). McCreech’s belief that the Proverbs 31 woman is a symbol for Lady Wisdom is unwarranted considering the legitimate appeal for a young man to marry this woman.

embodies no *one* woman, but rather the desired attributes and activities of *many*.²⁵ Third, the excellent woman Ruth (Ruth 3:11) fulfilled only some of the Proverbs 31 criteria. Fourth, the order of the Hebrew canon argues that Ruth was historically understood as the excellent woman.²⁶ Fifth, Proverbs 31 culminates with an overarching spiritual description—she fears the Lord.²⁷ Death, disability, infertility, or other maladies associated with a fallen world may prevent a woman from fulfilling the criteria of the excellent woman, but if she fears the Lord then she will use whatever God has given her in service to her house.²⁸

Part of the excellent woman's composite nature includes her identification with Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9.²⁹ Camp recognizes the importance of this observation, "The preponderance of female imagery in Prov 1–9 and in Prov 31 assumes great significance. It becomes hard to ignore the possibility that these texts were chosen to begin and end the book of Proverbs by virtue of that imagery. Far from being mere coincidence, this imagery should have crucial literary and theological claims to make with respect to the material it surrounds."³⁰ The literary and theological import of this inclusio becomes evident when one recognizes that marrying Lady Wisdom is the epitome of what it means to be wise.

Scholars have noted the thematic and lexical relationship between Lady Wisdom and the excellent wife in Proverbs.³¹ Lady Wisdom is difficult to find, and the man who finds her is blessed (2:1–4; 3:13, 18). Similarly, the excellent woman is difficult to find (31:10), and, thematically, the one who finds her is blessed (31:28). The

²⁵ Christine Roy Yoder, "The Woman of Substance (אשת-חיל): A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 31:10–31," *JBL* 122.3 (2003): 446, her emphasis. Concerning this function of the acrostic see Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques*, TTCBL (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 198.

²⁶ The third and fourth points are supported below.

²⁷ Waltke explains, "This woman's itemized, self-sacrificing activities for others exemplify the fear of the Lord." Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 536.

²⁸ Ruth was infertile and her husband died, placing her in a different socio-economic situation than the excellent woman. Nevertheless, she used the little she had to honor her dead husband and serve those to whom she was obligated. Boaz, therefore, identifies her as the excellent woman.

²⁹ Goswell explains, "The poem about 'the good wife' is a fitting end to the book, for the metaphor of *finding* a wife (= Lady Wisdom) forms the subtext of Proverbs 1–9. The 'good wife' of Proverbs 31 is the feminine embodiment of the wisdom ethic of Proverbs, but in contrast to Lady Wisdom depicted in Proverbs 1 and 8–9, she is a real-life woman and is realistically portrayed." Gregory Goswell, "Is Ruth Also among the Wise?," in *Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, ed. David G. Firth and Lindsay Wilson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 127.

³⁰ Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, BLS 11 (Sheffield: Almond, 1985), 187–88. Dell argues that Proverbs 10–30 describe the moral character of the virtuous woman and connects these characteristics to Ruth. Katharine Dell, "Didactic Intertextuality: Proverbial Wisdom as Illustrated in Ruth," in Dell and Kynes, *Reading Proverbs Intertextually*, 103–14.

³¹ McCreesh ("Wisdom as Wife") draws out several correlations between Lady Wisdom and the Proverbs 31 woman. See also Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, 186–208; Yoder, "The Woman of Substance"; Waltke, *Proverbs 15–31*, 517–18; Ruben Zimmermann, "The Love Triangle of Lady Wisdom: Sacred Marriage in Jewish Wisdom Literature?," in *Sacred Marriages: The Divine-Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity*, ed. Martti Nissinen and Risto Uro (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 246; Dell, "Didactic Intertextuality: Proverbial Wisdom as Illustrated in Ruth"; Goswell, "Is Ruth Also among the Wise?"

blessing is related to the profiting (סחר) of both ladies (3:14; 31:18). The value of Lady Wisdom and the excellent woman exceeds rubies (פנינים) (3:15; 31:10). The husband can trust (בטח) the excellent woman (31:11) just like Lady Wisdom (1:33; 3:23).³² Life is frequently associated with Lady Wisdom (3:18, 22; 4:10, 13, 22–23; 7:2; 8:35; 9:6, 11). The excellent woman’s industry similarly provides life for her household (31:15, 21), and her generosity provides life to others (31:20). Yoder notes, “The nature and extent of lexical and thematic parallels between the Woman of Substance and Wisdom in Prov 1–9 indicate that, for the sage, the two women essentially coalesce.”³³

Table 1: Comparison between Lady Wisdom and the Virtuous Woman

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

2. *The Lover*. The excellent wife also corresponds to the “wife of one’s youth” in Proverbs 5:15–19³⁴ and the Song of Songs female lover. Several scholars have noted the similarities between the “wife of one’s youth” and the Song of Songs lover,³⁵ though few are willing to draw a direct comparison.³⁶ Melton recognizes the connection between Proverbs and the Song of Songs but goes too far by claiming

³² Waltke illustrates the distinctiveness of this characteristic, “Outside of this text and Judg. 20:36, Scripture condemns trust in anyone or anything apart from God/the Lord... The present exception elevates the valiant wife, who herself fears the Lord, to the highest level of spiritual and physical competence” (*Proverbs 15–31*, 521).

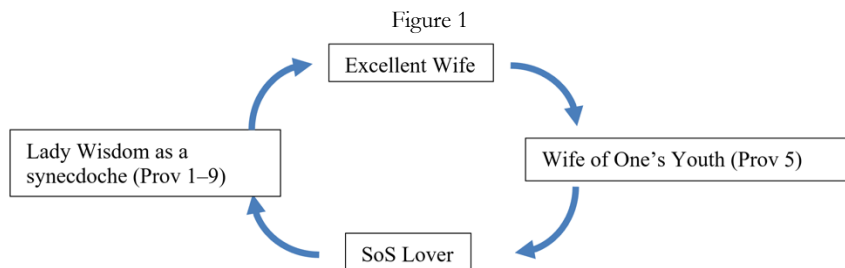
³³ Yoder, “The Woman of Substance,” 446.

³⁴ Lucas agrees, “The Woman of Worth can be seen as a filling out of the picture of ‘the wife of your youth’ (5:18–19) and is the strict antithesis of the Strange Woman, who incarnates some characteristics of Folly.” Ernest C. Lucas, “The Book of Proverbs: Some Current Issues,” in *Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, ed. David G. Firth and Lindsay Wilson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 50.

³⁵ Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 317–22; Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 18A (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 199–204; Lindsay Wilson, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018), 102–4; Rosalind Clarke, “Seeking Wisdom in the Song of Songs,” in Firth and Wilson, *Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, 100–12.

³⁶ Steinmann attributes the shared terminology to Solomonic authorship, “These similarities are easily explained if the interpreter accepts that Solomon is the author of both the Song of Songs (as stated in Song 1:1) and the author of Proverbs 1–9” (*Proverbs*, 153–56). Kaiser believes Proverbs 5 is the interpretive key to the Song of Songs. Walter C. Kaiser, “True Marital Love in Proverbs 5:15–23 and the Interpretation of Song of Songs,” in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, ed. J. I. Packer and Sven Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 106–16.

that Song of Songs is *only* a metaphor for Solomon’s pursuit of Lady Wisdom.³⁷ However, seeing Lady Wisdom as a composite character that connects God’s ordered creation directly to one’s wife (i.e., sex according to the order of creation) makes better sense of the Song of Songs than making her only a metaphor for Solomon’s pursuit of wisdom. Since Lady Wisdom is the excellent wife, the excellent wife is the “wife of one’s youth” (Prov 5:15–20), and the “wife of one’s youth” is the female lover in the Song of Songs, then the female lover in the Song of Songs must be Lady Wisdom.³⁸



Song of Songs is a song (שיר), not a drama. As such, it is composed poetically as wisdom literature³⁹ with composite, archetypal characters.⁴⁰ This ideal, composite,

³⁷ Brittany Melton, “Solomon, Wisdom, and Love: Intertextual Resonance between Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs,” in *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, ed. Katharine J. Dell and Will Kynes (New York: T&T Clark, 2016), 130–41. For a history of this interpretation, see Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs*, AB 7C (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 110.

³⁸ Fox notes that the Proverbs 5:15–19 wife “is a metaphor, albeit elusive, for wisdom.” Michael V. Fox, “The Strange Woman in Septuagint Proverbs,” *JNSL* 22.2 (1996): 35.

³⁹ Murphy claims the Song is a song and so cannot be wisdom literature. Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 106. Yet he recognizes that the Song contains “echoes” of Lady Wisdom and thus has a sapiential character to it (106–7). Wisdom literature was composed using multiple literary styles; identifying the Song as a song should not disqualify it as wisdom literature. Schellenberg, however, argues against the Song’s sapiential character, contending that sapiential literature concerns three points: (1) a concern “with the value or limitations of wisdom;” (2) an “aim at providing advice;” and (3) an “interest in the order of creation.” Annette Schellenberg, “Questioning the Trend of Classifying the Song of Songs as Sapiential,” in *Nächstenliebe und Gottesfurcht: Beiträge aus alttestamentlicher, semitistischer und altorientalistischer Wissenschaft für Hans-Peter Mathys zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Hans-Peter Mathys, Hanna Jenni, and Markus Saur, AOAT 439 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2016), 394–95. This article responds to Schellenberg’s second and third points. She also claims the “uncertainty of meaning” in the Song is an evidence that it is not “advice literature” (396). Yet the opposite is true. The enigmatic character of the Song strengthens its connection with the sapiential tradition (Prov 1:6). The intimate subject matter also strengthens the case for ambiguity. The didactic nature of the Song is not nearly so limited as Schellenberg makes it out to be. For additional arguments in favor of a sapiential reading of the Song, see Katharine J. Dell, “Does the Song of Songs Have Any Connections to Wisdom?,” in *Perspectives on the Song of Songs*, ed. Anselm C. Hagedorn (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 8–26; Clarke, “Seeking Wisdom in the Song of Songs,” 101; Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 575; Yair Zakovitch, *The Song of Songs: Riddle of Riddles*, trans. Valerie Zakovitch, LHBOTS 673 (New York: T&T Clark, 2019); Kenton L. Sparks, “The Song of Songs: Wisdom for Young Jewish Women,” *CBQ* 70.2 (2008): 277–99.

⁴⁰ Exum agrees, “The Song’s lovers are archetypal lovers—composite figures, types of lovers rather than any specific lovers. In the course of the poem, they take on various guises or personalities and assume different roles.” J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs*, OITL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 8. See also Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 577; Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of*

female lover primarily teaches “young Jewish women propriety in matters of love and sex.”⁴¹ This female lover usually loves her husband according to the order of creation (wisdom).⁴² She is the excellent wife of Proverbs 31 eroticized. While women are the primary audience, the Song still contains a message for men.⁴³

The correlation between Lady Wisdom and intimacy also exists in Proverbs. The author invokes bridal terminology in Proverbs 4:5–8.⁴⁴ The son is exhorted to get (קנה) wisdom and understanding (4:5, 7). קנה means “to buy” and “in a weakened sense, to acquire as a wife.”⁴⁵ Furthermore, the young man is exhorted not to abandon (עזב) her, another term that can refer to a relationship with a spouse (Prov 2:17; Isa 54:6; 60:15; 62:4). He should love (אהב) wisdom in Proverbs 4:6 and embrace (חבק) her in vs. 8. The verb “love” (אהב) can refer to the abstract idea of love, but in this bridal context, a more erotic connotation is implied. The LXX seems to reflect this interpretation by translating אהב with ἐράω.⁴⁶ Embrace occurs two times in the Song of Songs and refers to a very intimate embrace (Song 2:6; 8:3). Commenting on Song 2:6, Estes notes, “The verb *hābaq* here, as in Prov. 5:20, refers to sexual touching.”⁴⁷ Estes recognizes the correspondence with Dame Folly in 5:20 but overlooks the reference to wisdom in 4:8.⁴⁸ Just as Solomon presents Dame Folly as a composite evil woman who seeks the embrace of the young man, so also does Solomon use intimate language to refer to the young man’s embrace of wisdom. Intimacy with Lady Wisdom (Prov 4:8) represents life according to the order of creation.

Proverbs 7 also contains marriage terminology. The father exhorts the son to call wisdom “sister” (Prov 7:4), just as the husband in the Song of Songs calls his wife “sister” (4:9, 10, 12; 5:1, 2). Exum explains that “brother” and “sister” are “stock

Proverbs, 98; Daniel Grossberg, “Two Kinds of Sexual Relationships in the Hebrew Bible,” *HS* 35 (1994): 7; Tremper Longman, *Song of Songs*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 48; Mark McGinniss, *Contributions of Selected Rhetorical Devices to a Biblical Theology of the Song of Songs* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 157–58.

⁴¹ Sparks, “The Song of Songs,” 278. See also Clarke, “Seeking Wisdom in the Song of Songs,” 101, 105.

⁴² The Song presents idealistic pre-Fall love (1:12–17) and realistic post-Fall love (3:1–4; 5:2–8). See Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther*, NSBT 10 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 26–27.

⁴³ Clarke, “Seeking Wisdom in the Song of Songs,” 105.

⁴⁴ Zimmermann, “Love Triangle of Lady Wisdom,” 245–46.

⁴⁵ HALOT 3:1112. Cf. Lipiński, “קנה,” *TDOT*, 13:58–65. Ruth 4:5, 10 is the exclusive biblical use of קנה in the purchase of a wife. The Hebrew Bible takes an elevated view of women and typically distinguishes them from the other property of the man. Jack R. Lundbom, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 295–96. Thus, it is not surprising that the term קנה is not usually used in the taking of a wife.

⁴⁶ Zimmermann, “Love Triangle of Lady Wisdom,” 246. See also BDAG 389.

⁴⁷ Daniel J. Estes, “The Song of Songs,” in Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, AOTC 16 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 322. Concerning the embrace of the strange woman in Proverbs 5:20, Fox notes, “To ‘embrace an alien’s bosom’ (v 20b) means having sex with her” (*Proverbs 1–9*, 203).

⁴⁸ Estes, “The Song of Songs,” 322. Zimmermann recognizes this correspondence (“Love Triangle of Lady Wisdom,” 246).

terms of endearment used in the Song.⁴⁹ The significance of this term is lost on modern sensibilities, but it is found at one of the most intimate sections of the Song (5:1). Habel notes that “‘bridal’ imagery dominates this portrait of wisdom, especially in [Prov] 7:4–5.”⁵⁰ Habel, unfortunately, believes the bridal imagery “recedes into the background,” but he states, “She guards and shields the traveler from that strange woman.”⁵¹ Would it not make more sense, however, if it were Lady Wisdom as wife who “guards and shields the traveler”? The young man’s intimacy with Lady Wisdom as wife will help him resist the temptation of the seductress in Proverbs 7.⁵²

In Proverbs 5:15–23, the father exhorts the son to enjoy the intimate pleasures of one’s wife instead of the intimate pleasures of Dame Folly. The antagonistic relationship between Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly is well attested.⁵³ Just as Dame Folly’s antithesis is Lady Wisdom (Prov 9), so also is Dame Folly’s antithesis the excellent woman—one’s wife.

Table 2: Comparison between Lady Wisdom in Proverbs and the Female Lover in Song of Songs

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

The sexual antithesis between Dame Folly and Lady Wisdom is magnified in the Song of Songs. Just like Dame Folly, Lady Wisdom’s lips drip with honey (Prov 5:3; cf. Song 4:11), her scent is intoxicating (Prov 7:17; cf. Song 4:13–14), she invites

⁴⁹ Exum, *Song of Songs*, 171. Exum writes, “As a term of endearment, ‘sister’ may represent a striving toward completeness or wholeness, whose realization the man can only imagine in his mirror-image from the opposite sex. The combination of sibling and marriage imagery in the epithet ‘my sister, bride’ epitomizes the desire to achieve oneness with the other” (*Song of Songs*, 172). Kalmanofsky similarly highlights its closeness: “Although this term of endearment does not mark an actual familial relationship, it does evoke one to convey the intimacy, familiarity, and affection felt between the lovers,” Amy Kalmanofsky, *Dangerous Sisters of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 142. Kalmanofsky then comments on Song of Songs 8:1–2, “The Shulamite’s words offer a rare glimpse into the dynamics of the brother-sister relationship, which is portrayed as intimate (they suck the same breast), physical (they kiss), and relatively non-hierarchical” (142). Kalmanofsky’s first two categories have merit, but the third, “non-hierarchical,” contradicts other passages in the Song (e.g., 1:5–6).

⁵⁰ Norman C. Habel, “Symbolism of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9,” *Int* 26.2 (1972): 142.

⁵¹ Habel, “Symbolism of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9,” 142.

⁵² Walke phrases this section in the context of marital commitment, “[The young man’s] commitment to wisdom in an endearing relationship will protect him from the dangerous enticements of the unrestrained wife” (*Proverbs 1–15*, 370).

⁵³ Habel, “Symbolism of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9,” 141–43; Clarke, “Seeking Wisdom in the Song of Songs,” 108–9; Grossberg, “Two Kinds of Sexual Relationships in the Hebrew Bible”; Daniel J. Estes, “What Makes the Strange Woman of Proverbs 1–9 Strange?,” in *Ethical and Unethical in the Old Testament: God and Humans in Dialogue*, LHBOTS 528 (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 151–169.

the man to spend the night with her (Prov 7:18–20; cf. Song 7:11–13), she promises delight (Prov 9:17; Song 7:9–13), and she even goes in search of her lover in the city at night (Prov 7:6–23; Song 3:1–5).⁵⁴ Concerning the similarities between Proverbs 7 and Song of Songs 3, Grossberg writes, “The seeking, the finding, the grasping, the kissing, the locale of the search, the night setting and the sexual end are all elements of the common theme of amatory desire and quest appearing in Canticles and echoed in Proverbs.”⁵⁵

Table 3: Comparison between Lady Wisdom
in the Song of Songs and Dame Folly

Characteristic	Lady Wisdom	Dame Folly
Lips	Song 4:11	Prov 5:3
Scent	Song 4:13–14	Prov 7:17
Invitation	Song 7:11–13	Prov 7:18–20
Delight	Song 7:9–13	Prov 9:17
Night Scene ¹	Song 3:1–4	Prov 7:6–23

¹Seven points of correspondence exist here.

Both women appeal to the man, “Lie with me!” The one lures the young man to the house of the mother—the chamber of conception and life (Song 3:4), the other to the chambers of death (Prov 7:27; 9:18). The sexual appeal of Lady Wisdom is even more pronounced in apocryphal and pseudepigraphal literature.⁵⁶

3. *Dame Folly*. Dame Folly exists as a composite character, adding to the evidence that her antithesis, Lady Wisdom, is a composite character. The two most common descriptors of Dame Folly are that she is strange (זר, Prov 2:16; 5:3, 20; 7:5) and foreign (גברתי, 2:16; 5:20; 6:24; 7:5). Dame Folly’s composite character appears in 6:26, where she is identified by two different labels: harlot (זנה) and adulteress (אשת איש). Here, two different fees are described by the father, “For the price of a harlot is a loaf of bread, but an adulteress, she will hunt the precious life.” The harlot, comparatively speaking, is inexpensive—a loaf of bread, but the adulteress is going to take everything.⁵⁷ Dame Folly, as a composite character, could be either an inexpensive harlot or an adulteress.

⁵⁴ Clarke, “Seeking Wisdom in the Song of Songs,” 108–9.

⁵⁵ Grossberg, “Two Kinds of Sexual Relationships in the Hebrew Bible,” 11.

⁵⁶ The Hebrew version of Ben Sira 51:13–20 (11QPs^a 21:11–17) and Wisdom of Solomon 8:2–16 contain provocative pursuits of Lady Wisdom. For more information see Anthony I. Lipscomb, “‘She Is My Sister’: Sarai as Lady Wisdom in the Genesis Apocryphon,” *JSJ* 50.3 (2019): 329–30; Sidnie White Crawford, “Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly at Qumran,” *DSD* 5.3 (1998): 358–59.

⁵⁷ Waltke agrees, noting, “The severity of the penalty is established by contrasting the price of the prostitute—a meal—with the price of the adulteress—one’s very life (v. 26)” (*Proverbs 1–15*, 353). Similarly, Streeet writes, “Intercourse with a prostitute (zōnal) is preferable, because her price is not costly, whereas adultery with another man’s wife costs the lover his life, although the ultimate penalty is not death but dishonor, permanent disgrace, and the fury of the jealous husband (6:33–35).” Gail Corrington Streeet, *The Strange Woman: Power and Sex in the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 108.

Dame Folly's most common appellation is "foreigner," referring to her ethnicity as a non-Israelite. Solomon himself was known to love foreign (נכרי) women who led him away from the Lord (1 Kgs 11:1–8). "Foreigner" functions as a metonymy for the pagan/unbelieving character of Dame Folly as evidenced in Solomon's women. Solomon, however, did not have dalliances with these foreign women; he married them. Thus, Dame Folly is broader than just a harlot, adulteress, or foreigner. She could be one's wife.

Even more pronounced is the antithesis developed between Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly in Proverbs 9, where the sexual nature of Dame Folly is heavily muted.⁵⁸ Dame Folly is not called stranger, foreigner, harlot, or adulteress. She is only named Woman Folly (אשת כסילות) (9:13).⁵⁹ Dame Folly compositely personifies not only real, bad women, but the embodiment of folly—the disorder of God's creation. Writing on Proverbs 7:24–27, Hauge notes that Dame Folly is mythic, representing more than just one woman,⁶⁰ and Streete identifies her as the foolish woman found in the rest of the book of Proverbs.⁶¹ Just as Lady Wisdom represents the created order, the essence of life, and one's wife; so also Dame Folly represents disorder, the essence of death, and an immoral woman. Dame Folly is more than a physical woman. She is a spiritual entity; she is death herself.⁶²

Examples of Dame Folly and Lady Wisdom abound in the OT. Two contemporaneous pairs would be Delilah/Ruth and Potiphar's wife/Tamar. Delilah is the Dame Folly *par excellence*. She cared nothing for Samson's life, only her own financial gain. Proverbs 7:26, "and all who were slain by her were mighty men," may be an echo of Judges 16 where Delilah struck down Israel's mightiest man.⁶³ While Delilah destroyed the mighty man Samson, Ruth honored her dead husband by remaining

⁵⁸ Both women have a house (vv. 1, 14), offer food and drink (vv. 2, 17), call out (vv. 3, 15), appeal to the simple (vv. 4, 16), and more. See also Estes, "What Makes the Strange Woman of Proverbs 1–9 Strange?"; Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 430.

⁵⁹ Estes correctly acknowledges the significance of "אשת כסילות" in 9:13–18, in which the Strange Woman is revealed for who she truly is, the personification of folly in antithesis to Woman Wisdom" ("What Makes the Strange Woman of Proverbs 1–9 Strange?," 159).

⁶⁰ Martin Ravndal Hauge, *Solomon the Lover and the Shape of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015), 156. Hauge also states, "The explicit personification of wisdom as the son's beloved, set up as a counter-figure to the seductive strange Woman in 7.4–5, relates the Strange Woman perceived as an 'another man's wife,' to 'your own wife' as a counter-figure, and to the 'mythological' categories of Lady Wisdom with Lady Folly as her counter-figure" (155).

⁶¹ Streete notes, "Throughout the rest of the book of Proverbs, the figure of the Strange Woman persists, not as a full personification but in the persons of bad or foolish women, usually in contrast with good or wise women" (*The Strange Woman*, 109).

⁶² Dame Folly became a symbol for folly in later Judaism and Christianity. Goff writes, "A trend towards allegorical and symbolic interpretations of the Strange Woman is evident in later periods of Judaism and Christianity." Matthew J. Goff, "Hellish Females: The Strange Woman of Septuagint Proverbs and 4QWiles of the Wicked Woman (4Q184)," *JSJ* 39.1 (2008): 22.

⁶³ Blyth and Chisholm recognize some correspondence between Delilah and Dame Folly though they do not argue for characterization. Caroline Blyth, *Reimagining Delilah's Afterlives as Femme Fatale: The Lost Seduction*, LHOTS 652 (New York: T&T Clark, 2019), 77; Robert B. Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, KEL (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013), 427. Though she fails to draw an explicit connection to the strange woman of Proverbs, Blyth notes how biblical interpreters have created "images of Delilah as an archetypal fatal woman" (6).

faithful to him, marrying Boaz, and building up her house. While Potiphar's wife was unfaithful to her husband and enticed the young slave Joseph, Tamar honored her dead husband by remaining faithful to him, marrying his wicked brother, deceiving her immoral father-in-law, and building up her house.⁶⁴ The correspondence between Ruth and Tamar is reflected in the speech at the gate in Ruth 4:11–12.⁶⁵ Furthermore, both women are mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:3, 5). Ruth and Tamar built up their houses and characterize Lady Wisdom; whereas, Delilah and Potiphar's wife tore down their houses and characterize Dame Folly.

4. *Ruth*. Ruth's characterization as Lady Wisdom is further substantiated through the three uses of "excellent woman" (אִשָּׁה חַיִל) in the biblical corpus (Prov 12:4; 31:10; Ruth 3:11). Several scholars have identified Ruth as the excellent woman.⁶⁶ She does possess several of the qualities of the excellent woman (hard worker, kindness, etc.), but fails in other respects (businesswoman, luxuriousness, etc.).⁶⁷ Because the excellent woman is a composite character, however, Ruth does not have to display all the characteristics, only some of them. The essence of the excellent woman is that she fears the Lord.⁶⁸ Ruth's kindness (רַחֲמִים) to the widow Naomi and commitment to the preservation of her dead husband's name distinguished her as an excellent woman (Ruth 3:10–11)—one who feared the Lord.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Waltke recognizes Tamar's notoriety, "Tamar is a heroine in Israel because she risks her life for family fidelity." Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 513–14.

⁶⁵ For support, see Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, NAC 6 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 723. For an intertextual analysis, see Ellen van Wolde, "Texts in Dialogue with Texts: Intertextuality in the Ruth and Tamar Narratives," *BibInt* 5.1 (1997): 1–28. Concerning the "impropriety" of Tamar's solicitation of Judah, Waltke comments, "Her demand that her father-in-law father a child by her, since he refuses to give her his son, is probably consistent with accepted ethical practices at her time. Both Hittite (fourteenth–thirteenth century B.C.) and Middle Assyrian laws legislated that if a married man died and his brother also died, then 'his father shall take her.... There shall be no punishment.' The Mosaic law did not go this far, but her actions are not inconsistent with the principle: '[the deceased brother's] widow must not marry outside the family' (Deut 5:5)" (*Genesis*, 511–12).

⁶⁶ L. Daniel Hawk, *Ruth*, AOTC 7B (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 110; Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 659–60; Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, Int (Louisville: John Knox, 1999), 62; Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 216.

⁶⁷ Goh recognizes the similarities and differences, Samuel T. S. Goh, "Ruth as a Superior Woman of לֵיָהּ?: A Comparison between Ruth and the 'Capable' Woman in Proverbs 31.10–31," *JSOT* 38.4 (2014): 487–500.

⁶⁸ Three observations from Proverbs 31:30 substantiate this point. First, the assertion that she fears the Lord is found in the conclusion of the poem to the virtuous woman—a climactic location. McCreesh, "Wisdom as Wife," 33. Second, the inclusion with Proverbs 1:7 creates, according to Bartholomew and O'Dowd, "bookends indicating the centrality of the fear of the Lord to wisdom" (*Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, 81). Third, Proverbs 31:30 itself, highlighting only one characteristic of the woman, prioritizes this virtue. Waltke writes, "This woman's itemized, self-sacrificing activities for others exemplify the fear of the Lord" (*Proverbs 15–31*, 536).

⁶⁹ Boaz's speech establishes this point (Ruth 3:10–11). It also corresponds to the virtuous woman, of whom it is said that "the instruction of kindness (רַחֲמִים) is on her tongue" (Prov 31:26). Hubbard explains, "The point was that Ruth acted neither from passion nor greed. Rather, sacrificially setting aside personal preferences, she chose a marriage of benefit to her family. She reckoned her own happiness as secondary to provision of an heir for her late husband and Naomi" (*The Book of Ruth*, 215). Ruth likely could have provided for Naomi through marriage to any virtuous male. The preservation of the family, her husband's name (Ruth 4:5, 10), would have narrowed her options substantially.

The character of Ruth, however, is more complex. She, by her own mouth, identifies herself as a stranger (נכרִי, Ruth 2:10). Her foreign status is not missed by the narrator (1:4, 22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10).⁷⁰ At first appearance, Ruth appears to have more in common with Dame Folly than Lady Wisdom. Through the character of Ruth, the narrator emphasizes, however, that the primary characteristic of Lady Wisdom is the fear of the Lord, not ethnicity. Contrasting the unfaithful wife of Proverbs 2:17 with Ruth, Goswell writes, “This woman [i.e., the unfaithful wife] is an Israelite who acts like an outsider, but, in a variation on the theme, Ruth is an ethnic outsider who acts as a true Israelite (e.g., her Abraham-like oath to leave home and country [1:16–17; 2:11; cf. Gen. 12:1–3]), and she is shown to be a suitable wife for Boaz.”⁷¹ Dame Folly “forgets the covenant of her God” (Prov 2:17), but Ruth seeks protection from the God of Israel (Ruth 1:16–17; 2:12).

Finally, the ordering of the Hebrew canon reflects a tradition of understanding Ruth as the excellent woman.⁷² While the order of the Hebrew canon has undergone changes, the current ordering is Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs. Ruth directly follows Proverbs 31.⁷³ Stone writes, “What is the effect of Ruth’s inclusion in the Writings directly after Proverbs? The primary implication ... is the foregrounding of Ruth’s intertextual relationship to Proverbs 31:10–31. *This context interprets Ruth not only as the ideal wife, but also the embodiment of the wisdom ideal from Proverbs as a whole.*”⁷⁴ Furthermore, Boaz, the man with a name (Ruth 4:11, 17–22; contra “John Doe” in Ruth 4:1), provides the connection to the Song of Songs (Song 1:3). These three books create a full portrait of the excellent wife.

III. SOLOMON’S WOMEN

Understanding Dame Folly and Lady Wisdom as composite characters of real women but also representing creation order/disorder sheds further light on Ecclesiastes 7:28 and Song of Songs 8:11–12. Solomon loved many foreign (נכרִי) women, having 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kgs 11:1–3). Intertextual resonance exists between 1 Kings 11, Ecclesiastes 7:28, and Song of Songs 8:11 through the intertextual links of Solomon, the number one thousand, and women. These three texts

⁷⁰ Queen-Sutherland notes, “The story names her Ruth the Moabite over and over again, as if a large M is imprinted on her forehead.” Kandy Queen-Sutherland, “Ruth, Qoheleth, and Esther: Counter Voices from the Megilloth,” *PRSt* 43.2 (2016): 230.

⁷¹ Goswell, “Is Ruth Also among the Wise?,” 128.

⁷² See Timothy J. Stone, *Compilational History of the Megilloth: Canon, Contoured Intertextuality and Meaning in the Writings*, FAT 2/59 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 133; Goswell, “Is Ruth Also among the Wise?,” 115–23.

⁷³ Goswell notes, “The canonical juxtapositioning of Proverbs and Ruth in the Hebrew canonical tradition is a *post-authorial* phenomenon, with biblical book order reflecting the perceptions and views of ancient readers, who were right, however, to detect the presence of significant thematic connections between these two canonical portions” (“Is Ruth Also among the Wise?,” 123, his italics). For a fuller discussion, see Stone, *Compilational History of the Megilloth*. Queen-Sutherland (“Ruth, Qoheleth, and Esther”) also notes several correspondences with Ruth and Esther, the first and last books in the Megilloth.

⁷⁴ Stone, *Compilational History of the Megilloth*, 135, my emphasis.

recount Solomon's foreign wives (1 Kgs 11), failure to find Lady Wisdom (Eccl 7:23–29), and rejection by Lady Wisdom (Song 8:11–12).

1. *The Unfindable Woman* (Eccl 7:23–29) Qohelet recounts his personal search for wisdom in Ecclesiastes 7:23–29, creating resonance with Proverbs.⁷⁵

²³All of this I tested with wisdom.

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

²⁴Whatever has happened is far off, deep, very deep, who can find it?

The personal nature of the pursuit is reflected through the structural link with Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:3,⁷⁶ first-person pronouns, and the interjection "says Qohelet."⁷⁷ Qohelet first declares his intention, "I will be wise!" but then notes his failure to be wise (7:23). Fox correctly notes, "There must be a difference between the wisdom Qohelet aimed at but did not reach (implied by *'ehkamah*) and the wisdom he *did* have."⁷⁸ The very next verse (7:24) describes Qohelet's search that resonates with Lady Wisdom and the Proverbs 31 woman. Seow recognizes this resonance, observing, "It is important to note that here in 7:24 the language of wisdom's elusiveness is in part reminiscent of the elusiveness of the ideal woman of Proverbs 31, who is the embodiment of Woman Wisdom herself."⁷⁹ Two lexical links connect Proverbs 31:10 and Ecclesiastes 7:24: the rhetorical question "Who can find?" and the adjective "far" (קרח).⁸⁰ Estes observes this intertextual connection and states that it "perhaps [indicates] an explicit quotation, or more likely, an allusion."⁸¹ Qohelet searches for wisdom, not a woman, but he uses language similar to the Proverbs 31 woman. His search conflates the pursuit of Lady Wisdom and the excellent wife as was seen in Proverbs.

The leading question in Ecclesiastes 7:24 sets Qohelet up to describe his search for wisdom and discovery of the ensnaring woman (7:25–29).⁸² Ingram notes this abrupt transition, "Qohelet's diligent search for wisdom and folly has just been described when, suddenly, readers are introduced to האשה ("the woman"), as though they are supposed to know who she is."⁸³ The synthesis of Qohelet's pursuit of

⁷⁵ Several scholars have noted this resonance; see Daniel C. Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," in Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 184; Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, AB 18C (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 271–72; Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, BCOT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 267.

⁷⁶ Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 181–82; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 270.

⁷⁷ Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 182–86.

⁷⁸ Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 264, his emphasis.

⁷⁹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 270. Bartholomew connects this text with Proverbs 31 and Job (*Ecclesiastes*, 265).

⁸⁰ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 270.

⁸¹ Daniel J. Estes, "Seeking and Finding in Ecclesiastes and Proverbs," in Dell and Kynes, *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, 126.

⁸² For a structural analysis of 7:25–29, see Kyle Dunham, "The Woman Who Is a Snare: The Identity and Nature of the Female Figure in Ecclesiastes 7:25–29," *DBSJ* 27 (2022): 32–33. Dunham, however, incorrectly deduces that 7:25–29 is a "new phase of inquiry."

⁸³ Doug Ingram, "'Riddled with Ambiguity': Ecclesiastes 7:23–8:1 as an Example," in *The Words of the Wise Are Like Goats: Engaging Qoheleth in the 21st Century*, ed. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman, and Cristian G. Rață (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 229.

wisdom but finding a *woman* has led to numerous interpretations concerning the identity of the ensnaring woman. Dunham summarizes five views:

- (1) The woman represents all women, and Qohelet denigrates women in general as dangerous. (2) The woman represents all women, but Qohelet is expressly reflecting on Genesis to comment on the marred marital relationships that result from the fall. (3) The woman is a particular kind of woman, such as the outside woman of Proverbs.... (4) The woman is a specific woman, such as his own wife.... (5) The woman is metaphorical (or quasi-metaphorical) and represents an abstract concept or archetype such as Lady Wisdom, [or] Lady Folly.⁸⁴

The composite nature of Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly as representing real women provides a better explanation of Qohelet's search and discovery. Qohelet had a particular kind of woman in mind (view three, the strange woman), whom he married (view four), and represented the archetypal Dame Folly (view five). Qohelet sought Lady Wisdom (Eccl 7:24) but found himself married to Dame Folly (7:26). Commentators have been too quick to disassociate Dame Folly in Ecclesiastes 7:26 from real women.⁸⁵ Qohelet references his harem of dame follies when he writes, "What my soul seeks, but I could not find; one man out of a thousand I found, but a woman among all of these I have not found" (7:28). Qohelet notes here what he has and has not found. He has found one man out of a thousand. This man is the privileged one who married the excellent woman and found Lady Wisdom—only one man out of a thousand is wise.⁸⁶ By marrying Dame Folly, Qohelet has failed to live according to the order of creation, he has failed to be wise.

In Ecclesiastes 7:29, Qohelet explains why Lady Wisdom is so difficult to find—man's schemes (חשבון). Qohelet's scheme that led him away from Lady Wisdom is not disclosed. The resonance with Song of Songs 8:11–12, however, provides further insight on Solomon's failure to find Lady Wisdom and instruction on how to find her.

2. *The Woman's Rejection (Song 8:11–12)* The ideal, composite, archetypal female lover of the Song of Songs, known as Lady Wisdom in Proverbs (functioning as a synecdoche for the entire order of creation) and the excellent wife in Proverbs 31, rejects Solomon in Song of Songs 8:11–12.⁸⁷ Through her rejection, Solomon

⁸⁴ Dunham, "The Woman Who Is a Snare," 40–41.

⁸⁵ Seow, for example, disassociates Dame Folly from real women: "The *femme fatale* is not, therefore, an individual woman. She is not necessarily a specific type of woman or women in general. Rather, she is a composite image of Folly herself (Prov 9:13–18)" (*Ecclesiastes*, 272).

⁸⁶ Estes notes that the rhetorical questions in Proverbs emphasize the rarity of the faithful man and virtuous woman: "The positive evaluation of a wife is expanded in the final encomium of the excellent woman in Proverbs 31:10–31, introduced by the rhetorical question, 'A woman of valor, who can find?' This question is formally parallel to 20:6, but the context here yields a different nuance. The reader is prone to expect the negative answer 'No one,' but the passage proceeds to extol the exemplary qualities of the woman who is praised by her husband (31:28–31). Consequently, the implied answer to the question posed in Proverbs 31:10 is 'Almost no one,' because the woman who lives wisely does indeed exist, and even though she may be rare, when she is found she is a cherished treasure." Estes, "Seeking and Finding in Ecclesiastes and Proverbs," 125.

⁸⁷ The identity of the speaker is in question here. Keel and Exum each argue that the man is speaking, particularly because the vineyard is "before me" (לפני), i.e., "right in front of me." Othmar Keel, *The Song*

teaches the reader how to find Lady Wisdom, enjoy intimacy the way God designed it, and thus live according to the order of creation.

¹¹Solomon had a vineyard at Baal Hamon.

He gave the vineyard to keepers.

A man would bring for its fruit a thousand silvers.

¹²My vineyard, which is mine, is before me; the thousand to you, O Solomon,
And two hundred to the keepers of its fruit.

Solomon's vineyard represents his harem.⁸⁸ The vineyard is a regular metaphor for the woman's intimate fruits in the Song (Song 1:6; 2:15; 4:10–5:1; 6:11).⁸⁹ The location Baal Hamon is geographically unattested.⁹⁰ Baal means "master, husband" and Hamon means "many, much"; thus, the name of this location is "Master/Husband of Many/Much" and represents his harem.⁹¹

Solomon's harem, being so vast, required others to maintain it at great expense.⁹² The thousand silver coins refers to the extravagant expense of maintaining the vineyard to produce its luxurious fruit.⁹³ "Fruit" is a metaphor for the sexual delight that the wife would offer her husband (cf. Song 4:13–16; 7:13).⁹⁴ Considering the expensive nature of the fruit, the fruit would consist of a beautiful, supple, fragrant woman—the presumed ideal sexual experience. Esther completed one year of beauty preparations before going to King Ahasuerus (Esth 2:12). Only a king or extremely rich individual would be able to enjoy this kind of "fruit." "Thousand" creates resonance with 1 Kings 11:3 and Ecclesiastes 7:28.⁹⁵ While "thousand" in those two passages refers to the quantity of Solomon's women, in Song of Songs 8:11 it refers to the quality of his women. There, "thousand" functions as a metonymy of cause that is the fiscal source of the beautiful maiden. Solomon was the man who loved the most (thousand women) and loved the best (thousand silvers).

The keepers (נָטַר) guard and oversee the beautification of the harem.⁹⁶ The verb "keeper" occurs four times in the Song in two texts that both concern female

of Songs, CC (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 282; Exum, *Song of Songs*, 260–61. More likely the woman, who spoke in 1:6, is also the speaker here. See Longman, *Song of Songs*, 219; Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs*, BCOT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 246–47.

⁸⁸ Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 199; Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 282, contra Estes, "The Song of Songs," 415.

⁸⁹ Exum, *Song of Songs*, 260.

⁹⁰ Exum, *Song of Songs*, 206. For discussion, see Pope, *Song of Songs*, 686–88.

⁹¹ Zakovitch, *The Song of Songs*, 28; Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 281–82.

⁹² Exum states, "Two things are noteworthy about this vineyard: Solomon does not tend it himself, and its produce is very valuable" (*Song of Songs*, 260).

⁹³ Keel correctly notes that "this poem does not speak of the cost of the vineyard itself; it values the annual yield at one thousand pieces of silver" (*The Song of Songs*, 282).

⁹⁴ Hess, *Song of Songs*, 247.

⁹⁵ Murphy (*The Song of Songs*, 199) and Keel (*The Song of Songs*, 282) each acknowledge the connection to 1 Kings 11 but not Ecclesiastes 7. Zakovitch says Song of Songs 8 is an allusion to 1 Kings 11 (*The Song of Songs*, 23). She later that "Song of Songs ... left its mark ... perhaps even in Eccles. 7:28 about the character of women" (31). Unfortunately, she does not develop this link.

⁹⁶ Zakovitch notes that נָטַר encompasses the ideas of guarding and watching over (*The Song of Songs*, 28). In 1:6, however, the woman uses the word metaphorically to describe her failure to protect her beauty. Murphy explains, "The woman has not protected herself from the sun" (*The Song of Songs*, 128).

beauty (Song 1:6; 8:11–12).⁹⁷ In 1:6, the female lover was forced to work in physical vineyards, resulting in her metaphoric vineyard being diminished. In 8:11–12, by contrast, the vineyard is lavishly maintained at great expense by “keepers.” The Song teaches the reader that the ideal, archetypal, excellent woman is *not* the beautiful, soft, and fragrant woman; instead, the excellent woman plants a vineyard (Prov 31:16) that mars her metaphoric vineyard (Song 1:6).

In Song of Songs 8:12, the excellent woman (Lady Wisdom) rejects Solomon. The three pronouns (*my* vineyard, which is *mine*, is before *me*) create an emphatic distinction between Solomon’s vineyard and the excellent woman. She then references again the keepers who are paid even more for their labors. The Song teaches that the excellent woman cannot be nurtured by keepers. She must be personally nurtured, cultivated, and tended.

The Song instructed husbands to personally cultivate, maintain, and tend one’s own Lady Wisdom (Song 2:15; 8:11–12). The male lover of the Song of Songs maintained his own vineyard.⁹⁸ In 2:15, the lovers seize the jackals that spoil the vineyard.⁹⁹ Jackals destroy and reside in destroyed places (Ps 63:14; Lam 5:18; Ezek 13:4). They represent problems (e.g., disputes, sin) that arise in a relationship that must be addressed to enjoy intimacy according to the order of creation.¹⁰⁰ The Song taught that by seizing the jackals, the couple recreates the Garden of Eden (Song 2:16; 6:3; 7:10–8:4) and enjoys intimacy the way God designed it. Clarke gets close to the message of wisdom from the Song: “Here, then, is the wisdom of the Song: follow the example of the idealized Solomonic wisdom-seeker, by seeking a wise woman and making her your bride. It is in these activities of seeking and finding that the wisdom-seeker himself becomes wise.”¹⁰¹ Through the personal cultivation of the vineyard, the Song teaches the young man how to cultivate the excellent wife, but also how to be cultivated by the excellent wife. Solomon, by paying others to maintain the vineyard, failed to cultivate Lady Wisdom and be cultivated by Lady Wisdom. The female lover of the Song offers the reader a sexual experience that Solomon never experienced because he valued beautiful, supple, fragrant harem girls who used their beauty for their own gain (Eccl 7:26). God made man upright, but their schemes have not only led them away from Lady Wisdom, but into the arms of Dame Folly.

⁹⁷ Murphy recognizes the connection with 1:6 but notes, “There is no obvious reason why ‘keepers’ of the vineyard are mentioned” (*The Song of Songs*, 199). Hess notes concerning 1:6, “Thus the female’s own body has not been cared for as would be appropriate for someone seeking love” (*Song of Songs*, 57).

⁹⁸ Exum writes, “The motif of vineyard keepers allows the man to illustrate indirectly his sole responsibility for his vineyard” (*Song of Songs*, 261).

⁹⁹ Exum is likely correct that the woman is responding to the man’s request in v. 14 (*Song of Songs*, 128–29). The plural imperative, however, addresses the couple together. Hess writes, “It makes a great deal of difference if the couple together pledge to come against any attempt to interfere with that relationship” (*Song of Songs*, 98).

¹⁰⁰ Hess explains, “The vineyard is a metaphor for the female’s body as well as a picture of their union of love. Their mutual desire to share their love with one another is expressed by the use of ‘our.’ This is a powerful statement about the need to protect the love that the lovers possess” (*Song of Songs*, 98). Similarly, Longman explains, “We should just adopt a general interpretation, associating the foxes with obstacles to the blossoming relationship” (*Song of Songs*, 124–25).

¹⁰¹ Clarke, “Seeking Wisdom in the Song of Songs,” 112.

IV. CONCLUSION

Textual and thematic links between Lady Wisdom, the excellent woman, the female lover in the Song of Songs, and Ruth argue that Lady Wisdom functions as a synecdoche for the most important and most difficult part of wisdom—marriage to an excellent wife. The composite nature of Lady Wisdom’s antithesis, Dame Folly, further substantiates this position. Solomon the sage failed to find Lady Wisdom because the schemes of his heart led him into the embrace of Dame Folly. Intertextual resonance with Song of Songs 8:11–12 reveals that his scheme for the beautiful, soft, fragrant harem girl led to his rejection by Lady Wisdom. The Solomonic wisdom corpus teaches that through the pursuit and personal cultivation of one’s vineyard a man may find Lady Wisdom.