Yoder, Christine Roy

Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31

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The book is a slightly reworked version of a doctoral thesis submitted to Princeton Theological Seminary (supervisor Choon Leong Seow). It aims to clarify the origin of the wisdom figure in Proverbs 1-9 with regard to the poem about the so-called “woman of worth” in Prov 31:10-31. In a short review of current interpretations Yoder demonstrates that until now, the concept of personified Wisdom has mainly been traced back to a goddess tradition whereas its counterpart, the “strange” woman or, rather “Woman Folly” was related to real women. Yoder aims to bridge this interpretative hiatus by reconsidering the socio-economic background of the texts mentioned, and the perception of women that may have shaped the sage’s ideas about Wisdom. Methodologically her approach is a continuation of recent studies on the socio-historical background of wisdom literature which for the book of Proverbs have been focused on the figure of the “strange” woman (J. Blenkinsopp, T.C. Eskenazi, C. Maier, H.C. Washington). In addition to this perspective, Yoder attempts to confirm the oft-stated date of the book’s frame texts as being in the Persian Period by a thorough analysis of its linguistic evidence.

The book is divided into three chapters and a short conclusion. An extensive bibliography and indices of Ancient texts and authors help the reader find pages of special interest.

Chapter One argues that Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31 represent Late Biblical Hebrew. This is plausibly shown by morphological and orthographical devices in the Hebrew, by the presence of morphological and lexical Aramaisms that are otherwise attested exclusively or extensively in Official Aramaic and late Aramaic dialects, and by the lack of Greek loanwords.
Chapter Two offers a reconstruction of the socioeconomic world of Persian-period Palestine focusing on the economic activities of women. Yoder’s presentation is based on epigraphical evidence of Babylon, Persepolis, and Egypt and on archaeological remains of mainly coastal sites. She justifies her conclusions for the Judean territory from this material, with the assumption that the postal, trading and monetary systems of the Persian Empire increased the similarities of economic matters in its parts. Based on marriage contracts of Babylon and Elephantine she argues that marriage was mainly a business arrangement allowing men to gain at least temporary control of a woman’s dowry and inheritance. From Elephantine papyri and Persepolis tablets she demonstrates the multifaceted activities of women in house keeping, textile working, trading, and even credit business. Texts from the Murašû archive are presented to show that high-ranking women are property holders and estate owners.

Chapter Three interprets Prov 31:10-31 and the portrait of Wisdom against this background. Thus, the “housewife” of Prov 31 emerges as a woman of substance who engages in trade, estate buying and accumulating riches to the benefit of her husband. The semantics of several words in the poem point to earnings, trade and business. The relatedness of this real, but somehow ideal woman with personified Wisdom is established by striking lexicographical and thematic parallels so that both figures merge into one. The urban setting of Wisdom’s appearance is seen in the context of the urbanization of the coastal sites. Reading this interpretation one may think that “money makes the world go round” is a proverb already valid in the Persian Period. Only in the end is this impression slightly reversed by Yoder’s comments on the identification of the woman of substance with the concept of “fear of god”. She thus interprets the personified Wisdom as a “pedagogical figure used to teach young boys of the golah community about economic survival in the Persian period, [...] and about religious piety” (p. 114). Yoder states that this image reflects an upper-class bias and an andro-centric view of women.

The clear-cut thesis of the book is well-founded and contributes to the current feminist discourse of the literary representations of women, and especially of the character of Wisdom as a woman. However, the focus on socioeconomic matters neglects other remarkable and already elaborated traditions in the texts: For example, the woman’s stretching out her arms in Prov 31:19-20 is interpreted as lending money to the poor for her own benefit in addition to caring for the needy (p. 88s). In the eyes of the reviewer this is an overstatement that fails to notice the strong relationship of Wisdom and Torah ethos in the texts of Proverbs, a tradition that results in the identification of both concepts in Sir 24. Yoder also interprets the notion that wisdom is “more precious than rubies” (Prov 3:15; 8:11; 31:10) as a statement on economic value (p. 97), that could equally be seen as a deconstruction of countable riches. Wisdom’s benefits are not only wealth, but justice, righteousness, and well-being within the community (Prov 2:9-10; 8:10,13). Only in this context does the “fear of the Lord” become a virtue of piety. At the very least, the goddess tradition in the figure of wisdom cannot be skipped as easily as Yoder suggests. Remarkably, Yoder omits the Ancient Near Eastern affiliation of the “tree of life” (Prov 3:18) with the goddess and she does not interpret the passage of wisdom’s origin in Prov 8:24-30.
Some comments can also be made about the by and large well-founded sociohistorical approach. There is a certain disagreement between the term “Palestine” as point of reference for the socioeconomic reconstruction and the Judean golah community as intended addressee of the texts. Although a general relationship of the peoples in the Persian empire is well attested, there should be at least some hesitation about drawing direct conclusions for Judah, which formed a small and somewhat remote province in the huge Persian satrapy Ebirnari. The community living around Jerusalem is composed of golah members, Judeans that never left the country, and perhaps other ethnic groups from the surrounding areas. Concepts of family, marriage and inheritance are likely to vary within diverse groups. From the distribution of the coins, for example, it is likely that the money system introduced by the Persians took a long time to be accepted in Jehud. This may indicate that the economic patterns are not always the same within the empire. These minor criticisms are not meant to lessen Yoder’s work. Its socioeconomic perspective closes a gap in the field showing that the personification of Wisdom is also conceptualised with regard to real women’s lives and activities. Recent scholarly work presents multi-faceted characterizations of the female figures of Proverbs. Yoder adds another precious piece to this mosaic.