

The Gender and Motives of the Wisdom Teacher in Proverbs 7

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The assumption that objectivity is an illusion is often asserted as if it were objectively true. Nevertheless, it is true that male and female commentators sometimes allow gender based biases to hinder their attempts to understand biblical texts in their original contexts. Both gender based and western culture derived assumptions have adversely colored interpreters' understanding of the gender and motives of the wisdom teacher in Proverbs 7. This paper takes a fresh look at the issues and concludes that the teacher is a F(emale) voice whose strategy of changing men's sexual behavior is consistent with high female self esteem and, if successful, would have strengthened the entire community.

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One of the givens of much contemporary biblical scholarship is that there is no such thing as an objective reading of a text. This conviction is akin to the often dogmatically held view that truth is never absolute. Both of these precepts are propounded as if *they* were objective, absolute truths. If this were true, however, the dogmas themselves would be proven false. If it is not true, then the validity of these views is also undercut.

Feminist biblical scholars, including myself, are often quick to point out the subtle and sometimes not so subtle androcentric, even sexist biases of our male colleagues. These biases sometimes hinder the commentator's attempts to hear the text unencumbered by twentieth century perspectives and issues.

In a similar way the subtle and sometimes not so subtle gynocentric, even sexist biases, of feminist interpreters sometimes adversely affect interpretive work. In addition, contemporary western values shared by both male and female scholars color the way we read, eroding our ability to understand texts in their own historical, cultural,

and sociological context and ultimately to consider their implications for today. These problems are illustrated in recent work on the gender and motives of the wisdom teacher in Proverbs 7.

Biblical commentators have generally assumed that the implied voice of the wisdom teacher who instructs son(s) to avoid the iššâ zārâ, the "strange" woman,¹ in Proverbs 7 is male.² Feminist interpreters have for the most part agreed with this consensus, though often with negative assessments of the wisdom teacher's motivations.³ Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes have raised the possibility that the wisdom teacher is implicitly a female voice. They cite the ancient Near Eastern tradition of the female rebuker⁴ and the fact that the speaker looks through a window at a scene below, an action that is much more frequently associated with women than men.⁵ They, like their feminist sisters who criticize the supposed male teacher's psy-

¹ The translation used here is simply for convenience. The term is multivalent, though in the various contexts in which it is used in Proverbs it is clear that the "strange" woman is one who is involved in illicit sexual relations. See Claudia V. Camp, "What's So Strange About the Strange Woman?" *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (ed. David Jobling, Peggy L. Day, and Gerald T. Sheppard; Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1991) 17-31, and the literature cited there.

² See James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 87; William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (London: SCM, 1970) 332-41; R.B.Y. Scott, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (AB 18; New York: Doubleday, 1965) 15, R. N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs* (SBT 45; London: SCM, 1965) 33, and *The composition of the Book of Proverbs* (JSOTSup 168; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 56.

³ See e.g., Claudia Camp, "What's So Strange About the Strange Woman," in which she views the male teacher as expressing male fears of female sexuality. See also Carol Newsom, "Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9," *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Peggy L. Day, ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 142-60; Carole R. Fontaine, "Proverbs," *The Woman's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/Knox, 1993) 146-48; Kathleen O'Connor, *The Wisdom Literature* (The Message of Biblical Spirituality 5; Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988) 61-63; Gale A. Yee, "I Have Perfumed My Bed With Myrrh: the Foreign Woman (iššâ zārâ) in Proverbs 1-9," *JSOT* 43 (1989) 53-68.

⁴ See S. D. Goitein, "Women as Creators of Biblical Genres," *Prooftexts* 8 (1988) 1-33.

⁵ Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1993) 57-62, 113-26; and Athalya Brenner, "Some Observations on the Figurations of Women in Wisdom Literature," *Of Prophets' Visions and the Wisdom of Sages: Essays in Honour of R. Norman Whybray on His Seventieth Birthday* (JSOTSup 162; Heather A. McKay and David J. A. Clines, eds.; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993) 192-208.

The one exception to the generalization that women look out windows is Gen 26:8 where Abimelech sees through his window Isaac fondling Rebekah. The biblical examples of women looking out of windows are Michal (2 Sam 6:16; 1 Chr 15:29), Jezebel (2 Kgs 9:30), and Sisera's mother (Judg 5:28). Brenner points out that the literary figure of the woman at the window is substantiated by archaeological finds, in particular the Samaria ivories (*On Gendering Texts*, 120).

chology, also negatively assess the supposed female teacher's ideology. Both see the female wisdom teacher as having internalized androcentric values. Van Dijk-Hemmes writes,

The voices of admonishing and rebuking women which can be heard in Proverbs, are not in disagreement with... androcentric discourse. They are the voices of women who have internalized this discourse.¹

Brenner writes,

I am aware that even when my reading is deemed viable it can nevertheless be argued that the textual voice is an M [=male] voice, presented as typically guarding paternity and its ensuing morality. Could it not, however, be the reflected dominant voice of a culture as it is introjected by F [=female] participants of that same culture...? The price, here as in other passages in Proverbs, is the subscription of an identifiable F voice to misogyny and self-inflicted gender depreciation and gender disparagement.²

How the wisdom teacher's injunction against the "strange" woman guards paternity is not entirely clear. Indeed, androcentric Israelite society seemed to tolerate a certain amount of promiscuity on the part of its men as long as the sexual partner was not a married woman---the infamous double standard. This standard assured men that their wives' children were their own, while giving them the freedom to enjoy other women sexually, typically prostitutes who operated on the margins of society.³

Thus, the voice that teaches son(s) to avoid the "strange" woman is not necessarily any more an internalized androcentric one than the voices of twentieth century feminists who challenge the remnants of the same double standard today. Rather, such a voice can be understood to provide an alternative to norms that were oppressive to women.

There is a difference, however, between modern feminists' strategies and the ancient Hebrew wisdom teacher's approach to undercutting the double standard. Generally, modern feminists wish to increase sexual freedom for women. The wisdom teacher in Proverbs 7 is trying to decrease male sexual freedom.⁴ Either strategy, if effective, could lead to a more egalitarian ethic; however, the ancient

¹ Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, "Traces of Women's Texts in the Hebrew Bible," *On Gendering Texts*, 62.

² Athalya Brenner, "Proverbs 1-9: An F Voice?," *On Gendering Texts*, 125-26.

³ See Phyllis Bird, "To Play the Harlot: An Inquiry into a Biblical Metaphor," *Gender and Difference*, 77-79.

⁴ It is also quite possible that the strange woman comes to represent foreign gods as well as illicit sexuality as many have suggested, but the sexual meaning is the most obvious and probably the original meaning.

Hebrew teacher's approach is clearly a more restrictive one than that of many modern feminists.

Brenner's discomfort with this restrictiveness may be reflected in the following statement that she makes :

Within the literary F voice, F self interest is silent through identification with M interest; control over female sexuality is recommended at least implicitly; maternal possessiveness merges with the internalized M voice for the purpose of preserving an existing world order and worldview.¹

What Brenner calls F self-interest is unstated, but it would seem to be sexual freedom. This is suggested by her concern about what she terms "control over female sexuality," a particularly odd designation since what the teacher is advocating is really male sexual self-control. It is true that such self-control would result in less female sexual activity, but to call this result "control over female sexuality" obscures the fact that the speaker IS trying to control the sexual behavior of males, not females. A man's choice not to engage in sexual relations with a woman can hardly be considered controlling female sexuality any more than a woman's choice not to engage in sexual relations with a man should be called controlling male sexuality. Brenner's shifting the emphasis in the passage only makes sense if her underlying concern is sexual freedom in general and female sexual freedom in particular.

Sexual freedom for both men and women combined with competent birth control may make sense in a modern western setting where children are not economic necessities but rather may be viewed as expensive luxuries.² In a largely agrarian economy where children were highly valued commodities and where birth control was proba-

¹ Brenner, "Proverbs 1-9: an F Voice?," 125-26.

² This view is prevalent today. Nevertheless, several realities mitigate against it. The risk of AIDS makes sexual freedom a dangerous game, even when so-called safe sex is practiced. Moreover, recent studies indicate that women are more likely to achieve orgasm in long-term monogamous relationships than in short-term ones. Finally, although children are not the economic necessity to the family in postindustrial society that they are in more agriculturally based economies, modern western society's failure to put a high priority on children, to the point that one in five children in the U.S. is growing up in poverty, is creating social problems that affect everyone. Without a supply of healthy, well-educated future adults, the future looks bleak. My rejection of the common view is no doubt colored by my personal situation. I am a married woman with two daughters. My husband and I both devote many hours to our children who are bright and multi-talented. Although we are privileged economically, educationally, and socially, we must still stretch ourselves to what seem like our financial, emotional, and energetic limits to provide what we consider the optimum environment for their development. Parenting is not easy, but it is important not only to the lives of individual children but also to the society in which they live.

bly not highly developed for that very reason, what made sense in terms of sexual behavior was perhaps a little different from prevalent attitudes in the west today.

The book of Proverbs probably came into its final form in the postexilic period, although much of the material in it may go back to earlier periods. Although particular verses may reflect later dates, the concerns that run through Proverbs 1-9 in general and are found specifically in Proverbs 7 regarding illicit sexuality could make sense at almost any period of Israel's agrarian history.

Hebrew society was agriculturally based, even in the postexilic period. In agrarian economies many children are needed to work the land and provide for family members who are too old to work any longer. Because infant mortality was high, many children had to be born to ensure that a few would live to adulthood. Much of the burden of producing children fell to women, who not only gave birth but also nursed the children in their early years.

Although women may have done much manual labor in addition to their child nurturing responsibilities,¹ they could not survive alone. They needed a partner, a helper, with whom to share the load. A womanizing man would in one way or another divert a portion of his material resources and energy in another direction, thus diminishing the life of the family, including the woman. It may be difficult for modern westerners, who are accustomed to a more individualistic approach to life, to appreciate the communal, cooperative organization that apparently prevailed in ancient Israel,² though even moderns realize that a two parent household is generally better for the children and makes for easier parenting than single parent arrangements.

Thus it can be argued that it was in ancient Hebrew women's self-interest for men to be monogamous. Although there is much in the Hebrew Bible that is androcentric and misogynistic, Proverbs 7 may be read as a voice subversive of "patriarchy," understood here in the sense of the double standard. Ironically, this conclusion strengthens the arguments of Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes that the voice of the wisdom teacher in Proverbs 7 is a female voice. It is less likely that an Israelite man, the primary beneficiary of the double standard, would have argued against it.³ It is more likely that those who opposed it were women.

¹ Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 168-73.

² *Ibid.*, 123-24.

³ The only suggestion I have found as to what might motivate a male writer to advise son(s) against relationships with the strange women is offered by Leo G. Perdue

This assumes that the self-interest of either gender was a more significant motivating factor than the interests of the group. Much modern western analysis makes this kind of unexamined assumption, which in effect reads twentieth century individualistic values and gender battles into ancient Israel. Given the communitarian orientation of the Hebrews, one could easily argue that the motivation behind the wisdom teacher's advice in Proverbs 7 is not narrowly construed female self-interest, but rather the preservation and health of the community, which in turn would benefit all of its individual members.

One could argue then that the gender of the wisdom teacher in Proverbs 7 is either impossible to determine or irrelevant. Certainly, it is impossible to be certain of the gender of the speaker in Proverbs 7, though we may nevertheless still find clues concerning the implied speaker. Here Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes's arguments are helpful. The question of relevance is of another sort. If the clues suggest that the speaker is a female voice, that is of interest to modern readers for whom gender concerns are often burning issues.

A number of questions must still be addressed if the hypothesis of a female voice in Proverbs 7 is to be accepted. It might seem odd that a female wisdom teacher, whose aim was in part to end the double standard, would address son(s) rather than daughters. Would she not have been more successful counseling young women to shun liaisons with young men? The reality was probably otherwise. To the extent that the "strange" women that the teacher had in mind were prostitutes, counseling them to change professions would have been about as effective as advising the unemployed to get a job.¹ Married women and single women living in their father's houses were already heavily socialized against promiscuity. Advising them was in most cases like

who suggests that the motivation might be "the sapiential disdain of which passions were given free rein. Thus, for example, ecstatic religious behavior would characterize the 'heated man', but not the true sage, the 'silent man'. (*Wisdom and Cult: A Critical Analysis of the Views of Cult in the Wisdom Literature of Israel's Ancient Near East* [SBLDS 30; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977] 155). This is an interesting suggestion, but without textual support, it sounds more like a modern concern for control than a truly ancient motivation.

¹ Prostitutes, then and now, are usually persons marginalized by society. They are often products of families that cannot or do not provide for their needs and of societies that have weak safety nets. In ancient Israel perhaps they were young widows, who had no familial home to which they could return after the deaths of their husbands. Although the prophets admonished the people to care for the widows, orphans, and sojourners, it is fair to assume that such preachments were honored in the breach. In most cases prostitution is a career to which one turns in desperation; it is rarely a profession of choice.

preaching to the converted. Those whose attitudes needed to be changed were men, not women.¹

Still, some may feel that there is something of self-hatred in advice given by a woman teacher to son(s) to avoid the seductions of "strange" women. However, self-esteem does not require one to pretend that every member of one's group is worthy of praise. I am a citizen of the United States, and I am proud of my heritage; however, I do not believe that all the behavior of all my fellow citizens is above reproach. If I argued that all U.S. citizens are wonderful it would imply that I am very insecure about my national identity. Only when our egos are strong can we tolerate self-criticism.²

Nevertheless, the admonition to young men to avoid "strange" women is itself strange, given the fact that there are more stories in the Hebrew Bible of men raping women than of women (prostitutes or otherwise) seducing men³ and that the historical reality was probably even more skewed in that direction. Interestingly, except for the story of Tamar's seduction of Judah, which is a special case, there are no specific stories of Hebrew men consorting with prostitutes. Gomer might appear to be an exception, but she is not called a zônâ and may be understood as a promiscuous woman rather than a prostitute. The Hebrew spies who stay at Rahab's house may have been mixing business with pleasure, but the text does not say so directly. In spite of the lack of stories dealing with prostitution in the Hebrew Bible, it is clear that prostitution existed, was tolerated, and was probably more

¹ We may ask what kind of men the wisdom teacher addresses: single men, married men, or perhaps any man who was vulnerable to the seductions of a "strange" woman. Since life expectancy was short, the need to produce offspring high, and the educational years for the average male brief, we may assume that men usually married, young. Thus, most young men probably were not sexually mature for very long before, they were married. It is likely, therefore, that premarital sex was less a problem than sexual activity outside of marriage and that the primary audience of the wisdom teacher in Proverbs 7 was married men. Not only were they the most numerous, they were also the most critical to the maintenance of families and thus to the health of the community. This conclusion does not preclude the possibility that the teacher spoke to all men, married and single. By indoctrinating young unmarried men against sexual liaisons with "strange" women, the wisdom teacher hoped to engender a habit that would follow the men into their marriages.

¹ It may seem contradictory that in note 15 I argued that prostitutes did not choose their professions and thus may be seen as victims rather than immoral characters and now I argue that it is not contrary to one's self-esteem to be critical of certain members of one's group (i.e., prostitutes). Society may force women into prostitution; however, that does not mean that their behavior is praiseworthy or that one should do business with them.

² Tamar is raped by her half-brother Amnon, and the Levite's woman is brutally gang-raped and murdered. Lot's daughters are offered to the Sodomites to be raped, though the offer is refused. According to many interpretations, Dinah is raped by Shechem, but for another view of this story, see Lyn Bechtel, "What if Dinah Is Not Raped? (Genesis 34)," *SOT* 62 (1994) 19-36. Potephar's wife makes an unsuccessful attempt to seduce Joseph, and Judah's daughter-in-law Tamar pretends to be a prostitute in order to be impregnated by Judah when he fails to enforce the law of levirate on her behalf.

widespread than rape. Rape was a crime with harsh penalties. Prostitution was less offensive but probably negatively impacted more women than did rape. Since prostitutes in most cases had no other means of support, the only way to stop prostitution was to induce men to stop seeking the services of prostitutes.¹

Here, we may surmise that the wisdom teacher is using a bit of psychology. (S)he counsels men to be strong enough not to allow themselves to be seduced, rather than nagging them to avoid the pleasures of the "strange" woman.

Perhaps in a different world where men were not more powerful physically, economically, and politically than women, such a psychologically savvy approach would not be essential to success. In the world of the Hebrew Bible, the (female) wisdom teacher's strategy can be understood as carefully calculated to change men's sexual behavior in a way consistent with high female self-esteem. Such a change would not only enhance the lives of many women but strengthen the entire community. Whether in fact the strategy worked is hard to gauge. The teaching made it into the canon. That much is clear. Perhaps it has contributed to the destruction of the ancient double standard. Perhaps it also contributed to the survival and health of ancient Israel.

Whether it can touch postmodern culture at the grass-roots level is harder to assess. Our worlds are vastly different, yet some commonalities bind us together. These commonalities entice us to continue reading the words of ancient wisdom teachers. We read these ancient teachers' words not only to debate them intellectually. We look at the texts not simply to confirm our own values as if the text were only a mirror and never a window into another world. Rather we listen to the ancient authors to glean from them something of value for today. In the process we see ourselves more clearly and are challenged to reconsider the common "wisdom" of our day.

¹ If the wisdom teacher was successful, we must ask what would have become of the prostitutes. Clearly, in the short term their lives would have been made more difficult. It is unlikely, however, given human nature, that the supply of customers for prostitutes will ever be eliminated. If that were to happen, perhaps the same change of heart would provide a better social order in which women would not be driven to such work in the first place.

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