

Chapter One: She Said, He Said

We're all familiar with the first verse of the Bible: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." What could be simpler? God was around before anything else and he brought everything else that exists into being, right? Well, not quite. He wasn't alone at the creation.

Now, if you're a Christian, you have no problem with that idea when you think about it—God is a triune being. Of course God wasn't "alone." The Son and the Spirit were there as well, because they are the rest of the godhead. The apostle John makes it clear that Jesus, who is "the Word," was with the Father from the beginning: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelled with us" (John 1:1, 14). And then there's the apostle Paul, who tells us in no uncertain terms that it is through Jesus that everything was created (Col. 1:16). No surprises. Unless you look at the Old Testament, that is.

It may startle you to discover that the Old Testament also has passages that describe a co-creator alongside God. After all, Genesis 1:1 seems to say that God did just fine all by himself. But that's only one account of creation among several in the Old Testament. There are others, and they don't sound exactly like Genesis 1:1. Having said that, I guess there's no sense in delaying your first real jolt any longer—the co-creator in the Old Testament is described in *female* terms. No, I'm not going to add a fourth person the Trinity (there's something oxymoronic about that last line). Confused? Upset? Well, then, we're off to a good start.

The divine figure I'm thinking about is Wisdom. No, I'm not talking about being smart or even wise when I use that term—and sometimes the authors of the Bible weren't either. Granted, "wisdom" is something the Bible talks about a lot, and nearly always in the context of *not* being a fool. That's probably how you're used to thinking about the term. However, there are places in the Old Testament where wisdom is described as an actual person or deity. There are places in the Bible where the person Wisdom talks *about* God and claims to be a part of God's own essence brought forth to assist Him in creation. This is pretty mind-stretching stuff, and it has some direct ramifications for our view of God, so don't leave now!

Taking an abstract idea like wisdom and "converting" it into a person is called personification (I know I said I would keep big words out, but that one will really impress your friends). English does this kind of thing with abstract ideas or plain objects. We might say, "*Greed* overtook him," or "*Love* blinded her." In these cases, "greed" and "love" are spoken of as though they were living things. The Old Testament does this with Wisdom, but takes it a step further. Wisdom is more than just one of God's attributes that gets spoken of in personal terms. Wisdom in the Old Testament is not only personified, but is described as an entity that *interacts* with God, *speaks* of God, and

assists God. Even more, Wisdom is even *interchangeable* with God. I'll unpack that in a moment. Right now we need to talk a bit more about this divine *female* thing.

If you've ever studied a foreign language or are bilingual, you know that languages are not all the same. Each one has its own quirks. When it comes to gender, in English we have many words that we know intuitively as English speakers describe males ("boy," "man," "actor," "priest," "buck," "bull") or females ("girl," "woman," "actress," "priestess," "doe," "heifer"). Other words in English are ambiguous, requiring some context for what gender we're talking about: "author," "doctor," "lawyer." English doesn't worry about assigning gender to words that have nothing to do with physical gender—but many languages around the world do just that.¹ German, French, and Spanish are examples. The reason for this derives from the way a language relates words to each other in sentences.²

Ancient Hebrew and Greek are like German, French, and Spanish in this respect. They assign gender to all nouns, not just the ones that have physical gender. It may seem odd, but the Hebrew word for "wisdom" has a gender in that language—and it happens to be feminine. This means that when we read about the person of Wisdom in the Bible, she is spoken of as female—most often with feminine pronouns like I just used ("she"; "her"). This is why commentators and (perhaps) your Study Bible notes on the passages below refer to Wisdom as "Lady Wisdom." But this has nothing to do with real gender—and does not denote some sort of goddess. Quite the opposite, as we'll see.

Wisdom is first described as a person in Proverbs 1:20-33, where she takes on the role of biblical prophet, warning her audience of their impending doom should they live as fools. I've underlined some of the words that will help illustrate the personhood of Wisdom (ESV translation):

- ²⁰ Wisdom cries aloud in the street,
in the street plazas she raises her voice;
²¹ at the head of the noisy streets she calls out;
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
²² "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
And those who scoff delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?"

So far there's nothing unusual, as far as what Wisdom is doing or who "she" might be. But there's much more.

In Proverbs 8 we find another description of Wisdom in personhood language. For example, in verses 12, 14 Wisdom herself tells us that "I, wisdom, dwell with prudence, and I find knowledge and discretion . . . I have counsel and sound wisdom; I have insight and strength." It all sounds "typical" until you get to verses 22-31. Are you sitting down? Take an especially close look at the underlining again as you read what Wisdom says in these verses:

22 “The LORD begot me at the beginning of His way
 (as) the first of His works of old.
 23 Long ago I was poured out,
 From the first, before the beginning of earth.
 24 There was no deep when I was brought forth,
 No springs rich in water;
 25 Before the mountains were planted,
 Before the hills I was brought forth.
 26 He had not yet made earth and fields,
 Or the world’s first clumps of clay.
 27 When he established the heavens, I was there;
 When He fixed the circle of the horizon upon the deep;
 28 When He made the clouds above firm,
 And the fountains of the deep gushed forth;
 29 When He established the limits of the sea,
 So that its waters never transgress His command;
 When He fixed the foundations of the earth,
 30 I was beside Him as an artisan,
 Daily was I his delight,
 Rejoicing before Him at all times,
 31 Rejoicing in His inhabited world,
 Finding delight with mankind.

Six times in this passage Wisdom informs us that she has existed before the creation of God’s material world. In verse 30 we discover that she was God’s helper in creation as his “artisan”—something you won’t find any hint of in Genesis 1.

What’s going on here? Well, it shouldn’t be a surprise that some scholars and critics of the Bible believe that this passage is evidence of a primitive polytheism, specifically the presence of a goddess—the “untold story” of Israel’s faith! That’s a quite biased interpretation. Gods and goddesses of other ancient faiths and texts are typically depicted as creating the world and its contents through sexual cohabitation. There is nothing like this in Proverbs 8 or anywhere else in the Old Testament.

One thing you will learn as you read this book is that God has always had a “chief assistant”—a being who served as his special agent, co-ruler, and co-creator. This divine being is referred to in the Old Testament as a god,³ or assumes God’s own identity in biblical stories, making him (or her) indistinguishable from the God of Israel. However, this second person was not another god distinct from Yahweh, the God of Israel. This would be a denial of monotheism. Rather, *the second god was considered to be Yahweh’s own essence* but yet a different person.

Proverbs 8 is not the only creation text in the Old Testament where we see Wisdom at God’s side assisting in creation.

Psalm 104:24

How wonderful are your works, O Lord!

With Wisdom you have made them all;

The earth is filled with your creatures.

If what I'm suggesting to this point sounds like the godhead we think of in the New Testament, you're on track. I'm going to argue in this book that this idea is actually an Israelite one, and that Jews of Jesus day understood that! Wisdom as a "second god" is actually part of the *Jewish* basis for the "Father-Son" godhead that later got a lot of attention in the New Testament. In some of the chapters that follow we'll lay all this out, in startling detail.

The apostles understood the view I'm articulating here—that Wisdom in Proverbs 8 was a second deity. This is made clear by the fact that they equated Jesus with Wisdom! Paul explicitly states that Jesus is the "Wisdom of God" (I Cor. 1:24). It's possible that Paul meant only to say that Jesus was God's "wise plan" to outwit Satan,⁴ but I would suggest what Paul says should be understood in the context of other apostolic sayings about Jesus and Wisdom.

The most striking and obvious example of such an equation is the passage below from the gospels. Luke 11:49-51 (ESV) refers to the Wisdom of God in terms now familiar to us, terms of personhood. As you read, ask yourself who is speaking:

⁴⁶ And he said, "Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers. ⁴⁷ Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. ⁴⁸ So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs. ⁴⁹ Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,' ⁵⁰ so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, ⁵¹ from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of this generation.

The passage is pretty straightforward. We know the context well enough to realize that Jesus is the speaker, in this case once again railing on the hypocrisy of his enemies. But in verse 49 Jesus suddenly interjects another speaker, the Wisdom of God, who proceeds to say in the first person, "I sent you prophets and apostles...." Jesus does this in such a way as to create the impression that it was *Wisdom* who sent the prophets and apostles, something we know from both the Old and New Testament that God the Father did (e.g., Isa. 6:8; 10:6; Jer 1:7; I Cor. 1:28). Jesus is explicitly equating Wisdom and God the Father; he's putting Wisdom into the "God slot." Is Jesus confused? Is the gospel writer being careless? No way. It's deliberate, and sets up a wonderful illustration of the theological value of having more than one gospel.

You might be wondering what the big deal is. I think you'll see it when you read *the same passage* in Matthew 23. Check out the underlining, and remember the speaker is the same as before—Jesus:

²⁹ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, ³⁰ saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ ³¹ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. ³² Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. ³³ You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? ³⁴ Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, ³⁵ so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. ³⁶ Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

Did you catch it? In this gospel Matthew naturally has Jesus as the speaker who is giving the Pharisees and scribes a tongue-lashing. But whereas the gospel of Luke had Jesus making Wisdom a second speaker, Matthew puts the very words of Wisdom, who has assumed the identity of God the Father in Luke, into Jesus' own mouth! The effect of this in the early church was electric: Luke and Matthew, through a written tag-team effort, identified Jesus as God's co-creator, Wisdom, who was identified as Yahweh, the God of Israel. To those readers who knew their Old Testament well, the implication was obvious: Jesus occupies the “God slot”—he is God but yet a distinct personage from God the Father. Whew! Who said theology can't be fascinating?

One of the reasons the apostles were not taken by surprise by the idea that Wisdom was described as a divine being was that other Jewish religious writings around in Jesus' day said the same thing. Like many writers whose works are sold in Christian bookstores today, Jewish writers living just before or during the life of Jesus wrote books about the contents of the Bible. In fact there were several books widely circulated among Jewish readers that drew on Proverbs 8 for their own descriptions about Wisdom.

Two of these works go by the names *The Wisdom of Solomon* and *The Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach*. It's a bit startling to read what the Jewish authors of these books said. Some of their material sounds like Proverbs 8 or sayings of Jesus from the gospels, but it's well known that they lived before Jesus was born. From the selections below it's apparent that Jews understood what was going on in Proverbs 8, and that the apostles took advantage of these well known concepts when explaining who Jesus was.

Sirach 1:1-4

¹ All wisdom comes from the Lord, and is with him for ever. ² Who can number the sand of the sea, and the drops of rain, and the days of eternity? ³ Who can find out the height of heaven, and the breadth of the earth, and the deep, and wisdom? ⁴ Wisdom has been created before all things, and the understanding of prudence from everlasting. ⁵ The word of God most high is the fountain of Wisdom; and her ways are everlasting commandments.

Wisdom of Solomon 9:1-4, 9

¹ O God of my fathers, and Lord of mercy, who has made all things with your word, ² And ordained man through your Wisdom, that he should have dominion over the creatures which you have made, ³ And order the world according to equity and righteousness, and execute judgment with an upright heart: ⁴ Give me Wisdom, who sits alongside your throne; and do not reject me from among your children:

⁹ And Wisdom was with you, who knows your works, and was present when you made the world, and knew what was acceptable in your sight, and right in your commandments. ¹⁰ O send her out of your holy heavens, and from the throne of your glory, that being present she may work with me, that I may know what is pleasing unto you. ¹¹ For she knows and understands all things, and she shall lead me soberly in my doings, and preserve me in her power.

Sirach 24:1-5, 8-12

¹ Wisdom shall praise herself, and shall glory in the midst of her people. ² In the congregation of the most High shall she open her mouth, and triumph before his power.

³ I came out of the mouth of the most High, and covered the earth as a cloud. ⁴ I dwelt in high places, and my throne is in a cloudy pillar. ⁵ I alone compassed the circuit of heaven, and walked in the bottom of the deep.

⁸ So the Creator of all things gave me a commandment, and he that made me caused my tabernacle to rest, and said, Let your dwelling be in Jacob, and your inheritance in Israel. ⁹ He created me from the beginning before the world, and I shall never fail. ¹⁰ In the holy tabernacle I served before him; and so was I established in Sion. ¹¹ Likewise in the beloved city he gave me rest, and in Jerusalem was my power. ¹² And I took root in an honorable people, even in the portion of the Lord's inheritance.

Probably the most significant of these passages are the ones drawn from *Sirach* 24. There is much here that will be the subject of detailed discussion in chapters that follow, but for now you may want to highlight (mentally or literally) the fact that Wisdom is in “the congregation of the Most High,” was in the Tabernacle, was in the pillar of cloud, and was in charge of “the Lord’s inheritance.” We will return to these

themes—they are mind-blowing and make a critical contribution for understanding most of the Old Testament. But let's stay focused on Wisdom now.

Once you realize these passages were written by a pious Jewish author, these readings are frankly shocking.⁵ Like Proverbs 8, Wisdom is a being that has existed from the very beginning, being present with God when he created everything. But the writer goes beyond that. The Jewish writer of *Sirach*—living before there were Christians who believed that Jesus was true deity seated at the right hand of God—boldly asserted that Wisdom had a throne alongside God (*Sirach* 9:4) and that she came forth from the very throne of God (*Sirach* 9:10). It was Wisdom who issued “everlasting commandments” (*Sirach* 9:5), a phrase that creates an implicit connection between Wisdom and the God of Sinai. It was Wisdom who ordained that humankind should have dominion over the earth (*Sirach* 9:2), an obvious allusion to God's creation of humanity in Genesis 1:26-27. It was Wisdom to whom the writer appealed to work in his heart and sanctify him, ideas the New Testament reserves for the Holy Spirit. Whereas in the Old Testament it is God who sits above the circle of the earth, lives in the tent of the heavens, whose chariot throne is the clouds, and who is master of the deep, here Wisdom takes these roles.⁶ Amazingly, Wisdom even praises herself (*Sirach* 24:1), has power (*Sirach* 9:11) and triumphs before God (*Sirach* 24:2)!

With this as backdrop, in *Sirach* 51:26-27 Wisdom says, “Put your neck under the yoke, and let your souls receive instruction; it is to be found close by. See with your eyes that I have labored little and found myself much rest.” Is it any wonder that when Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:29-30) that the ears of his audience perked up? He was speaking as the deity alongside the God of Israel that their Bible and other writers they knew had described! When Wisdom is described in the *Wisdom of Solomon* 7:26 as “the brightness of the everlasting light, the unspotted mirror of the power of God, and the image of his goodness,” is it any wonder that new Jewish Christians understood that Jesus was God in flesh when they read that he was “the reflection of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:5) and the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). By drawing on what their hearers and readers knew of God and his throne partner, Wisdom, the apostles were declaring that Jesus Christ of Nazareth *was that same partner*—he was in the “God slot” just as Wisdom was. He was the Wisdom of God (I Cor. 1:24).

Right about now your head may be swirling with the implications of all this—and how you missed something so amazing when you read through Proverbs 8 before. I'm happy to tell you that it won't be the last time; get used to the experience—and enjoy it. I've been there, too. Unfortunately, I can't give you a breather just yet. We have something vital to deal with before leaving this topic.

You may have noticed amid all the grand talk about Wisdom in these texts that Wisdom is at times said to have been created. That's bad news if Wisdom is Jesus, because then he'd be a created being, which means he can't truly be the eternal God in any meaningful way. If this is lost, then Trinitarianism is undone and shown to be

unbiblical. The fact is, though, that not all Jewish writers said this; that is, they did not interpret Proverbs 8 to be teaching that Wisdom was a created being. Let's take a look at what the non-biblical Jewish writers said about Wisdom first, noting some apparent division of opinion:

Sirach 1:4 – “Wisdom has been created before all things, and the understanding of prudence from everlasting.”

Wisdom of Solomon 7:25-26 - “She [Wisdom] is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty, . . . a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God and an image of his goodness”

Sirach 24:3 – “I came out of the mouth of the most High, and covered the earth as a cloud.”

Sirach 24:9 – “He created me from the beginning before the world, and I shall never fail.”

If you are reading closely you can see that sometimes these Jewish authors used the word “created” and at other times they used vocabulary that described something that *flows out of God*.⁷ The latter is important since God is eternal. If something was part of God and God just called it out of himself, then that which was called out is also eternal and thus uncreated.

It's helpful to look at what other Jewish thinkers were saying about God's “special agent,” but the issue for us is what the Bible says about whether Wisdom and Jesus were created or not. What does Proverbs 8 say? The key verses are 22-25:

- 22 “The LORD begot me at the beginning of His way
(as) the first of His works of old.
23 Long ago I was poured out,
From the first, before the beginning of earth.
24 There was no deep when I was brought forth,
No springs rich in water;
25 Before the mountains were planted,
Before the hills I was brought forth.

The word I have translated “begot” in Proverbs 8:22 is an elastic one. The original Hebrew verb could mean to create, to beget, or to acquire. The latter option would yield a translation like “The Lord *owned* me at the beginning” or “The Lord *possessed* me at the beginning.” This is a common meaning for this word, both in the Hebrew Old Testament and other Jewish writings.⁸ This option would go well with the idea of Wisdom being uncreated. But what about the others?

This text takes us to the heart of a question that you may have asked yourself at some point (and congratulations if you did): What’s the difference between the words “begotten” and “created”? I remember as a teenager, new to Christianity, wondering about that (okay, I was strange). It was a big deal to understand Jesus was not created, but then the creeds spoke of him as begotten. What’s the difference?

“Created” implies bringing something into existence that had not existed before that point. It speaks of a moment of origin. “Begotten,” on the other hand, was a term used by early church fathers and Jewish writers in an effort to describe something (or someone) who was not created in the normal sense of “moment of origin.” “Begotten” speaks of being “brought forth” or “introduced”—a new character on the stage as it were—without the connotation of “at this point beginning to exist.” Hence we see statements in the creeds that describe Jesus as “begotten, not made.”⁹ The distinction is important. The former (“created”) means that Wisdom at one time did not exist in any way. The latter (“begotten”) has Wisdom as an eternal being who was part of Yahweh, yet brought forth as an independent entity.

One’s decision on Proverbs 8:22 affects the other verbs in the verses that follow, all of which can go either way. Proving that “begotten” is the correct option for God’s “special agent” in part depends on two things: (1) Considering other texts that describe this second divine being to get a full picture of Israelite and Jewish thinking on the second deity figure; and (2) determining if those other references can be construed as describing a created being. If some cannot, then “begotten” is the accurate choice for it successfully encompasses all the data, not just some. Word meaning is determined by context, but sometimes the context is pretty wide. One of the major problems in Bible study (“word study”) that linguists have lamented for some time is that a word is often confused for a concept. Biblical theology does not (or should not!) derive from the study of a word or two on some topic. If I wanted to write a biblical theology of child-rearing I’d need to go well beyond studying words like “home” or “child” or “teach”; I’d need to incorporate everything I could find, regardless of terminology, on the subject for a full picture.

In the next chapter and several that follow, I’ll make the case that Wisdom is just one of the “guises” for God’s special agent. That second deity figure shows up in various expressions throughout the Old Testament, and is referred to as God (not just a god), is interchanged with Yahweh, and subsumes Yahweh’s attributes and powers. The equation means that if Yahweh isn’t created, the special agent isn’t either.

But don’t take my word for it. Consider God’s “Word” instead.

¹ Sometimes we do this in English in an abstract way. For example, we speak of ships or cars as feminine (“*she* was the grandest ship on the sea”; “*she* really flies”).

² As one grammar puts it, “Gender is a feature allocated to nouns *on the basis of their form or the way they combine with other elements in a clause*” (Christo Van der Merwe, Jackie Naudé, Jan Kroeze, Christo Van der Merwe, Jackie Naudé, and Jan Kroeze. *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar*. electronic ed. Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997). English usually telegraphs word relationships by word order.

We can tell by listening or reading what word goes with what other word or words. Other languages put little emphasis on word order. They attach endings to words that indicate gender, number [e.g., singular or plural], and role in the sentence. This is called “inflection.”

³ For example, the most common Hebrew word for the God of Israel, *elohim*, is at times used to describe a second being who is interchangeable with the God of Israel in a particular Old Testament story.

⁴ And if that’s the case, the Pauline doctrine of Jesus’ deity does not depend on this verse.

⁵ The reader needs to realize, though, that just because the Jewish writer could make such observations does not mean they processed them the same way as the apostles. For Jesus son of Sirach, Wisdom was the Mosaic Law (24:23). As you will learn in this book, Jews struggled to figure out who or what the “second god” in their Bible was. By the time Jesus was born, they had many speculations. The apostles were able to present Jesus in this familiar category, and armed with the resurrection and the power of the Spirit, many Jews found the answer.

⁶ Job 22:13-14; 26:7-10; Isa 19:10; 40:22; Deut. 33:26; Psa 104:1-6; Psa 77:16; 107:24; Hab 3:10.

⁷ See Appendix 1 for more detail on this issue.

⁸ See Appendix 1.

⁹ As we’ll see in the next chapter, the Jewish writer Philo spoke of God’s Logos (same word that John uses for Jesus in John 1). For Philo, the Logos had an origin, but was uncreated. This was because the Logos (a Greek word that means “word”) was God’s word or mind that was the agent of God’s creative activity—something eternal, but which could be expressed or “brought forth” in new and various ways. As a result, for Philo, who was not a Christian, the Word (Logos) was not part of creation, but something that came forth from the eternal God to facilitate creation.