

The Incarnation of Wisdom in Pre-Christian Judaism

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1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to ascertain to what extent the concept of incarnation appears in pre-Christian Jewish sources. It is often assumed by commentators on the Fourth Gospel that the theology of incarnation finds its origins specifically in John 1:14, where the preexisting *word* (or its close synonym *wisdom*) becomes flesh and makes its tabernacling presence among the Johannine community. This effectively sets a date on the theology of incarnation to roughly the end of the first century C.E., when the Fourth Gospel arrived at its final form. Martin Scott's comment in his work *Sophia and the Divine Jesus* is typical of this position: "the word became flesh" is a step "beyond anything said directly of Sophia in the tradition."¹ Ernst Haenchen, in his two-volume critical commentary on the Gospel of John, draws a similar conclusion that overlooks the Jewish Wisdom traditions that predate Christianity: "the author of the hymn is now describing something that he did not derive from the old Wisdom tradition."² Andrew Lincoln, in his otherwise excellent 2005 treatment of the Fourth Gospel, nevertheless makes the same mistake: "this formulation goes far beyond any personification of the divine wisdom to claim that this Wisdom has become incarnate in a particular human."³ The list of those who subscribe to this position is unfortunately lengthy.⁴ To the surprise of these commentators on the Gospel of John, there are many scholars of Second Temple Judaism that have observed evidence that the personified wisdom of God is portrayed as coming down to earth to become human, that is, becoming incarnate in flesh. These two groups of scholars cannot both be correct. Either the concept of incarnation begins in the Fourth Gospel, or it begins in pre-Christian Judaism.

In order to find some clarity on this topic, we will examine four Jewish texts in which scholars have suggested that the concept of the incarnation of Wisdom appears. First, we will look closely at the biblical book of Proverbs, which has a high concentration of passages depicting the wisdom of God as a personified female figure. Second, we will explore the apocryphal book of Sirach, otherwise known as Ben Sira. Third, we will shift our attention towards an often-overlooked work from the Dead Sea Scroll collection known as the Genesis Apocryphon. Lastly, we will survey the works of Philo Judaeus, the first-century Greek-speaking Jewish philosopher. After ascertaining the extent to which these pre-Christian Jewish sources contribute to the doctrine of incarnation, we will use that data to inform our reading of the key texts in the Johannine Prologue: John 1:1, 14. Our hope is that we adequately place the Gospel of John in its Jewish context, particularly the context of Jewish speculation surrounding the God of Israel and his personified wisdom.

¹ Martin Scott, *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus*, JSNTSS 71 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 1992), 105.

² Ernst Haenchen, *John 1*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 119.

³ Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2005), 104.

⁴ E.g., Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 102-3; Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 79; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, LLC, 2003), 406-8; Sharon H. Ringe, *Wisdom's Friends: Community and Christology in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 51; Elizabeth Harris, *Prologue and Gospel: The Theology of the Fourth Evangelist*, JSNTSS 107 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 198.

2. The Book of Proverbs

Within the Hebrew Bible, there is no larger hub of wisdom material than within the Book of Proverbs. Structurally, the editors of Proverbs bookended the collection with noteworthy sections pertaining to personified wisdom, beginning with chapters 1-9 and concluding with the acrostic poem of Woman of Substance in 31:10-31. Although it is difficult to ascertain a firm date for the original compilation of proverbs, the Jewish sages responsible for chapters 1-9 and 31 composed them during the Persian Period, between 539-333 B.C.E.⁵ It will be prudent for this study to examine the portrayal of personified wisdom in each of the relevant passages.

Proverbs chapter 1 introduces the whole collection by declaring its intent to impart wisdom to its readers. In doing so, wisdom is associated with instructions for discipline, understanding, wise behavior, prudence, knowledge, and discretion. The household father and mother are those trying to commit these wise precepts unto the readers. In Prov. 1:20-33, however, the concept of wisdom has moved beyond the mere wise instructions of a royal father into a heavily personified female figure. Wisdom—depicted as a lady who speaks in the first person—now stands openly in the streets, in the town square, and at the entrance of the city gates. Lady Wisdom’s speech and behavior resembles that of a prophet.⁶ She speaks forth prophetic condemnations to those who refuse to listen to her wise sayings.⁷ She utters prophetic threats that are to follow as judgment upon those who do not heed her words.⁸ Although Lady Wisdom speaks as an authorized prophetess, she talks in the first person; “I will pour out my spirit on you, I will make my words known to you.” She situates herself publicly as accessible, particularly as she shouts, lifts her voice, cries out, and utters her sayings. However, she will become inaccessible to those who refuse to repent, “they will call on me, but I will not answer...they will not find me.” The chapter concludes with Lady Wisdom promising a life of security and ease to those who faithfully listen to her wise oracles.

The ways that the Jewish sages portrayed wisdom in Proverbs as both God’s wise commands and a personified female figure are clear in 2:1-12. On one hand, the wisdom of God is likened unto the words, commandments, understanding, and discernment that the ideal readers should strive to receive. On the other, wisdom is almost instantly personified as an active figure who takes the initiative to enter the heart of the upright.⁹ The author then offers synonyms to wisdom—knowledge, discretion, and understanding—as additional personifications that actively guard and watch over those walking in integrity. Since Lady Wisdom is the personification of God’s wise interaction with his creation, God and his wisdom are often interchangeable in their actions.¹⁰ As such, Wisdom continues to appear accessible and openly available to those who diligently search for her (2:2-7).

Proverbs 3:14-21 stresses the unparalleled value of wisdom, which encourages readers to acquire her at all costs. Her economic worth is incredible; she is greater than silver, gold, and jewels (3:14-

⁵ For a thorough treatment on the dating of Prov. 1-9 and 31:10-31, see Christine Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31*, BZAW 304 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), 39-91.

⁶ Abigail Ramos Teh, “Images of Personified Wisdom,” *Landas*, 22.1 (2008), 108-15.

⁷ 1:24-25; 28-30. Lady Wisdom’s prophetic condemnations draw upon the earlier biblical prophets in form and language (cf. Isa 1:15; 50:2; 65:12; 66:4; Jer. 7:13; 11:10-11; 17:23; 29:19; Hos. 5:6; Mic. 3:4).

⁸ 1:26-27; 31-32. In these prophetic threats, Lady Wisdom resembles threats uttered by other biblical prophets (cf. Isa. 1:15; Jer. 11:11; Hos. 5:6; Psa. 2:4).

⁹ 2:10; Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, WBC, vol. 22 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 16.

¹⁰ 2:6-11; cf. Murphy, *Proverbs*, 16.

15). Personified wisdom holds long life, riches, and glory in her hands (3:16).¹¹ Her ways, which are meant to contrast from the crooked ways leading to the personified strange woman (2:15-19), are characterized as pleasant and peaceful (3:17). Furthermore, wisdom is likened unto a tree of life that is to be grasped and held fast (3:18). In order to further heighten the value of wisdom, the sages depict God founding the earth by using wisdom as an agent, indicating that God wisely ordered the good creation (3:19).¹² However, wisdom is not to be confused as a conscious female figure alongside God, as the sages carefully parallel wisdom with the regular synonyms “understanding” and “knowledge.”¹³ It is no wonder that the household father implores his son to keep priceless wisdom and never let her vanish from sight.

The personification of wisdom reaches its poetic climax in Proverbs 8, where Lady Wisdom utters her longest speech thus far. Taking the role of a teacher, Lady Wisdom encourages her listeners to take hold of her instruction, counsel, and discipline (8:10, 14, 33). Wisdom again presents herself openly and publicly, indicating her accessibility to those who listen to her and keep her ways. Her wise sayings come forth from her personified mouth (8:6-8), which suggests a close connection between God’s wisdom and word. To those who love her, she offers her love as well as riches and glory (8:17-18). She can reward those who love her with wealth because Wisdom herself is valuable, and her speech spends a considerable amount of time describing the extent of her preeminence in terms of her ancient origins (8:22-31). By employing the use of several prepositions and phrases (“in the beginning,” “before,” “from everlasting,” “from the earliest times”) the sages illustrate Lady Wisdom as preexistent. However, she is not coeternal with Yahweh; she declares that Yahweh created her (8:22),¹⁴ established her (8:23), and brought her forth as a child (8:24, 25).¹⁵ She details the extent to which she witnessed creation alongside God, but she never claims to be the creator. That role she is incredibly careful to reserve for Yahweh alone; “he made the earth and the fields” (8:26), “he established the heavens” (8:27), “he made firm the skies above” (8:28), “he set a boundary for the sea” (8:29). As a joyful child, personified wisdom delights in Yahweh, and that love is reciprocated; “I was daily his delight” (8:30). Having proven her preeminent value, she displays her accessibility to anyone who listens to her, keeps her ways, and heeds her instructions, resulting in life and favor (8:32-36).

Personified wisdom gains yet another role in chapter nine as she acts as the head of the household—a house that she built. The passage focuses on the dinner she prepares and the invitation she openly offers to whoever lacks understanding. Her table consists of meat, bread and wine (9:2, 5). Lady Wisdom’s request to dine at her table is a summons to forsake folly and walk in the path of understanding that only wisdom offers. In doing so, the naïve will surely find life. The table fellowship that personified wisdom offers is set in contrast to the dinner that personified folly offers (9:13-18). While the two dinner hosts bear some parallels—both are homeowners, invite the naïve, offer food and drink—Lady Wisdom’s invitation is clearly the better choice. She

¹¹ These three benefits were also given to Solomon by God (1 Kgs. 3:13; 2 Chr. 1:11-12), further indicating that wisdom offers by extension that which God himself offers.

¹² Cf. the similar expression in Jer. 10:12; 51:15, a prophetic work distinct from the Jewish Wisdom literature: “[Yahweh] established the world in his wisdom.”

¹³ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 16-7, insists on this very point, “The texts in question make it quite clear that they are not infringing the standard monotheistic insistence that God created without assistance of any kind.”

¹⁴ The Hebrew verb *qana* can mean “to create” and “to acquire” (HALOT, 1111-2). Both definitions seem to be intended here, as it would be difficult to argue persuasively that the author intended one but did not intend the other. See the discussion in Christine R. Yoder, *Proverbs*, AOTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 94-5.

¹⁵ William P. Brown, “Proverbs 8:22-31,” *Interpretation* 63 no. 3 (2009): 286.

offers wine to drink, while Lady Folly can only provide stolen water. Lady Wisdom has female servants whom she sends (9:3); while Lady Folly has no servants. Those who partake of personified wisdom's meal are offered life, but the personified folly's guests are in the depths of Sheol. By juxtaposing the invitation of Wisdom and the invitation of Folly, the sages highlight the value and necessity of Wisdom's life-giving teachings and instructions.

Although the authors of the collection of Proverbs intended that their primary audience be young males, the final passage is clearly directed at females who incorporate wisdom's teachings into their daily lives.¹⁶ In Prov. 31:10-31, the poem of the Woman of Substance¹⁷ is a noteworthy passage that pertains to Lady Wisdom, as many of her traits, qualities, and descriptions are recapitulated in the portrayal of Jewish women.¹⁸ The poem is set forth in an acrostic arrangement, with each line beginning with a sequential letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The purpose of arranging the poem acrostically is that it would set forth an all-encompassing description of Jewish women in the Persian period who embody personified wisdom.¹⁹ The Woman of Substance, like personified wisdom, is more valuable than jewels. Both offer good things, despise evil, are delightful, bring forth profit, offer bread, are homeowners, have female servants, bear fruit, speak at gates, and laugh.²⁰ In fact, the sages responsible for the poem of the Woman of Substance made a bilingual pun in 31:27, where the Hebrew verb *tsofiya* ("she watches over") sounds remarkably like the Greek word for wisdom, *sophia*.²¹ Many specialists on Proverbs point to the poem in 31:10-31 and describe its depiction of these Jewish women in the Persian period as the embodiment and incarnation of personified wisdom.²² Leo Perdue observes that she "becomes the human incarnation of what Woman Wisdom teaches."²³

¹⁶ Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 299, concludes from this passage an ideal interpretation where wise people "aim to incarnate the wisdom she embodies."

¹⁷ For a detailed discussion on the translation "Woman of Substance," see Yoder, *Proverbs*, 292.

¹⁸ Fox, *Proverbs 10-31*, 908-9, records eleven different ways in which the woman in Prov. 31:10-31 is portrayed with the same language and characteristics as personified wisdom, wisdom, and wise women. See also Horne, *Proverbs-Ecclesiastes*, 359-65; Ringe, *Wisdom's Friends*, 34.

¹⁹ Fox, *Proverbs 10-31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB, vol. 18B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 890, observes that the Hebrew alphabet denotes "totality" in its ability to encompass all words. See also the helpful diagram in Milton P. Horne, *Proverbs-Ecclesiastes*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publications, 2003), 360-1.

²⁰ Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, Bible and Literature Series, vol. 11 (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1985), 188-9.

²¹ Murphy, *Proverbs*, 244, argues that this play on words was deliberate and suggestive of a relationship between the woman of the poem and personified wisdom.

²² Leo G. Perdue, *Proverbs*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2000), 229. Perdue unpacks this theology by calling the Jewish woman: "the incarnation of wisdom in female form" (280). Amy Plantinga Pauw, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015) 32, follows Perdue in this line of interpretation: "The 'woman of substance' is in some ways a real-life incarnation of Woman Wisdom." Yoder, *Proverbs*, 299, succinctly states that the woman of substance is identified with personified wisdom. Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 34-35, "This woman is indeed the very embodiment of Wisdom...she is Wisdom truly embodied." See also JiSeong Kwon, "Wisdom Incarnate?: Identity and Role of אִשְׁת־חַיִל ('the Valiant Woman') in Proverbs 31:10-31," *JESOT*, 1 no. 2 (2012), 181, 187-8; Karen L. H. Shaw, "Wisdom Incarnate: Preaching Proverbs 31," *The Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society*, 14 no. 2 (2014), 47-8; Silvia Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House: Studies in the Figure of Sophia in the Bible*, trans. Linda M. Maloney and William McDonough (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 21-4.

²³ Perdue, *Proverbs*, 63. Horne, *Proverbs-Ecclesiastes*, 357, comes to the same conclusion: "Readers are challenged to associate the wife with Woman Wisdom herself."

<u>Characteristics of Personified Wisdom</u>	<u>Characteristics of the Woman of Substance</u>
Wisdom is more profitable than jewels – 3:15	31:10
Wisdom offers good things – 2:8-9	31:12
Wisdom hates evil – 8:13	31:12
Wisdom is full of delight – 3:15	31:13
Wisdom brings forth profit – 3:14	31:14
Wisdom offers bread – 9:5	31:14
Wisdom is a homeowner – 9:1	31:15
Wisdom has maidens who server her – 9:3	31:15
Wisdom bears fruit – 8:19	31:16
Wisdom speaks at the city gates – 8:3	31:23
Wisdom engages in laughter – 8:30-31	31:25

To sum up, the Book of Proverbs presents personified wisdom in a variety of behaviors: as a prophetess, teacher, child, and homeowner. These roles contribute to her summons to listen to her wise teachings and instructions. The teachings of wisdom come forth from her mouth, thereby strongly associating the words of God with the wisdom of God. Wisdom is the agent of creation, indicating that God created wisely and orderly. Lady Wisdom, naturally, preexisted creation, while making it certain that Yahweh alone is the creator. She makes herself available to those who diligently seek her and even becomes incarnate in the Woman of Substance, a strikingly early reference to the concept of incarnation within Judaism.²⁴

3. The Book of Sirach

The Book of Sirach belongs to the Jewish intertestamental literature included in the Septuagint. Scholars date Sirach to the beginning of the second century B.C.E., around 180.²⁵ Sirach is that it is deeply indebted to the Book of Proverbs, drawing upon its theology and structure quite heavily.²⁶ Sirach interprets the wisdom of God in terms of Torah's commandments and the fear of the Lord; "If you desire wisdom, keep the commandments, and the Lord will lavish her upon you" (1:26; cf. 1:10). Wisdom is hidden with God, but available to all who obey the Law (1:1-10).²⁷ The theme of wisdom dominates the Book of Sirach, appearing over ninety times in the document.²⁸

²⁴ Several scholars whose works attempt to trace the development of Wisdom throughout Jewish literature overlook Proverbs 31 and its portrayal of incarnation entirely: Aidan O'Boyle, *Towards a Contemporary Wisdom Christology* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 2003), 20-4; Michael E. Willett, *Wisdom Christology in the Fourth Gospel* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992), 11-13.

²⁵ James L. Crenshaw, "The Book of Sirach: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. V (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 613; John E. Rybolt, *Sirach*, Collegeville Bible Commentary 21 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1986), 5-6.

²⁶ Yoder, *Proverbs*, xxiv; Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB, vol. 18A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 6. Pancratius C. Beentjes, "Full Wisdom is from the Lord," in *The Wisdom of Ben Sira: Studies on Tradition, Redaction, and Theology*, ed. Angelo Passaro and Giuseppe Bellia, Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Studies, vol. 1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 149, remarks that scholars are unanimous in their observation that Proverbs can be detected in every portion of Sirach.

²⁷ Beentjes, "Full Wisdom is from the Lord," 149, rightly detects the influence of Job 28 and Proverbs 8 in Sirach 1:1-10.

²⁸ Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, tr. by James D. Martin (London: S.C.M. Press, 1972), 242, argues that wisdom is the most prominent theme in the Book of Sirach, even more prominent than the fear of the Lord.

Like Proverbs, Sirach personifies the wisdom of God as a female figure.²⁹ Lady Wisdom is a bride and mother (15:2); her children are those whom she teaches (4:11). As a personification of God's wise interaction with creation, Lady Wisdom often blurs the lines between herself and God, so much that those who serve her serve the Holy One (4:14).³⁰ Even so, she portrays herself as obedient to the commands of the Creator (24:8). In addition to playing the role of bride and mother, personified wisdom is a teacher utilizing strict discipline and testing (6:18-31). Those who take upon her yoke are rewarded with rest (4:15), long life (1:12; 4:12), peace (1:18), and desirable goods (1:17).³¹ Showing influence from Proverbs 9, Sirach describes the benefits of Lady Wisdom in terms of bread, water (15:3), and fruit (1:16; 24:19).

One of the notable contributions offered by Sirach is the portrayal of wisdom as the Law of the commandments; "All these are the book of the covenant of the Most High, the law that Moses commanded us" (24:23).³² Personified wisdom's place among Israel began as a request regarding where she should abide, resulting in her Creator commanding her to come down out of heaven in order that she may pitch her tabernacle among Jacob (24:7-8).³³ Taking the role of the Law of Moses, Wisdom promises whoever obeys her will not be put to shame (24:22).³⁴ Lady Wisdom acknowledges that she held sway over every people and nation, not just the children of Israel (24:6).

Like depictions of wisdom in Proverbs, Sirach portrays wisdom's preexistence. She was created before all other things, making her the firstborn of God (1:4, 9; 24:9). Personified wisdom declares, "I came forth from the mouth of the Most High" (24:3), which likens her to God's word.³⁵ Wisdom

²⁹ Daniel J. Harrington, *Jesus Ben Sira of Jerusalem: A Biblical Guide to Living Wisely* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005), 103; Markus Witte, "Key Aspects and Themes in Recent Scholarship on the Book of Ben Sira," in *Texts and Contexts of the Book of Sirach*, ed. Gerhard Karner, Frank Ueberschaer, and Burkard M. Zapff, Septuagint and Cognate Studies 66 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 26; James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making, A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, Second ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 172.

³⁰ Teresa Ann Ellis, *Gender in the Book of Ben Sira: Divine Wisdom, Erotic Poetry, and the Garden of Eden*, BZAW 453 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), 80, draws attention to the Hebrew original of Sirach which states, "to serve God is to serve Wisdom herself" (4:14), thereby reinforcing the theology that personified wisdom is akin to God wisely interacting with his servants.

³¹ On the personification of wisdom in 1:17, wisdom's relationship with God, and the influence of Prov. 9:1-6, see especially Alexander A. Di Lella, "Fear of the Lord as Wisdom: Ben Sira 1,11-30," in *The Book of Ben Sira in Modern Research: Proceedings of the First International Ben Sira Conference, 28-31 July 1996 Soesterberg, Netherlands*, ed. by Pancratius C. Beentjes, BZAW 255 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 124.

³² Jessie Rogers, "'It Overflows Like the Euphrates with Understanding': Another Look at the Relationship Between Law and Wisdom in Sirach," in *Of Scribes and Sages: Early Jewish Interpretation and Transmission of Scripture*, ed. Craig A. Evans, vol. 1 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 114-21. Leo Perdue, "Cosmology and the Social Order in the Wisdom Tradition," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 461-2, astutely noted that Ben Sira is not the first to interpret wisdom as Torah, noting how the torah psalms of Psalms 19 and 119 predate Ben Sira.

³³ Alexander A. Di Lella, "God and Wisdom in the Theology of Ben Sira," in *Ben Sira's God*, ed. Renate Egger-Wenzel, BZAW 321 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 13, observes that the depiction of personified wisdom in Sirach 24 draws upon Prov 8:4-36.

³⁴ Friedrich Vincenz Reiterer, "The Interpretation of the Wisdom Tradition of the Torah within Ben Sira," in *The Wisdom of Ben Sira: Studies on Tradition, Redaction, and Theology*, ed. Angelo Passaro and Giuseppe Bellia, Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Studies, vol. 1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 225.

³⁵ John Snaith observes that Ben Sira refers to the opening chapters of Genesis where the creation of the universe by God occurs through a series of creative words. See his *Ecclesiasticus, The Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 121. See also Schmidt, *Wisdom, Cosmos, and Cultus in the Book of Sirach*, 252-

refers to God as “my Creator” and “the Creator of all things” (24:8; 43:33).³⁶ Having taken root in Zion, Lady Wisdom likens herself to several trees; a cedar, a cypress, a palm tree, rosebushes, an olive tree, a plane tree, cassia and camel’s thorn, myrrh, a terebinth, and even a vine (24:12-17).³⁷ Even so, all wisdom is with God (1:1), since God is the source of wisdom.³⁸

In a similar vein to Proverbs’ portrayal of Wisdom incarnate in the Woman of Substance, Sirach ends with a depiction of wisdom embodied, specifically in the High Priest Simon ben Onias (50:1-24).³⁹ Simon, by carrying out the temple functions, manifests the very Wisdom who tabernacled among Jacob. Sirach deliberately details the high priest with the very same language formerly used to describe the traits and characteristics of personified wisdom.⁴⁰ For example, Simon the high priest pronounces glory, situates himself in the midst of the people, is likened unto a rosebush, incense, an olive tree, a cypress tree,⁴¹ a cedar tree, and a pleasing fragrance.⁴² What is noteworthy to consider is that while Lady Wisdom is incarnate into Jewish females in Proverbs 31, Sirach displays the incarnation of Wisdom in a prominent cultic figure of history—the High Priest.⁴³ In doing so, Sirach stresses the importance of God’s wise interactions among the daily temple service and priestly activities.⁴⁴

3, Maurice Gilbert, “Ben Sira, Reader of Genesis 1-11,” in *Intertextual Studies in Ben Sira and Tobit*, CBQMS 38, ed. Jeremy Corley and Vincent Skemp (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2005), 93-4, who both detects allusions to and influence from Genesis 1.

³⁶ A. Jorden Schmidt, *Wisdom, Cosmos, and Cultus in the Book of Sirach*, Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Studies, vol. 42 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), 238, astutely notes that Wisdom is a created entity, despite preexisting everything else. For an excellent overview of God in his role as creator within Sirach, see Alexander A. Di Lella, “God and Wisdom in the Theology of Ben Sira,” 4-8.

³⁷ Burkes, “Choosing Life in Ben Sira and Baruch,” 64, observes that the association of personified wisdom with the trees evokes the tree of life imagery from Proverbs, where the life-giving tree is another way of speaking about Lady Wisdom’s value and benefits.

³⁸ Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira: A New Translation with Notes, Introduction, and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 39 (Doubleday: New York, 1987), 138.

³⁹ Martha Himmelfarb, “The Wisdom of the Scribe, the Wisdom of the Priest, and the Wisdom of the King According to Ben Sira,” in *For a Later Generation*, ed. Randal A. Argall, Beverly A. Bow and Rodney A. Werline (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000), 97, argues that the High Priest Simon “appears...almost as Wisdom’s double.” The most thorough study of the High Priest Simon as the incarnation of personified wisdom is Schmidt, *Wisdom, Cosmos, and Cultus in the Book of Sirach*, 408-39. See also the helpful comments connecting the high priest with Wisdom’s activity in Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 261.

⁴⁰ See the discussion in Otto Mulder, *Simon the High Priest in Sirach 50: An Exegetical Study of the Significance of Simon the High Priest as Climax to Praise of the Fathers in Ben Sira’s Concept of History of Israel*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism, vol. 78 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 333, 340.

⁴¹ Skehan and Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 549.

⁴² For further parallels between personified wisdom and Simon, see the chart and discussion in Ellis, *Gender in the Book of Ben Sira*, 81-6.

⁴³ Crispin H.T. Fletcher-Louis, “The Cosmology of P and Theological Anthropology in the Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sira,” *Of Scribes and Sages: Early Jewish Interpretation and Transmission of Scripture*, ed. Craig A. Evans, vol. 1 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 112, acknowledges that incarnational language is appropriate when concluding the theology of Sirach ch. 50: “she is ‘incarnate’ in her avatar, Israel’s high priest.” Schmidt, *Wisdom, Cosmos, and Cultus in the Book of Sirach*, 439, concludes, “Ben Sira sees the high priest as one who transmits wisdom by his own embodiment of Wisdom...the preeminent embodiment of Wisdom in the world.” Simon Gathercole, “Wisdom (Personified),” *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, 1339, acknowledges Wisdom’s incarnation in Simon, but plays down its significance. See also the exegesis in J. R. Daniel Kirk, *A Man Attested by God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 127-8.

⁴⁴ On the support that Ben Sira offers towards the temple and the priesthood, see Benjamin G. Wright III, “‘Fear the Lord and Honor the Priest’: Ben Sira as Defender of the Jerusalem Priesthood,” in *The Book of Ben Sira in Modern Research*, ed. Pancratius C. Beentjes, BZAW 225 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 189-96.

<u>Characteristics of Personified Wisdom</u>	<u>Characteristics of Simon ben Onias, High Priest</u>
Wisdom possesses God's glory – 24:1	50:20
Wisdom is present in the people's midst – 24:12	50:5
Wisdom is like a rosebush – 24:14	50:8
Wisdom is likened unto incense – 24:15	50:9
Wisdom is like an olive tree – 24:14	50:10
Wisdom is compared to a cypress tree – 24:13	50:10
Wisdom is likened unto a cedar tree – 24:13	50:12
Wisdom is like a pleasing fragrance – 24:15	50:15

To summarize, Sirach is a Jewish work that draws upon the influence of the Book of Proverbs in order to impress the importance of God's wisdom, particularly identified as the Law of Moses. Wisdom continues to be personified in Sirach, taking the roles of a bride, mother, and strict teacher. She existed before all creation—which she attributes to her creator—and now she is obtainable in the form of the Law. Her ongoing presence and involvement with Jacob are observable in the cultic activities of the high priest Simon ben Onias, the human being in whom she becomes incarnate. Those who accept her discipline will find security, peace, and life.

4. Genesis Apocryphon (1Q20)

Among the earliest scrolls recovered from the caves near Qumran was the Aramaic text that scholars designate as 1Q20, the Genesis Apocryphon. Attempts to date this document are complicated by arguments proposing 1Q20's relationship with earlier portions of 1 Enoch and Jubilees. A safe range of possible dates of its composition extends between the second and first century B.C.E.⁴⁵ This nonbiblical scroll retells many stories from Genesis, including accounts of Lamech, Noah, and Abraham. In the retelling of Abraham's life, we can observe the influence of Proverbs, particularly the poetic tradition wherein personified wisdom becomes incarnate in exceptional human women. The Genesis Apocryphon illustrates Sarah—Abraham's wife—as Lady Wisdom's embodiment three times over the course of the reimagination of the Genesis account.⁴⁶

First, Sarah embodies the characteristic of Lady Wisdom from Prov. 3:13-18 wherein she offers and extends life, specifically involving the imagery of a tree. In 1Q20 column 19 the author recounts one of Abraham's dreams in which Sarah is illustrated as a date-palm and Abraham as a cedar tree. Within the dream, the date-palm that symbolizes Sarah speaks out and rescues Abraham when some men attempt to chop down the cedar (19.15-17). Thus, Sarah's decisive boldness and courage save the life of Abraham with remarkable similarity to the earlier portrayal of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs as a life-giving tree.

Second, the author confers upon Sarah a catena of praises indicating her greatness and surpassing value. While this description of Sarah recalls the superlative of personified wisdom in Prov. 3:14-15 (more profitable than silver and gold, more precious than jewels, greater than anything desirable), Craig Evans and Anthony Lipscomb have convincingly identified the lengthier passage in Proverbs wherein several praises are heaped upon the Woman of Substance as the biggest

⁴⁵ For a detailed discussion of the Apocryphon's dating and its relationship with Jubilees and 1 Enoch, see Daniel A. Machiela, *The Dead Sea Genesis Apocryphon*, STDJ 79, ed. Florentino Garcia Martinez, Leiden: Brill, 2009, 7-17.

⁴⁶ I am indebted to the insights presented by Anthony I. Lipscomb, "'She is My Sister': Sarai as Lady Wisdom in the Genesis Apocryphon" *JSJ* 50 (2019), 319-47.

influence on the Apocryphon's portrayal of Sarah.⁴⁷ The author notes how the Egyptian ruler Hirkanos admires several of Sarah's features, including her pretty face, her lovely hair and eyes, the pleasantness of her nose, the beauty of her face and arms, the perfection of her hands, and similar compliments of her feet and thighs (1Q20 20.2-6). Furthermore, he lauds her beauty in comparable language to the praise of Wisdom in Prov. 3:15, "no virgin or bride entering the bridal chamber is more beautiful than her" (20.6).⁴⁸ At the conclusion of his list of praises of Sarah, he acknowledges that despite her beauty; "she possesses great wisdom" (20.7).

Lastly, the Apocryphon depicts Sarah acting as the sister of Abraham, elaborating on the story in Gen. 12:13. The trick wherein Sarah plays the part of Abraham's sister is alluded to on three separate occasions (1Q20 19.18-20; 20.9-10, 26-27). The reason why the author of 1Q20 gives such heightened attention to the sister motif is best explained when we observe the father instructing his son in Proverbs to, "Say to Wisdom, 'You are my sister'" (Prov. 7:4). In this way, Abraham's ruse wherein he refers to Sarah as his sister identifies her with Lady Wisdom herself. Since Sarah already possesses the characteristics of personified wisdom, the Apocryphon has essentially put a positive spin on the original story in Genesis that appeared to be morally questionable.

<u>Characteristics of Personified Wisdom</u>	<u>Characteristics of Sarah</u>
Wisdom is likened unto a tree that offers life – Prov. 3:13-18	1Q20 19.15-17
Wisdom possesses immeasurable value – Prov. 3:14-15	1Q20 20.2-7
Wisdom is a sister unto me – Prov. 7:4	1Q20 19.18-20; 20.9-10, 26-27

In sum, the Genesis Apocryphon demonstrates the impact of the portrayal of personified wisdom within the Book of Proverbs by illustrating Sarah as the embodiment of wisdom. The author of the Apocryphon draws upon several characteristics of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs (ability to impart life through the symbolism of a tree, incomparable value, identification as a sister) and applies each of them to Sarah. By recapitulating the theology of personified wisdom's incarnation from the Book of Proverbs, 1Q20 has become the first Aramaic text in which incarnation appears in Jewish sources.

5. The Writings of Philo

The collective works of Philo Judaeus are more voluminous than all the books of the New Testament combined. Philo's authorial prowess, demonstrated in his fifty-two extant treatises,⁴⁹ is even more noteworthy when we acknowledge that he uses the Greek noun for "wisdom" (*sophia*) over 200 times. Since wisdom comes from God, Philo portrays wisdom's personification as a female figure as it relates to the God of Israel.⁵⁰ Wisdom is the wife of the creator God--the father of all things (*Cher.* 49), a mother, a parent, the daughter of God, and a nurse.⁵¹ When Philo allegorically comments on why a man shall leave his father and mother in order to cleave to his wife, he notes how the father is "the God of the universe, and the mother of all things, namely, the virtue and wisdom of God" (*Leg. All.* 2.49). As the personified mother, Lady Wisdom offers

⁴⁷ Craig A. Evans, "The Genesis Apocryphon and the Rewritten Bible," *Revue de Qumran* 13.49-52 (1988): 163; Lipscomb, "'She is My Sister,'" 335.

⁴⁸ Translations of the Aramaic are my own unless otherwise specified.

⁴⁹ Gregory E. Sterling, "Philo," in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Classical Judaism*, ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 1065.

⁵⁰ Sharon Lea Mattila, "Wisdom, Sense Perception, Nature, and Philo's Gender Gradient," in *HTR* 89.2 (1996): 108.

⁵¹ *Ebr.* 30-31; *Det. Pot.* 54; *Fug.* 51, 109.

nourishment and divine food in the form of nursing (*Det. Pot* 115-116). Humanity regards wisdom as their mother and as the spouse within the family (*Praem.* 59-61). She offers the necessary and sweet drink to those who will drink from her goodness and virtue (*Ebr.* 112). She is the delight of God, and the feeling is mutual, since God also is the delight of wisdom (*Som.* 2.242).

When detailing wisdom's role in creation, Philo draws upon the influence of Proverbs, Sirach, and Wisdom of Solomon in order to portray God creating through his wisdom.⁵² In doing so, Philo continues to depict personified wisdom as a female figure. For example, wisdom takes upon the roles of a mother "through whom the universe was brought to completion" (*Det. Pot.* 54). Since the creator God is the father of all things, personified wisdom acts as a mother "through whom the universe arrived at its origin" (*Fug.* 109). Lady Wisdom never creates on her own; Philo is careful to reserve the part of being the creator for God the father (*Leg. All.* 3.10; *Her.* 205). As the personified agent through whom God made all things, Philo naturally regards wisdom as preexisting and with the Father in the beginning.

Although Philo has much to say about God's personified wisdom, Philo speaks far more frequently about the *logos*—the intermediary between God and the material realm.⁵³ Many scholars rightly note that Philo seems to depict the *logos* with similar characteristics and attributes of the wisdom of God.⁵⁴ Having already pointed out that wisdom is the personified agent through whom God made the universe, the *logos* functions in a similar fashion; God created the universe and raised up the first human being from the earth with the same word (*Sac.* 8). God created the world through the agency of his *logos* (*Cher.* 127). Sometimes Philo identifies wisdom and word: "the wisdom of God, that is, the word of God" (*Leg. All.* 1.65). In other places Philo frames the two as coming forth from one another. For example, the *logos* proceeds forth from wisdom just as a river flows forth from a spring (*Som.* 2.242). On the other side of the coin, personified wisdom is explicitly called a parent of the *logos*—his mother (*Fug.* 108-109).⁵⁵ For Philo, the *logos* not only overlaps God's wisdom, but it also shifts the emphasis in the way that a Greek-speaking Jew speaks about the interaction of God in the world in the first century C.E.

The wisdom of God, for Philo, is not just a personification and agent in creation; Wisdom is outright identified with various human females within the history of Israel.⁵⁶ Without any discernable awareness of the Genesis Apocryphon, Philo also illustrates Sarah, the wife of Abraham and the mother of Isaac, as the wisdom of God.⁵⁷ In *Pot.* 124, Philo discusses the meaning

⁵² On the influence of biblical wisdom literature on Philo, see Shaye J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 42. Both Pancratius C. Beentkes, "Philo of Alexandria and Greek Ben Sira," in *Canonicity, Setting, Wisdom in the Deuterocanonicals*, DCLS 22, ed. Geza G. Xeravita, Jozsef Zsengeller, and Xaver Szabo (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 63-78, and Gregory E. Sterling, "The Interpreter of Moses: Philo of Alexandria and the Biblical Text," in *A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism*, ed. Matthias Henze (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 415-35, find evidence that Philo read Sirach. On the influence of the Alexandrian Wisdom of Solomon on Philo, see Peter Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 159.

⁵³ Maren R. Niehoff, *Philo of Alexandria: An Intellectual Biography*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 217, remarks that this definition is the broad consensus among scholars of Philo Judaeus.

⁵⁴ Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 82.

⁵⁵ Johnson, "Jesus, the Wisdom of God: A Biblical Basis for Non-Androcentric Christology," *ETL*, 61 (1985): 287, summarizes Philo's use of Wisdom and Logos: "At times Philo identified them; at times Sophia was the source of Logos; and at times it was the other way around."

⁵⁶ Jean Laporte, "Philo in the Tradition of Wisdom," in *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Robert L. Wilken (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 117.

⁵⁷ Laporte, "Philo in the Tradition of Wisdom," 117; Dorothy Sly, *Philo's Perception of Women*, Brown Judaic Studies 209 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2010), 151-2.

of Isaac's name, and in doing so, Isaac's mother, Sarah, is called *sophia*; "when God eradicated the pain from Wisdom, he gave rejoicing as an offspring." The identification of personified wisdom with Sarah is more explicit in *Leg. All.* 2.82; "Do you not see that dominant Wisdom Sarah says, 'For whosoever shall hear it will rejoice with me.'" Sarah is here clearly identified as God's wisdom to the point to where Wisdom even does the speaking for virtuous Sarah. And again, the mother of Isaac is "motherless wisdom" (*QG.* 4.145). Another example is in *Cong.* 12-13, where Philo recalls Sarah telling Abraham to bear children with her handmaiden; "And here we are to admire wisdom...she brought forth no child." Earlier, Philo characterizes this handmaiden as "the handmaiden of wisdom" (*Cong.* 9). Since Abraham is Sarah's wife, God "calls the names of wisdom and the wise man 'Abraham and Sarah'" (*Cher.* 10). Furthermore, Philo interprets Sarah in terms of wisdom by quoting Gen. 15:10 where God says that Sarah shall bring forth a son, only to immediately interpret this passage as "Wisdom shall bring forth joy" (*Mut.* 264). Sarah is not the only woman in whom Philo articulates wisdom's embodiment. Another woman, Rebekah, has "taken the vessel of wisdom into her arm from a higher place" (*De. Pos.* 146) to the point where Philo can call her "the daughter of God, that is, wisdom" (*Fug.* 51; *QG.* 4.97).⁵⁸ In addition to mentioning Sarah and Rebekah, Philo identifies Leah and Zipporah as the wives of the men who are "the lovers of wisdom" (*Cher.* 41).⁵⁹ Jean Laporte describes the appearances of the personified wisdom of God embodied in these women from the Genesis narrative as the extra-temporal existence of wisdom.⁶⁰ Philo has drawn inspiration from the portrayals of the incarnation of personified wisdom in Proverbs 31 and Sirach 50 in his depictions of virtuous women as Wisdom incarnate.

<u>Characteristics of Personified Wisdom</u>	<u>Women Identified as Wisdom</u>
God eradicated the pain from Wisdom – <i>Pot.</i> 124	Sarah
Dominant Wisdom Sarah – <i>Leg. All.</i> 2.82	Sarah
Motherless Wisdom – <i>QG.</i> 4.145	Sarah
Wisdom brought forth no child for Abraham – <i>Cong.</i> 12-13	Sarah
Wisdom's handmaiden – <i>Cong.</i> 9	Sarah
Wisdom and the wise man – <i>Cher.</i> 10	Sarah
Wisdom shall bring forth joy – <i>Mut.</i> 264	Sarah
She has taken the vessel of Wisdom into her arm – <i>De Pos.</i> 146	Rebekah
She is the daughter of God, Wisdom – <i>Fug.</i> 51; <i>QG.</i> 4.97	Rebekah
Men are lovers of Wisdom – <i>Cher.</i> 41	Leah and Zipporah

To summarize, Philo Judaeus speaks frequently about the wisdom of God. Demonstrating influences from the previous Jewish Wisdom books, Philo personifies wisdom as a wife, daughter, parent, and nurse. She shares many characteristics with the *logos*, and the two are often identified. Although personified wisdom is a mother through whom God created all things, she has also come down to earth to become incarnate in virtuous women, such as Sarah and Rebekah, both of whom Philo openly identifies as *sophia*.

⁵⁸ Laporte, "Philo in the Tradition of Wisdom," 118. Sly, *Philo's Perception of Women*, 157-8 observes a similarity between Sarah as wisdom and the figure of Rebekah, who "sometimes represents...wisdom itself."

⁵⁹ Philo comments on the Lord opening the womb of Leah by saying she receives the seed of wisdom (*Post.* 135).

⁶⁰ Laporte, "Philo in the Tradition of Wisdom," 116.

6. Conclusions and Implications for the Johannine Prologue

Having established that several Jewish writers incorporated the concept of incarnation in their pre-Christian writings, it is a self-evident conclusion that the Johannine Prologue was not the originator of that doctrine. In fact, the portrayal of Jesus as the word/wisdom become flesh is indebted to Judaism, demonstrating continuity between Judaism and Christianity.

How might the relevant passages in the Prologue be understood if we set them in the context of Jewish speculation of Wisdom becoming incarnate in noteworthy human beings? Let's begin by examining the opening verses of the Prologue. The Word was "in the beginning" (*en arche*), which recalls the Genesis creation by quoting Gen. 1:1 LXX verbatim.⁶¹ According to Genesis 1, God made all things by speaking them into existence with his powerful and creative utterance, with the refrain "And God said" repeated several times. Since both Genesis 1 and the Johannine Prologue discuss the themes of God creating with his powerful speech, bringing light to darkness, and making life, we can be confident that the author of the Prologue is quite deliberate in his attempt to point his readers towards the Genesis creation by positioning the *logos* "In the beginning."⁶² Personified wisdom was also in the beginning, preexisting all that the Creator made.⁶³ The wisdom of God—regularly personified as a female figure—preexisted creation according to several Jewish texts.⁶⁴ Proverbs 8 uses the same Greek phrase translated as "In the beginning" (*en arche*) when describing Lady Wisdom's preeminent position (Prov. 8:22-23 LXX).⁶⁵ Wisdom herself acknowledges her activity was "before [God's] works of old" (Prov. 8:22),⁶⁶ "when there were no depths" (Prov. 8:24), "while he had not yet made the earth" (Prov. 8:26). In Wisdom of Solomon, the author traces the course of personified wisdom from the beginning of creation (Wisd. 6:22). The *Fragmentary Targum* interpreted Gen 1:1 as God creating through Wisdom—a reading that occurred "In the beginning." Similarly, Targum *Neofiti* interprets Gen. 1:1 as the creative word of the Lord using Wisdom to make the heavens and the earth.⁶⁷

⁶¹ It is the dominant consensus of biblical scholars that John 1:1 deliberately cites the opening line of Gen 1:1. See F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel and Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 30-31; Raymond Brown, *John I-XII*, 4; G.R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, WBC 36, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 10; John F. McHugh, *John 1-4*, International Critical Commentary (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 6; Ernst Haenchen, *John 1*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 109; Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, ECC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 2:2.

⁶² See the references listed in Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:365; Ben Witherington III, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 52.

⁶³ Brown, *John I-XII*, cxxiii; Mary Coloe, "The Structure of the Johannine Prologue and Genesis 1," *Australian Biblical Review*, no. 45 (1997): 46; *John 1-10*, 4; Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 284; Jo-Ann A. Brant, *John*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 25. Warren Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 93. Von Wahlde, *John*, 2:2-3, observes that the thought world that gave rise to the conception of personified Word has the Jewish Wisdom writings among its closest parallels.

⁶⁴ Job 28:26-27; Psa. 104:24; Prov. 8:22-31; Wisd. 6:22; 9:9. Wisdom functions as the agent of creation in the prophetic literature as well, e.g., Jer. 10:12; 51:15.

⁶⁵ de Vries, "Targumim," 114, argues from his study of *Neofiti* and the *Fragmentary Targum* that the connection between Gen. 1:1 and Prov. 8:22 was already observed by Jews prior to 70 C.E.

⁶⁶ Richard Dillon, "Wisdom Tradition and Sacramental Retrospect in the Cana Account (Jn 2,1-11)," *CBQ* 24.3 (1962): 276; Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1992), 68.

⁶⁷ Anderson, "The Interpretation of Genesis 1:1 in the Targums," 28-9, insists that the parallels between *Targum Neofiti* and John 1:1 need to be considered by NT scholars. Coloe, "Structure," 53, correctly draws attention to *Neofiti* in her discussion of Wisdom's role in John 1:1.

Since God created the heavens and the earth in the beginning (Gen. 1:1), it is no surprise that the Prologue similarly positions the *logos*, the personified creative and powerful utterance,⁶⁸ with God (literally “the God”). The Greek preposition *pros* can here mean towards, with, by, at, or near—indicating a close proximity between God and his creative utterance.⁶⁹ In the poetic speeches within the Book of Job, the author similarly portrays words and decrees as being “with” God (Job 10:13; 23:14; 27:11).

The parallels with personified wisdom are more numerous than the references to a word being with God. In Proverbs, Lady Wisdom herself declares that she was with Yahweh before creation (Prov. 8:22-23).⁷⁰ “When he established the heavens,” personified wisdom says, “I was there” (Prov. 8:27), “I was beside him...rejoicing before him” (Prov. 8:30).⁷¹ Sirach explicitly declared that all wisdom is from the Lord and it is “with him” forever (Sir. 1:1). Wisdom of Solomon records a prayer to God in which personified wisdom is “with you...and was present when you made the world” (Wisd. 9:9). Marvin Scott concludes from his study of the prepositions connecting Wisdom with God that “we can see in these Wisdom parallels a precise correspondence to the Johannine Logos.”⁷² The Prologue, by positioning the preexistent *logos* with God, demonstrates the influence of Jewish texts portraying Israel’s God being with his personified wisdom.⁷³

The third phrase in the opening verse of the Prologue brings with it translational difficulties. Most English versions render the phrase, “and the word was God.” Since the previous phrase in the passage distinguishes God from his *logos*, it seems unlikely that the author intended to then identify the two as one and the same.⁷⁴ Grammarians regularly point out that the anarthrous “God” in this phrase functions adjectively: the *logos* was fully expressive of God or “divine” in quality.⁷⁵ Spoken words naturally reflect the character of the person who speaks them forth.

Like the personified *logos*, personified wisdom reveals God’s wise interactions with creation. Ben Sira depicted Lady Wisdom as expressing the God of Israel by writing that those who serve Wisdom will serve the Lord, and that the Lord loves those who love Wisdom (Sir. 4:14). Wisdom’s

⁶⁸ BDAG, 601 defines the *logos* in John 1:1abc as “the independent personified expression of God.” On the author intending that the *logos* was a personification, see Martinus C. de Boer, “The Original Prologue to the Gospel of John,” *NTS* 61 (2015): 448-9. Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 219, persuasively points out G.F. Moore’s observation, “Nowhere either in the Bible or in extra-canonical literature of the Jews is the word of God a personal agent or on the way to become such.” Witherington, *John’s Wisdom*, 52, provides much clarity here, “Gen. 1 is not about a personified attribute, much less a person assisting God in creation.”

⁶⁹ BDAG, 874-5.

⁷⁰ Von Wahlde, *John*, 2:3.

⁷¹ Bernard, *Gospel*, vol. 1, 2; McHugh, *John 1-4*, 9; Talbert, *Reading John*, 68; Brant, *John*, 25; C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978), 155; Lincoln, *John*, 93, 96.

⁷² Scott, *Sophia*, 96-7.

⁷³ André Robert and André Feuillet, *Introduction to the New Testament*, translated by Patrick W. Skehan, et al. (New York: Desclee Company, 1965), 874; Warren Carter, “The Prologue and John’s Gospel: Function, Symbol, and the Definitive Word,” *JSNT* 39 (1990): 38; Gail R. O’Day and Susan E. Hulen, *John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 24.

⁷⁴ Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 4 (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 35, warns of the danger of collapsing the Word and God into one, noting that the author of the Prologue has gone to “considerable trouble to indicate that an identification between the Word and God is to be avoided.” Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 29, offers a similar observation that the distinction between the Word and God have not collapsed.

⁷⁵ M. Zerwick and M. Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Roma: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2016), 285; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 269. Moloney, *John*, 42, correctly notes that the Word is “divine” and that it should not be equated with God.

detailed expression in Wisdom of Solomon indicates her revelatory function; “she is the breath of the power of God...a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty” (Wisd. 7:25).⁷⁶ Furthermore, wisdom is “a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness” (Wisd. 7:26). Elizabeth Johnson aptly summarizes the monotheistic implications of wisdom’s personification: “The Wisdom of God in late Jewish thought was simply God, revealing and known.”⁷⁷

John 1:2 repeats the information provided in John 1:1a and 1:1b; “This one was in the beginning with God.” In doing so, the Prologue reemphasizes the preexistence of the *logos*, its close ties with Genesis chapter 1, and its distinction from Israel’s God.⁷⁸ The translation “He was in the beginning” gives special observation to the personification of the *logos*, which draws influence from similar depictions of God’s word within poetic passages of the Hebrew Bible.⁷⁹ We have already demonstrated that wisdom, the near synonym of God’s personified word, is quite regularly portrayed as the personification of God’s wise actions within the Jewish literature predating the Gospel of John. Urban C. von Wahlde argues that Wisdom’s depiction as preexistent and as a female person “was never intended (or apparently taken) literally among the Jews.”⁸⁰ Lady Wisdom talks, shouts in the streets, calls forth, issues summons, builds a house, prepares a meal, mixes wine, and sends forth maidens. Various Jewish writers personify the grammatically feminine wisdom as a woman, a wife, a bride, a mother, a nurse, a prophetess, and even more generally as a teacher, owner of a house, and a child. Personified wisdom’s close ties with the word of God can be detected in the Prologue’s insistence that he—the personified *logos*—was in the beginning with God.⁸¹

When we examine John 1:14, we are offered the positive response to the *logos* that contrasts with the negative response by “his own” who rejected him in 1:9-11. By describing the positive reception in terms of the *logos* becoming flesh, the author further unpacks three concepts subtly introduced earlier; the personified *logos* came into the world (1:9), he was in the world (1:10), and he came to his own (1:11). The incarnation of the personified word of God presents a key christological theme in the presentation of Jesus within the Gospel of John. The flesh that the *logos* became describes Jesus in his human capacity, a genuine humanity that is repeatedly emphasized throughout the narrative of John.⁸² The personified *logos* that preexisted with God is embodied in the human Jesus at the moment of his birth due to the subsequent designation that Jesus is the unique son of the Father (1:14b). While there are no parallels in pre-Christian Jewish literature to

⁷⁶ Talbert, *Reading John*, 68.

⁷⁷ Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Wisdom Was Made Flesh and Pitched Her Tent Among Us,” in Maryanne Stevens, ed., *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 99.

⁷⁸ Scott, *Sophia*, 97-8.

⁷⁹ Psalm 107:20 indicates that God sends his word out on a mission in order to heal and deliver. We can also note a similar illustration in Psalm 147:15 where God commissions forth his spoken command to the earth, and the parallel line states that God’s personified word “runs very swiftly.” This imagery appears again in Isa. 55:11, in which God equates the word sent forth from his mouth with the accomplishing of “what I desire.”

⁸⁰ Von Wahlde, *John*, 1:429.

⁸¹ Lincoln, *John*, 96, highlights the importance of recognizing the act of personification in the Prologue: “such talk involves a personification of a divine function, a way of speaking of God’s immanence in the creation, God’s active engagement in the world and with Israel, without compromising God’s transcendence.”

⁸² James McGrath, *John’s Apologetic Christology: Legitimation and Development in Johannine Christology*, SNTSMS 111 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 94; James D.G. Dunn, *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus? The New Testament Evidence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 124; Sheri D. King, “Wisdom Became Flesh: Analysis of the Prologue to the Gospel of John,” *CurTM* 40:3 (2013), 183; Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?*, 382.

the incarnation of the *logos* in human beings, we have already observed several key instances where personified wisdom is portrayed as becoming flesh.⁸³ Contrary to the scholarly claim suggesting that personified wisdom texts offer no parallel, the Prologue's portrayal of Jesus as the human incarnation of the personified word of God is thoroughly biblical, deeply Jewish, and in direct continuity with many strands of wisdom traditions. Furthermore, the depiction of the *logos* as a personification of the preexisting creative and powerful speech of God shows influence from these former wisdom texts in which God's wisdom is a personification that preexists.⁸⁴ Since the personified word of God closely resembled Lady Wisdom, readers of John 1:14 familiar with these wisdom texts could very well understand Jesus as "Wisdom become flesh."⁸⁵

In conclusion, this proposed reading argues that the depiction of the Word that was in the beginning with God is deeply indebted to the portrayals of personified wisdom in pre-Christian Jewish texts. Lady Wisdom becomes flesh, according to the Gospel of John, definitively in the person of the human Jesus. She is not to be found in deceased figures like Sarah, Rebekah, or Simon ben Onias. Nor is Wisdom to be found in the Law of Moses. According to the Gospel of John, Lady Wisdom has made her abode in Jesus, indicating a strong wisdom christology. In fact, when we place the entirety of the Johannine Prologue in the context of Jewish Wisdom literature, we observe twenty references to wisdom christology:

⁸³ Aquinas, *John Chapters 1-5*, 69, points to Wisdom's portrayal in Wisd. 7:27 is behind the language in John 1:14.

⁸⁴ Lindsay Wilson discusses this crucial point in her commentary: "Jesus fulfils and embodies OT wisdom...but the personified figure of Proverbs 8:22-31 is not a description of the pre-incarnate Christ." Lindsay Wilson, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 17 (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018), 126.

⁸⁵ Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary, Old Testament Library* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 31-32, comes to the same conclusion: "Early Christians saw Jesus as a wisdom teacher and *employed traditions about personified wisdom to express his incarnation*...John draws most explicitly on Proverbs to present Jesus as incarnate wisdom" (emphasis mine). McHugh, *John 1-4*, 95; "The sense of Jn 1.14 is that all that had previously been true of the Word and Wisdom of God in the OT is from a particular moment in time, the moment of the incarnation, embodied in Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ."

Characteristics of Personified Wisdom	References in the Prologue
Wisdom was “In the beginning” – Prov. 8:22-23 LXX, 24, 26; Wisd. 6:22	1:1a
Wisdom was “with” God – Prov. 8:22-23, 27, 30; Sir. 1:1; Wisd. 9:9	1:1b
Wisdom is fully expressive of God – Sir. 4:14; Wisd. 7:25-26	1:1c
Wisdom is a personification – Prov. 1-3, 8-9; Sir. 24; Wisd. 9; Philo	1:2
God created all things through his wisdom – Psa. 104:24; Prov. 3:19	1:3
Life is found in God’s wisdom – Prov. 3:18; 8:35; Wisd. 6:18-20; 8:13	1:4
Wisdom brings light to darkness – Prov. 2:10-13; 4:18; Sir. 24:25-27, 32	1:5
Wisdom was rejected by the world – Prov. 1:20-31; Bar. 3; <i>1 En.</i> 42:1-3	1:9-11
Those who receive Wisdom are called children – Prov. 1-3, 8; Sir. 2-4, 6	1:12
Belief is the appropriate response to Wisdom – Sir. 4, 15, 32-33	1:12
Wisdom became incarnate – Prov. 31; Sir. 50; Genesis Apocryphon, Philo	1:14a
Wisdom dwelt among the people of God – Sir. 24; Bar. 3-4; <i>1 En.</i> 42	1:14a
Wisdom reveals God’s glory – Prov. 8:18 LXX; Sir. 4, 6; Wisd. 7-9	1:14b
Wisdom is God’s <i>monogenes</i> – Wisd. 7:22	1:14c
Grace is found in God’s Wisdom – Prov. 3:21-22 LXX; 4:7-9; Sir. 24, 37	1:14d
Truth is found in Wisdom – Prov. 8:7; 23:23; Sir. 4:24-25; Wisd. 3, 6	1:14d
Wisdom is associated with God’s fullness/filling – Psa. 104; Wisd. 1:6-7	1:16
Wisdom was embodied in the Law of Moses – Sir. 24:8-12; Bar. 3:37-4:1	1:17
Wisdom is in intimate relationship with God – Prov. 8:30-31	1:18b
Wisdom reveals God – Job 28:27 LXX; Sir. 4:14; 43:31-33; Wisd. 8:4	1:18c

As we can observe, the Gospel of John continues the thoroughly Jewish interpretive maneuver of portraying personified wisdom as becoming incarnate in a noteworthy human being by taking several characteristics formerly belonging to Wisdom and applying them to the human subject. The Fourth Gospel, in this regard, is not new or innovative, save in its insistence that Jesus Christ is the definitive dwelling of Wisdom.

The portrayal of the Johannine Jesus in terms of wisdom christology furthermore bears considerably on the topic of preexistence and how one should properly define it. If Jesus preexists as the wisdom of God—which is a personification of God’s wise self-expression, then the precise nature of Jesus’ preexistence, at least within the Gospel of John, is not a literal, conscious preexistence. By recognizing and taking seriously the thorough portrayal of the Johannine Jesus in terms of Wisdom, we may need to rethink other passages commonly thought of pointing to literal preexistence within the same Gospel to see what they might mean when read in light of the Jewish Wisdom traditions and the personified nature of God’s wisdom. By setting the Gospel of John in its rightful context of Jewish Wisdom speculation, we now possess further opportunities to read afresh with new and wise eyes. My hope is that this short essay encourages the readers to participate in this wise journey.

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