

NEW TESTAMENT PORTRAYALS OF WISDOM CHRISTOLOGY:
MEANING, FUNCTION, AND PURPOSE

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4th Annual USA UCA Conference

1. Introduction

Ever since Albert Schweitzer's landscape-shifting contribution *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* was published in 1906, the scholarly guild of specialists in biblical studies has felt the proper burden to set Jesus the Jew in his historical Jewish context.¹ However, to change the default setting of readers of the Bible attending churches whose roots far predate Schweitzer's work is a monumental endeavor in its own right. Even with the publication of the Dead Sea scrolls and freely accessible copies of the Jewish intertestamental literature, Targums, and pseudepigrapha, it often appears that the path of least resistance is to settle on what churches have always taught, rather than doing the difficult (but necessary) scholarly work of setting the Jesus that appears in the New Testament in these Jewish sources.

While biblical scholars sensitive to the need to set the Jewish Jesus in his Jewish context have noticed the indebtedness of New Testament christology to Jewish portrayals of God's personified wisdom for well over a century, these crucial insights have struggled to trickle down to most lay readers. The average person who reads the Bible, in fact, has little-to-no idea about the tendency of several authors of the New Testament to illustrate Jesus Christ in terms of God's wisdom. Those few lay readers who do observe Wisdom Christology in the New Testament often struggle to define its meaning, relevance, and importance. This essay seeks to offer a comprehensive survey of the many strands of Wisdom Christology that are in the writings of the New Testament. My aim is to define what the biblical authors mean by applying the traits, attributes, and roles of personified wisdom to the figure of Jesus Christ, to discern what function this particular christological portrayal serves for the early Church,² and the purpose that Wisdom Christology can serve the churches today.

This essay's method for surveying the Wisdom Christology in the New Testament will follow a logical flow in time. First, it will examine the precedent in pre-Christian Judaism for applying texts describing personified wisdom to human beings (a theological move that many scholars have come to recognize as "incarnation"). Second, attention will be given to portrayals of Wisdom Christology in the earliest Christian writings in the New Testament—those belonging to the Apostle Paul. Third, the focus will shift to the Letter to the Hebrews and its Wisdom Christology, which was likely written after Paul's death but before most of the Synoptics were produced. Fourth, attention will be devoted to the three earliest gospel accounts—Mark, Matthew, and Luke (and the possible source that Matthew and Luke shared).³ Fifth, the Gospel of John, which many

¹ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: MacMillan, 1964 [originally 1906]). Schweitzer's insistence that the Jewishness of Jesus should be recovered had some radical effects on the prevalent views of high christology in the early twentieth century: "If, therefore, we desire to gain a historical understanding of Jesus' teaching, we must leave behind what we learned in our catechism regarding the metaphysical Divine Sonship, the Trinity, and similar dogmatic conceptions, and go out into a wholly Jewish world of thought" (*Quest*, 17).

² For a thorough discussion of the influence of Wisdom motifs in early Christianity, see Martin Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 73–117.

³ James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 167.

scholars regard as the New Testament's richest deposit of Wisdom Christology, will be surveyed. And finally, conclusions will be drawn pertaining to the data collected, which will give us an opportunity to reflect on matters concerning the importance of Jewish context, the nature of preexistence, and the meaning of the loaded term “incarnation.”

1.1 The Jewish Context

1.1.1 Proverbs

The constraints of this essay do not allow for a full-length treatment of the importance of the presentation of human beings embodying the personified wisdom of God within Proverbs.⁴ The figure of personified wisdom, or Lady Wisdom as scholars often describe her due to the feminine noun *chokmah*, receives significant attention in several key texts in Proverbs 1-9. She functions in the roles of a prophetess, teacher, child, and homeowner. Within these roles, Lady Wisdom summons the readers to heed her wise teachings and instructions, which are actually the wise teachings of Yahweh himself. The wise instructions Lady Wisdom offers come forth from her mouth—an image that strongly associates the words of God and the wisdom of God. Lady Wisdom's value for the reader is particularly highlighted when Yahweh is portrayed by the sage as using his wisdom as the instrumental agent of creation. This depiction served to heighten Lady Wisdom's value since God himself used her to wisely order all created things. Since she was the personified agent of creation, she naturally preexisted all created things. The sage is careful, however, to attribute the role of Creator to Yahweh alone, not to Lady Wisdom.

When the reader of Proverbs arrives at the final poetic section (31:10-31), which illustrates the Woman of Substance, the language describing her has a familiar ring to it. The skillful sage has taken several traits, characteristics, and roles that formerly described God's personified wisdom and he has used them to shape this ideal Jewish woman that the male readers were to acquire. No less than eleven discernable traits of Lady Wisdom are now used to portray the Woman of Substance.⁵ Even the dutiful behavior of this ideal woman, who watches over (*tsafia*) the ways of her household, reflects a bilingual pun for the Greek word for wisdom: *sophia*.⁶ The portrayal of the Woman of Substance is, therefore, the earliest datable instance in Jewish literature of the incarnation of one of God's attributes,⁷ namely his personified wisdom, and this interpretation has reached a consensus by specialists of Proverbs.⁸ In short, the theology of the wisdom of God

⁴ For a recent thorough examination, see Dustin Smith, *Wisdom Christology in the Gospel of John* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2024), chapter two.

⁵ The “Woman of Substance,” like personified wisdom, is more valuable than jewels (31:10; 3:15). Both women offer good things (31:12; 2:8-9), despise evil (31:12; 8:13), are delightful (31:13; 3:15), bring forth profit (31:14; 3:14), offer bread (31:14; 9:5), are homeowners (31:15; 9:1), have female servants (31:15; 9:3), bear fruit (31:16; 8:19), speak at the gates of the city (31:23; 8:3), and laugh (31:25; 8:30-31).

⁶ Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, WBC, vol. 22 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 244.

⁷ For a thorough treatment of dating the final portions of the collection of Proverbs (chs. 1-9, 31) to the Persian period, 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.

⁸ Leo Perdue, *Proverbs*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 2000), 229; Christine R. Yoder, *Proverbs*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentary (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 299; Judith E. McKinlay, *Gendering Wisdom the Host: Biblical Invitations to Eat and Drink*, JSOTSS 216 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 127; Ben Witherington, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 34-35; JiSeong Kwon, “Wisdom Incarnate? Identity and Role of אִשְׁת־חַיִל (‘the Valiant Woman’) in Proverbs 31:10-31,” *JESOT* 1, no. 2 (2012), 181, 187-88; Karen L. H. Shaw, “Wisdom Incarnate: Preaching Proverbs 31,” *JEHS* 14:2 (2014), 47-48; Silvia Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House: Studies in the Figure of Sophia in the Bible*, trans. Linda M. Maloney and William McDonough (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2000), 21-24; Daniel J. Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011), 108; Carol L. Meyers, et al., eds. *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 303-4; Temper Longman,

becoming human is deeply Jewish, thoroughly biblical, and openly acknowledged by modern scholarship.

1.1.2 Sirach

The third-century BCE intertestamental work of Sirach draws upon the theology presented in Proverbs wherein personified wisdom becomes incarnate. Like Proverbs, Sirach details several traits, characteristics, and roles belonging to Lady Wisdom before illustrating a human being in whom Wisdom has become flesh. The figure of Wisdom is thoroughly personified in Sirach, acting out the roles of a bride, mother, and teacher. She preexisted all creation, while at the same time attributing the role of Creator to God alone. Sirach portrays God's wisdom as coming down from heaven to take form in the Torah of Moses.

Like the Woman of Substance in Proverbs 31:10-31, Sirach has in mind a human being in whom Lady Wisdom has made her abode.⁹ For Sirach, this is High Priest Simon ben Onias. The author takes eight of the traits formerly describing Lady Wisdom and applies them directly to the person of Simon the high priest.¹⁰ Noting the dependence on the portrayal of Wisdom's incarnation in Proverbs, scholars have similarly observed the theology of incarnation in Sirach: "She is 'incarnate' in her avatar, Israel's high priest."¹¹ In short, the Jewish doctrine of Lady Wisdom's incarnation makes its first appearance in Greek literature in the work of Sirach.

1.1.3 1Q20

The impact of the portrayal of personified wisdom becoming flesh in Proverbs can also be observed in the Qumran scrolls.¹² The Genesis Apocryphon, also known as 1Q20, retells several stories from the life of Abraham and Sarah. However, it is Sarah who is given the privileged role in this scroll's retelling. It is in her person that the author of 1Q20 illustrates Wisdom's incarnation. First, Abraham dreams of Sarah, and in this dream, she is depicted as a date palm that rescues Abraham from death.¹³ This recalls the image of personified wisdom in Proverbs where she is likened to a tree that offers life.¹⁴ Second, the Egyptian ruler Hirkanos praises Sarah's beauty from head to toe, and in doing so, he admits that no virgin or bride is more beautiful than her.¹⁵ This again echoes Proverbs ("She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire compares with

Proverbs, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 542; Amy Plantinga Pauw, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 32; Ernest C. Lucas, *Proverbs*, Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 197.

⁹ McKinlay, *Gendering Wisdom the Host*, 152, observes that High Priest Simon in Sirach 50 has taken the place of the Woman of Worth of Proverbs 31.

¹⁰ Simon the high priest pronounces glory (50:20; 24:1); situates himself in the midst of the people (50:5; 24:12); and is likened to a rosebush (50:8; 24:14), incense (50:9; 24:15), an olive tree (50:10; 24:14), a cypress tree (50:10; 24:13),⁸⁰ a cedar tree (50:12; 24:13), and a pleasing fragrance (50:15; 24:15). Martha Himmelfarb, "The Wisdom of the Scribe, the Wisdom of the Priest, and the Wisdom of the King According to Ben Sira," 97, argues that High Priest Simon "appears . . . almost as Wisdom's double."

¹¹ Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis, "The Cosmology of P and Theological Anthropology in the Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sira," in *Of Scribes and Sages: Early Jewish Interpretation and Transmission of Scripture* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 1:112. Other scholars have drawn similar conclusions: A. Jorden Schmidt, *Wisdom, Cosmos, and Cultus in the Book of Sirach*, DCLS 42 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), 439, concludes that "Ben Sira sees the high priest as one who transmits wisdom by his own embodiment of Wisdom." J. R. Daniel Kirk, *A Man Attested by God: The Human Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 127–28; Simon Gathercole, "Wisdom (Personified)," in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, 1339.

¹² For a lengthy treatment, see Smith, *Wisdom Christology*, 31–33. Scholars date 1Q20 to between the second and first century BCE. On the issues of dating, see Daniel A. Machiela, *The Dead Sea Genesis Apocryphon*, edited by Florentino Garcia Martinez, STDJ 79 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 7–17.

¹³ 1Q20 19.15–17.

¹⁴ Prov. 3:13–18.

¹⁵ 1Q20 20.2–6.

her"). Third, Hirqanos openly states that Sarah has great wisdom within her.¹⁶ Lastly, the story from Gen. 12:13 where Abraham acts as if Sarah was his sister is repeated three times,¹⁷ which is a deliberate echo of Prov. 7:4 ("Say to Wisdom, 'She is my sister'"). In short, the author of 1Q20 displays Sarah, the wife of Abraham, as Lady Wisdom's embodiment on multiple occasions, giving Judaism an entry of incarnation theology into the Aramaic language.¹⁸

1.1.4 Philo

Philo Judaeus, the Greek-speaking Alexandrian Jew writing in the first century CE, openly talks about God's wisdom in several of his writings, mentioning *sophia* over 200 times.¹⁹ Showing the sheer impact of Proverbs and Sirach upon his theology, Philo illustrates personified wisdom as the following roles: mother, parent, daughter of God, and nurse.²⁰ Additionally, Philo portrays the God of Israel as the Father alone, who created the universe through his personified wisdom (*Leg.* 2.49; *Det.* 54; *Fug.* 109). So far, Philo sounds a lot like the sage who composed Prov. 3:19-20.

Wisdom, however, does not simply function as the personified instrument of the Father's creative acts in Philo's theology. She also comes down to earth to become incarnate in successive women in Israel's history. Philo identifies no less than four women in whom Lady Wisdom has made her abode: Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Zipporah. Scholars specializing in Philo's writings have drawn careful attention to these instances of the embodiment of Wisdom.²¹ Philo thus demonstrates that it was quite reasonable for a first-century Jew to regard Lady Wisdom as both functioning as the agent of creation and becoming incarnate in noteworthy human beings.

Having looked at the pre-Christina Jewish context of wisdom speculation as it regards its embodiment into human figures, our findings can be summarized as follows:

1. The attribute of the wisdom of the creator God was frequently personified in Jewish literature.
2. Personified wisdom functioned as the instrumental agent of creation, without taking the place of Yahweh, the Father, who was the sole creator.
3. Personified wisdom is often portrayed as descending to earth on a mission from God.
4. All four texts displayed human figures as the incarnation of personified wisdom. In doing so, the traits, attributes, and characteristics were applied to these noteworthy persons. Furthermore, the people in whom Lady Wisdom had become incarnate continue to carry out her roles and functions on earth.

With these key facts established, we can move to the writings of Paul, which were written within a generation of Philo's works.

¹⁶ 1Q20 20.7.

¹⁷ 1Q20 19.18-20; 20.9-10, 26-27.

¹⁸ Craig A. Evans, "The Genesis Apocryphon and the Rewritten Bible," *Revue de Qumran* 13.49-52 (1988), 163; Anthony I. Lipscomb, "'She Is My Sister': Sarai as Lady Wisdom in the Genesis Apocryphon," *JSJ* 50 (2019), 335.

¹⁹ For a full-length treatment of Philo's use of wisdom, see Smith, *Wisdom Christology*, 34-39.

²⁰ Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, LEC 7 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 42; Pancratius C. Beentkes, "Philo of Alexandria and Greek Ben Sira," in *Canonicity, Setting, Wisdom in the Deuterocanonicals*, DCLS 22 (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* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 415-35.

²¹ Dorothy Sly, *Philo's Perception of Women*, BJS 209 (Atlanta: Scholars, 2010), 151-52; Karl-Gustav Sandelin, *Wisdom as Nourisher: A Study of an Old Testament Theme, its Development within Early Judaism and its Impact on Early Christianity* (Åbo: Åbo Akad., 1986), 97-98; Jean Laporte, "Philo in the Tradition of Wisdom," in *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 117; Mireille Hadas-Lebel, *Philo of Alexandria: A Thinker in the Jewish Diaspora*, Studies in Philo of Alexandria 7 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 133.

2. Pauline Wisdom Christology

2.1 First Corinthians

Paul the Apostle, one of the first authors of early Christian writings, introduces Jesus in 1 Corinthians in terms of God's wisdom quite explicitly in the opening chapter. To both Jews and Greeks who are called, Paul preaches Christ as "the power of God and as the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24).²² Christ Jesus became to us, according to Paul, wisdom from God (1 Cor 1:30).²³ Having established that Christ crucified is both a stumbling block and foolishness, Paul argues that this wisdom was not understood by the rulers of this age, for if they understood it, they would not have crucified Jesus, the Lord of glory.²⁴

When Paul contrasts the so-called gods and so-called lords with his monotheistic Christian faith, he declares that there is only one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and that there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things (1 Cor 8:6). This monotheistic creedal statement sets the one true God—the Father, as the sole Creator of all things, while also, most notably, ascribing to Jesus the instrumental role of God's wisdom—the mediating agent of the God of Israel's creative acts according to texts like Ps 104:24, Prov 3:19, Jer 10:12; 51:15.²⁵ Paul's thought was not so much that Christ preexisted as the mediator of the Father's creative works, but that preexistent wisdom was now being recognized as Christ.²⁶

A similar attribution appears in Paul's typological retelling of the Israelite exodus from Egypt and the subsequent wilderness experience in which the rock that followed the children of Israel is identified as Christ (1 Cor 10:4). We have evidence from Jewish sources contemporary to Paul that this rock in the wilderness was being interpreted as God's personified wisdom.²⁷ Since Paul goes on to explicitly state that he is employing types for us (10:6) and that he is speaking typologically (10:11), we can confidently deduce that he is interpreting the wisdom of God as a type of Christ.²⁸ The fact that Paul assigns the characteristics and roles of the wisdom of God to

²² Richard A. Horsley, *1 Corinthians*, Abingdon New Testament Commentary (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 49. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 32 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 161, notes that Paul "adopts that typology and applies it to Christ."

²³ Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 116-7; Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 164, discusses personified wisdom in pre-Christian Judaism and argues that "Paul adopts this notion of Jewish theology and applies it to the crucified Christ in order to emphasize that true wisdom is not found in rhetorical eloquence." More to the point is Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 192-3, "The Christ of the New Testament fulfills the 'wisdom' of God expounded in Proverbs and in Judaism as the way of bringing about the long-established purposes of the one God." See also Horsley, *1 Corinthians*, 52.

²⁴ 1 Cor. 1:22-24; 2:7-8. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 247, observes "God's own wisdom reveals the crucified Christ as the Lord of glory."

²⁵ Dunn, *The Theology of Paul*, 269, remarks that there are few issues in NT theology that have commanded such unanimity of agreement as the source of the language and imagery in 1 Cor. 8:6, namely early Jewish reflection of God's wisdom. Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 198, states, "Jesus is assigned the role that divine personified Wisdom has in the OT." Similarly, Horsley, *1 Corinthians*, 120, remarks that Paul "replaces *Sophia* with Christ, applying to him the predicates of the instrument of creation."

²⁶ Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 343, "What was asserted as the role of personified Wisdom in the OT... is now predicated of Christ himself." See also Dunn, *The Theology of Paul*, 274; Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 636-8.

²⁷ Sir. 15:1-3 ("Wisdom will give water to drink"); Wis. 11:1-4 ("When the Israelites were thirsty, they called upon Wisdom, and water was given to them from the flinty rock"); Philo, *Leg. Al.* 2:86 ("the abrupt rock is the wisdom of God"); *Quod.* 1:115 ("the solid rock which cannot be cut through is the wisdom of God"). Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 218, rightly notes, "Here the role given to Wisdom in Wis. Sol. 11:4 is predicated to Christ." See also Horsley, *1 Corinthians*, 136-7; W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 152-3.

²⁸ See Andrew Perriman, *In the Form of a God: The Pre-existence of the Exalted Christ in Paul*, Studies in Early Christology, vol. 1 (Eugene: Cascade: 2022), 51-54; Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 385, states "Because Paul uses *typoi*, we can understand the

Jesus in such a casual manner, often without explicitly alerting his readers to what he is doing, suggests that he expected them to already possess the general Jewish framework to conceptualize and grasp his Wisdom Christology.²⁹

2.2 Second Corinthians

While there are not many christological statements in 2 Corinthians, the few we do have exhibit Paul's ongoing wisdom christology. In 2 Cor. 4:4, Paul describes Christ as the image of God, whose glory is revealed in the gospel. "Image" (*eikon*) was a quality of personified wisdom, and many have concluded that Paul is applying that role to Christ in 4:4.³⁰ Paul goes on by echoing the creation narrative ("Light shall shine out of darkness") and indicates that this light is now experienced in the face of Christ, in whom the knowledge of the glory of God is shone (4:6).³¹ The catena of illustrations (image, glory, shining light) are all standard descriptions of personified wisdom.³² The influence of Wis. 7:25-26, where the same three themes appear in a portrayal of God's wisdom, has convinced Pauline scholars that wisdom christology is present in 2 Corinthians.³³

2.3 Galatians

Galatians 4:4 has long been identified as a christologically-rich passage in Paul. In the fullness of time, God sent the Son, born of a woman, born under the law.³⁴ Almost immediately, Paul follows up this condensed statement by saying that God sent the Spirit of his Son in 4:6. While some have argued that the sending in question is simply a prophet's commissioning,³⁵ the parallels with Wis. 9:10-17, which speaks of God sending his personified wisdom followed by the sending of his

foreshadowing connotations of other terms already used in this section, such as... the rock was Christ." Similarly, Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 161, observes that "it is not difficult to see how Paul might have hit upon the notion of identifying the rock metaphorically with Christ, since the transference of the attributes of divine Wisdom to Christ was already a common interpretive practice in early Christianity." Along the same lines are the conclusions of Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 728-9, "Paul could take for granted a background about the role of divine Wisdom as protector, guide, and nourisher of Israel in the wilderness which would readily be applied to the preexistent Christ."

²⁹ Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 638, concludes that "If [Paul] is applying a tradition which he endorses, the compressed logic is readily understandable. A tradition of teaching is presupposed, and Paul argues on this ground with explication related to the situation" (emphasis added).

³⁰ Margaret E. Thrall, *2 Corinthians 1-7*, International Critical Commentary (New York: T&T Clark, 1994), 310, "Therefore it is very probable that in describing Christ as the image of God, Paul thinks of him both as the embodiment of the figure of Wisdom and as the prototype of the new humanity." Similarly, Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 32A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 222, surmises that "the application of the concept 'image of God,'... in Paul's case to Christ, has its background in this kind of Wisdom speculation in Hellenistic Judaism"; C. K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 133, "[Paul] uses the concept of Wisdom as the means by which the unknown God is revealed"; Frank J. Matera, *II Corinthians: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 102, "Paul's description of Christ as the image of God draws upon the background of wisdom."

³¹ Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 134, observes, "Paul still has in mind the theme of Christ as the Wisdom-image of God."

³² Thrall, *2 Corinthians 1-7*, 311; Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 222; Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 132-3; Matera, *II Corinthians*, 102.

³³ "For she is a breath of the power of God and a pure emanation of the *glory* of the Almighty... for she is a *reflection of eternal light*, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an *image* of his goodness." On personified wisdom's close association with God's glory, see especially Prov 3:16; 8:17-18.

³⁴ See Martinus de Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 263, "The Son's being 'sent forth' could point to his preexistence (cf. Wis 9:9, 10, where "wisdom" is "sent forth from the holy heavens")."

³⁵ However, see J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 406, who thinks that the meaning of the son's sending is influenced by God sending prophets *in addition* to sending his wisdom, citing Wis. 9:10, 17 as justification.

Spirit, has convinced several scholars that Paul's wisdom christology is also occurring here in Galatians.³⁶

2.4 Romans

There are two relevant passages in Romans that scholars have identified as likely representing an expression of Pauline wisdom christology. The first is Rom. 8:3, where Paul argues that God sent his son in the likeness of sinful flesh. Since Romans recapitulates many of the arguments from the earlier letter to the Galatians, it appears that Rom. 8:3 is reiterating the truth formerly stated in Gal. 4:4, where God sent his son.³⁷ If this is indeed what Paul is attempting to accomplish in Romans, then he is again framing the sending of Christ in light of the sending of God's wisdom,³⁸ thereby illustrating Christ as the wisdom of God.³⁹

The connection with Christ and personified wisdom is far more certain in the second relevant passage in Romans, namely 10:6-7. This passage draws on Deuteronomy 30, where the promise of covenant renewal is depicted in terms of a closely accessible experience. One won't have to ascend to heaven to acquire it and one will not need to descend into the abyss either. In both references, Paul qualifies them by identifying the tangible promise as Christ himself ("to bring Christ down...to bring Christ up from the dead"). When these same passages of covenant renewal from Deuteronomy were discussed in Baruch at least 100 years before Paul wrote Romans, the language depicts personified wisdom as that which is to be acquired: "Who has gone up into heaven, and taken her, and brought her down from the clouds? Who has gone over the sea and found her?"⁴⁰ Those readers of Romans familiar with Baruch's presentation of Lady Wisdom's accessibility would have understood Paul as transforming the search for Wisdom into the search for Christ—Wisdom's incarnation.⁴¹

2.5 Ephesians

Ephesians offers several passages that apply traits, characteristics, and roles belonging to Lady Wisdom to Jesus Christ. This can initially be observed in Eph. 1:6, where the glory of God's grace is given to the Church in the person of the beloved son. Both "glory" and "grace" are repeatedly

³⁶ N. T. Wright, *Galatians*, Commentaries for Christian Formation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 263, argues that Paul "sees Jesus himself both as the Davidic king (and in that sense 'the son of God') and as the embodiment of divine Wisdom" (emphasis his). See also Wright's *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 4. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 658. David A. deSilva, *The Letter to the Galatians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 354-5, suggests that while the son came into being from a woman, he preexisted as the figure of Wisdom. Similar observations are expressed by de Boer, *Galatians*, 266, "God's having sent forth (*exapesteilen*) the Spirit parallels his having sent forth (*exapesteilen*) the Son in v. 4b." See also Eduard Schweizer, "Zum religionsgeschichtlichen Hintergrund der 'Sendungsformel' Gal. 4:4f., Rm 8:3f., Joh. 3:16f., 1 Joh. 4:9," *ZNW* 57 (1966), 206-8; Craig Keener, *Galatians*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 183; James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, BNTC (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 215, 219.

³⁷ Joseph Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 485, notes the parallel to Gal. 4:4, while additionally referencing Wis. 9:10 where God sends his personified wisdom.

³⁸ See esp. N. T. Wright, "The Letter to the Romans," in *NIB*, vol. X (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 580, "Paul has exploited the phrase so that it becomes a way of saying what some Second Temple Judaism said about God's action in the world and Israel through Wisdom...that God had sent, or would send, Wisdom... Here and elsewhere Paul has worked within the Second Temple Jewish awareness of God's personal action in the world and in Israel." Wright's argument is expanded in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 660-1.

³⁹ Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 483, in observing that the sending formula is widely attested in Jewish sources, draws attention to Wis. 9:19, 17 where God sends his wisdom and spirit to humans. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, WBC, vol. 38A (Waco: Word, 1988), 420, similarly acknowledges God's sending of his wisdom in Wis. 9:10.

⁴⁰ Bar 3:29-30.

⁴¹ Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 153-4; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, WBC, vol. 38B (Dallas: Word, 1998), 604-5, 614; Wright, "The Letter to the Romans," 661-2, "a general suggestion that the 'Wisdom' sought or propounded by various Jewish writers at the time might be a source for Paul's christology, we might in part agree."

offered by personified wisdom in the Jewish wisdom literature.⁴² The train of thought continues by observing how all wisdom has been lavished upon believers “in him” (that is, in Christ) in 1:8-10.⁴³ Wisdom’s glory again appears as the object of the praise of none other than Christ (1:12). Furthermore, Eph. 1:23 describes the “fullness” of Christ that “fills” all things,⁴⁴ which almost certainly echoes the activity of wisdom filling God’s creation, such as Ps. 104:24 LXX, where wisdom is the instrumental agent of God’s creative acts that result in the earth “filled” with all creation. Similarly, Wis. 1:6-7 portrays personified wisdom as having “filled” the inhabited earth.⁴⁵ Personified wisdom’s role of filling all creation is applied to Christ on two further occasions in 3:17-19 and 4:10.⁴⁶ Ephesians wisdom christology is explicitly expressed in 3:10-11 where the manifold wisdom of God is made known in accordance with the purpose that God carried out in none other than Christ Jesus.⁴⁷

2.6 Colossians

The foremost expression among the Pauline epistles of Wisdom Christology appears in Colossians.⁴⁸ The dominant scholarly consensus concerning the Christ-hymn in Col. 1:15–20 observes that the passage thoroughly illustrates Christ in terms of Jewish portrayals of God’s wisdom.⁴⁹ The christological hymn contains no less than nine characteristics of God’s

⁴² For glory, see Prov 3:16; 8:18; Sir 4:13; 6:29-31; Wis. 7:25; 9:10-11; 1 En. 49:1. For grace, see Prov. 3:21-22 LXX; 4:7-9; Sir. 24:16-17; 37:21.

⁴³ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC, vol. 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 29, helpfully draws attention to the parallel to Col. 2:3 (“all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge were hidden in Christ”).

⁴⁴ Ernest Best, *Ephesians*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 1998), 184-5, thinks that Christ is the object of this fullness based upon other wisdom christology passages like Col. 2:3; 1 Cor. 1:24; and John 1:14.

⁴⁵ The verb *pleroo* appears in all three of these passages (Eph. 1:23; Ps. 104:24 LXX; Wis. 1:6-7). In discussing the verb, Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, AB 34 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 205, argues that “Wisdom permeates all creation...the ‘filling’ proceeds from God to Christ, from Christ to the church and world, not vice versa.” Similarly, Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 74, observes, “Wisdom speculation, which is reflected clearly elsewhere in the hymn, may also have been influential in the adoption of this term, since Wisdom was already thought of as pervading and permeating all things.”

⁴⁶ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Ephesians*, Wisdom Commentary, vol. 50 (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2017), 53, is helpful here, “Messiah Jesus’ fullness has already been implemented. So...the people’s assembly, can fulfill its task to herald G*d’s cosmic Sophia, G*d’s agent in creation, to the principalities and powers of the cosmos” (spelling hers). In 4:13, the church is to be filled with the fullness of Christ. On this point, Barth, *Ephesians 4-6: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, AB 34A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 491, helpfully calls attention to 1 Cor. 1:30 where Jesus Christ is “our wisdom.”

⁴⁷ Best, *Ephesians*, 323, “[the author of Ephesians] will have been influenced in his understanding of it chiefly by the existing Jewish Wisdom literature reaching him.” Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 188, cites Wis. 7:22 where she possesses “a host of characteristics, and it is to this highly variegated splendor and gloriously intricate design of God’s wise purpose in history that the writer of Ephesians draws attention.” Schüssler Fiorenza, *Ephesians*, 38-9, draws attention to personified wisdom in Jewish literature as impacting the wisdom christology in Eph. 3:10. Barth, *Ephesians 1-3*, 345, 356 observes the personification of Lady Wisdom in Eph. 3:10 by drawing attention to her portrayal in Proverbs and Wisdom of Solomon.

⁴⁸ Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 1998), 41, admits that “It is quite clear that early Christians, Paul (e.g., Col. 1:15-20)... seem to have drawn upon the language used by Jews to describe Wisdom...in articulating the significance of the exalted Jesus.” George B. Caird, *Paul’s Letters from Prison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 177, recognizes that “there can be little doubt that the personified Wisdom is somewhere in the background of this passage.”

⁴⁹ The scholarly support for wisdom christology in the Colossian hymn is overwhelming. Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 46, remarks, “the hymn relates to the characterization which Hellenistic synagogues gave to Wisdom.” Elsa Tamez, et. al., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, Wisdom Commentary, vol. 51 (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2017), 150, observe, “The hymn depicts Christ as all pervasive, an element of every part of the cosmos, whose features and activity align with the way that Jewish Scriptures describe the feminine figure of Wisdom, Sophia.” James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 86, similarly notes, “the passage can be quite properly classified as an early Christian hymn in which Christ is praised in language used commonly in Hellenistic Judaism in reference to divine wisdom.” David W. Pao, *Colossians & Philemon*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 92, says, “Read in light of the wisdom traditions, the unique emphases of the cosmological, soteriological, ontological, and revelatory significance of Christ

personified⁵⁰ wisdom that are reapplied to the figure of Jesus.⁵¹ When the contents of the hymn are set in the context of Jewish wisdom literature, several parallels become immediately apparent.⁵²

“He is the *image* of the invisible God” (1:15a)
Wisdom is “an *image* of his goodness” (Wis. 7:26)⁵³

“The *firstborn* of all creation” (1:15b)
“Wisdom is the *firstborn* mother of all things” (Philo, *Gen.* 4:97)⁵⁴

“For in him all things were created” (1:16a)
“In wisdom You have created all things” (Ps. 104:24)⁵⁵

“whether *thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities*—all things have been created through him and for him” (1:16c)
“If you delight in *thrones and scepters*, O rulers of the peoples, honor Wisdom, so that you may reign forever” (Wis. 6:21)⁵⁶

“He is *before* all things” (1:17a)
“Yahweh possessed me [Wisdom] at the beginning of his way, *before* his works of old” (Prov. 8:22)⁵⁷

“in him all things hold together” (1:17b)
“Wisdom...holds all things together” (Wis. 1:6-7)⁵⁸

“He is the *head/ruler*” (1:18b)
“God called Wisdom the *head/ruler*” (Philo, *Leg. Al.* 1:43)

“For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in him” (1:19)
“Wisdom will not enter a deceitful person, nor dwell in a body enslaved to sin” (Wis. 1:4)⁵⁹

“having made *peace* through the blood of Christ” (1:20b)

becomes even more apparent.” Robert McL. Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 130-1, offers much of the same, “The early Christians took over these epithets of Wisdom and the Logos, and applied them to Christ.” Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 674, summarizes Paul intent, “If it’s ‘wisdom’ you want, [Paul] is saying, you have it all in the Messiah.”

⁵⁰ Dunn, *Colossians*, 88-9, offers the precise meaning here, “‘personifications’ of God’s wisdom rather than ‘intermediaries’ or ‘hypostases.’”

⁵¹ Dunn, *The Theology of Paul*, 275-7.

⁵² See esp. Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 61-72.

⁵³ See also Philo, *Leg. Al.* 1:43 (“God called Wisdom...the image and the sight of God”).

⁵⁴ See also Prov. 8:22-25 (“at the beginning of his way...I was established,” “I was brought forth”); Philo, *Ebr.* 31 (“Accordingly wisdom is represented by someone of the beings of the divine company as speaking of herself in this manner: ‘God created me as the first of his works, and before the beginning of time he established me.’ For it was necessary that all the things which came under the head of the creation must be younger than the mother and nurse of the whole universe”). Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 34B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 197, rightly notes that the original creation, not the new creation, is in view in 1:15.

⁵⁵ The understanding that God created all things with his instrumental wisdom was widespread by the time of Paul. See esp. Prov. 3:19-20; Jer. 10:12; 51:15; Wis. 9:1-2.

⁵⁶ See also Prov. 8:15-16 (“By Wisdom kings reign, and rulers decree justice. By Wisdom princes rule, and nobles, all who judge rightly.”)

⁵⁷ See also Sir. 1:4 (“Wisdom was created before all other things”).

⁵⁸ Later is Wis. 7:24, personified wisdom is illustrated as she who “pervades and penetrates all things.”

⁵⁹ We already observed that personified wisdom becomes incarnate in qualified human beings according to Proverbs 31; Sirach 50; 1Q20, and Philo.

“Wisdom’s ways are pleasant, and all her paths are *peace*” (Prov. 3:17)⁶⁰

This wisdom hymn that was sung about Christ demonstrates the extent to which the early church’s understanding of Wisdom Christology came to influence Christian liturgy and worship. Surrounding this hymn are five further passages expressing similar depictions of wisdom christology in Colossians. First, Paul prays that the church in Colossae be filled with all spiritual wisdom in order to walk worthy of Jesus (1:9-10). Second, Paul proclaims Christ, and in doing so he admonishes and teaches with all wisdom to present believers complete in Christ (1:28). Third, Christ is he in whom all the treasures of wisdom are hidden (2:3). Fourth, the line from the Christ-hymn concerning “the Father’s fullness dwelling in Christ” (1:19) is repeated in 2:9, further emphasizing Jesus as the embodiment of God’s wisdom. Fifth, the word of Christ is to dwell among believers in a manner characterized as possessing all wisdom (3:16). The thorough and consistent presentation of Jesus Christ as personified wisdom’s embodiment fits well into the letter’s overall purpose, which is strongly associated with answering the Jewish opponents in Colossae familiar with the concept of God’s wisdom.⁶¹

3. The Letter to the Hebrews

The Letter to the Hebrews, written around the time of the temple’s destruction in 70 CE, opens with a catena of descriptive illustrations of Jesus Christ. Just as we observed in the Pauline letters, scholars have pointed to Jewish portrayals of personified wisdom that appear to have directly influenced the way in which the person of Christ is illustrated in Heb. 1:1-3.⁶² The influence of Wisdom of Solomon becomes apparent upon the christology of Hebrews when closely compared.⁶³

“through whom He *made the world*” (1:2)

“God *made all things* with his word and with his wisdom he formed humanity” (Wis. 9:1-2)⁶⁴

“He is the *reflection* of His *glory*” (1:3a)

“Wisdom is a pure emanation of his *glory*...a *reflection* of eternal light” (Wis. 7:25-26)⁶⁵

“He *upholds all things* by the word of His power” (1:3c)

“For wisdom is a kindly spirit...and that which *holds all things together*” (Wis. 1:6-7)⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Also consider Sir. 1:18 (“The fear of the Lord is the crown of Wisdom, making peace and perfect health to flourish”).

⁶¹ See the discussion in James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, Christianity in the Making, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 1042-4, who demonstrates how “Jewish” opponents fit the data better than the formerly popular “Gnostic” opponents.

⁶² See esp. the secondary literature and discussion in Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 206-9.

⁶³ Kenneth Schenck, *Understanding the Book of Hebrews: The Story Behind the Sermon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 31, summarizes the current scholarly consensus, “Hebrews and Wisdom share enough parallels to suggest that Hebrews’s author was aware of this book and certainly that the two came from a common Hellenistic Jewish milieu.”

⁶⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 67, observes, “Hebrews stands within the stream of scriptural tradition that ascribes a role in creation to God’s Wisdom... a tradition that, in the New Testament, becomes focused on the figure of Jesus.” See also Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 41; Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 36 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 186; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 4-5, “This conception of Christ is based (i) on such Old Testament passages as Prov. 8:22ff, where Divine Wisdom is personified... and (ii) on a very early Christian identification of Christ with Divine Wisdom incarnate”; Schenck, *Understanding the Book of Hebrews*, 21, “the royal Son of God, the very embodiment of the wisdom of God used in creation.”

⁶⁵ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 5; Schenck, *Understanding the Book of Hebrews*, 31; Koester, *Hebrews*, 187; Johnson, *Hebrews*, 68-9; Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 42.

⁶⁶ Koester, *Hebrews* 181, also draws attention to other references to personified wisdom sustaining the universe, namely Wis. 7:24; 8:1. See also the discussion in Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 45.

“He *sat down at the right hand* of the Majesty on high” (1:3e)
“Give me the wisdom that *sits by your throne*” (Wis. 9:4)⁶⁷

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews is deeply indebted to the representation of Lady Wisdom in Wisdom of Solomon as he aims to present the son of God as the wisdom of God’s present and definitive embodiment.⁶⁸ Just like the Wisdom Christology in Paul, the roles formerly belonging to the wisdom of Israel’s God are now applied to the risen Jesus of Nazareth.⁶⁹

4. Synoptic Gospels

4.1 The Gospel of Mark

When we turn to the Synoptic gospel traditions (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), we have the opportunity to examine sayings concerning the wisdom of God that potentially go back to the historical Jesus himself. Beginning with our earliest gospel, Mark does not offer any explicit connections between Lady Wisdom and Jesus. However, several noteworthy moments in the narrative might reflect a subtle Wisdom Christology. At the baptism of Jesus, the voice from heaven addresses the son as “my beloved son” (Mark 1:11). While it is commonplace to interpret this title as a combination of various quotations,⁷⁰ the loving intimacy perhaps echoes back to Prov 8:30 where personified wisdom is said to daily be the delight of YHWH.⁷¹ For Mark, the loving relationship between YHWH and his wisdom now finds its locus in God and his beloved son, Jesus.⁷²

The same voice from heaven makes a second announcement at the transfiguration event, again referring to Jesus as “my beloved son” (9:7). After calling the son “the beloved,” the heavenly voice commands those present to listen to the son, and the motif of disciples listening to and obeying personified wisdom is a common trope in Jewish Wisdom literature.⁷³ During the transfiguration event, Jesus momentarily appears in dazzling white clothes (9:3), which may point to descriptions of personified wisdom as possessing radiance.⁷⁴

Another episode worth exploring appears in Mark 6 where Jesus returns to his hometown, only to suffer an unfortunate rejection. Those in the synagogue who hear Jesus teach begin to ask some pointed questions that might signal a Wisdom Christology. Those present were saying, “Where did this man get these things, and what is this wisdom given to him?” (6:2). This question concerning wisdom is even more crucial once we recognize that the Greek interrogative pronoun “what” could also produce the feminine pronoun “who” (i.e., “*Who* is this Wisdom given to him?”). The hearers wrestle with the content of Jesus’ teaching as well as the miraculous deeds performed by his hands, and after considering his origins as Mary’s son, they took offense at him.

⁶⁷ Schenck, *Understanding the Book of Hebrews*, 31; Koester, *Hebrews*, 187.

⁶⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *Neither Jew nor Greek: A Contested Identity*, Christianity in the Making, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 540, summarized the consensus well, “Heb. 1:1-3 is a classic expression of early Wisdom Christology.” See also Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 41.

⁶⁹ Koester, *Hebrews*, 186, 188 “The exalted Christ bears the traits of God’s preexistent wisdom...[Hebrews]... ascribes the traits of wisdom to the Son of God.”

⁷⁰ Usually Ps 2:7; Isa 42:1; and Gen 22:2 are presented by specialists of the Gospel of Mark.

⁷¹ Cf. also Wis 8:3 (“the Lord of all loves her”); Sally Douglas, *Early Church Understandings of Jesus as the Female Divine: The Scandal of the Scandal of Particularity*, LNTS 557 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 38-9.

⁷² Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House*, 145, suggests that “The baptismal event reveals that Jesus is the person in whom/upon whom Wisdom/Spirit finds rest... [Jesus is] an emissary of Wisdom, but also already as the incarnation of Sophia, as that Wisdom who is in the most intimate possible relationship with God.” Ben Witherington III, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 155, notes the connection between the dove and personified wisdom was already available in Philo, *Her.* 126.

⁷³ E.g., Prov 1:33; 8:6, 32-34; Sir 6:22-24.

⁷⁴ See especially Wis 6:12; 7:26, 29; Douglas, *Early Church Understandings of Jesus*, 39

The rejection of the Markan Jesus who bears the wisdom of God may recall instances in Jewish literature where personified wisdom was rejected by her intended recipients.⁷⁵ Jesus responds to this rejection by referring to himself as a “prophet” without honor in his hometown, as the close association between “wisdom” and “prophet” may have been influenced by Wis. 7:27 (Wisdom makes people “friends and prophets of God”).⁷⁶ In short, a reasonable case can be made that Mark intended for his readers to pick up on the various illustrations of Jesus in terms of the wisdom of God.

4.2 Matthew and Luke’s Shared Source (Q)

When we turn to examine Matthew’s and Luke’s gospel accounts, we can be far more confident in our search for Wisdom Christology.⁷⁷ There are five key passages paralleled between Matthew and Luke’s accounts that clearly depict Jesus in terms of Lady Wisdom. First, while rebuking “this generation,” Jesus recalls how the Queen of the South came from the ends of the earth to hear Solomon’s wisdom, concluding that something greater than Solomon is here, namely Jesus himself as the eschatological messenger of wisdom (Matt 12:42; Luke 11:31).⁷⁸

Second, when Matthew’s Jesus compares “this generation” and its response to the deeds of Christ, he concludes that it is actually personified Wisdom who will be vindicated by *her deeds*, thereby openly equating Christ with God’s wisdom (Matt 11:2, 16–19).⁷⁹ In Luke’s version of the same account, John the Baptist and Jesus function as the children of Lady Wisdom in whom she will find vindication (Luke 7:31–35).⁸⁰

Third, Luke’s account of the rejection of Wisdom’s messengers consists of Jesus foretelling how the wisdom of God said, “I will send them prophets . . . some of whom they will kill” (Luke 11:49–51);⁸¹ Matthew, however, puts the words of Lady Wisdom on the mouth of Jesus himself: “I am sending you prophets . . . some of whom you will kill” (Matt 23:34–36).⁸² In effect, Matthew is making it explicit that the prophetic oracles of the wisdom of God are spoken by none other than Jesus himself—Wisdom’s embodiment.⁸³

Fourth, the lamentation over Jerusalem directly follows Jesus speaking the words of God’s wisdom in Matthew’s version (Matt 23:37–39), strongly suggesting that the “I” who often wanted to gather the children together is none other than Jesus who is embodying Wisdom.⁸⁴ Luke’s account of the

⁷⁵ E.g., Prov 1:24–25; Bar 3:12.

⁷⁶ Warren Carter, *Mark*, Wisdom Commentary, vol. 42 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2019), 146.

⁷⁷ Melanie Johnson-Debaufre, *Jesus Among Her Children: Q, Eschatology, and the Construction of Christian Origins*, Harvard Theological Studies 55 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 43–80.

⁷⁸ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 513.

⁷⁹ See the discussion in Elaine M. Wainwright, *Shall We Look for Another? A Feminist Rereading of the Matthean Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 68–79. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 8–18*, ICC (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1988), 264, acknowledge that “Matthew has gone beyond Q and identified Jesus with Wisdom.”

⁸⁰ Barbara E. Reid, “Wisdom’s Children,” *New Theology Review*, May (2002), 46, concluded that this parable “can offer new possibilities of embracing Jesus not only as Wisdom’s prophet, but as Divine Sophia herself Incarnate.”

⁸¹ Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 475 comments that “Jesus asserts his elevated status over these experts on the law as a person who has direct access to God’s own design . . . the divine Wisdom that communicates to persons and that sends messengers.”

⁸² M. Jack Suggs, *Wisdom, Christology, and Law in Matthew’s Gospel* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1970), 13–15; Walter T. Wilson, “Works of Wisdom (Matt 9:9–17; 11, 16–19),” *ZNW* 106 (2015), 1–20.

⁸³ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 555, suggests that “Matthew’s change to make Jesus rather than divine wisdom the sender makes more sense.” See also the helpful discussion in Esther G. Juce, “Wisdom in Matthew: Tripartite Fulfillment,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2011), 135–6.

⁸⁴ The most thorough study on this passage is Eva Gunther, *Wisdom as a Model for Jesus’ Ministry*, WUNT 513 (Tübingen: Mor Siebeck, 2020), 16–34. Celia M. Deutsch, “Wisdom in Matthew: Transformation of a Symbol,” *Novum Testamentum* XXXII, no. 1 (1990), 45, observes, “The fact that the lament follows the oracle immediately, without so much as a transitional phrase, indicates that Matthew considers the speaker of the lament to be Jesus as personified Wisdom.”

Jerusalem lament, however, is set in an entirely different context, following Jesus characterizing his death like other rejected prophets whom Lady Wisdom has sent (Luke 13:33–36).

Fifth, Matthew and Luke’s depiction of Jesus as the one to whom the Father delivers all things—knowledge that the son mediates—almost certainly reflects the Jewish Wisdom tradition. Particularly, this tradition characterizes God’s wisdom as *hidden*, namely, something only God knows and reveals as a gift to a select few (Matt 11:25–27; Luke 10:21–22).⁸⁵ These five parallel Wisdom Christology passages in Matthew and Luke originate from a shared written source that most scholars regard as “Q,”⁸⁶ a source of Jesus material that may even predate Paul’s earliest letters.⁸⁷ This shared source would allow us to cautiously date the portrayal of Jesus Christ in terms of God’s wisdom to an incredibly early period in the study of Christian origins, sometime around the forties CE.

4.2.1 Matthew’s Contribution

Independent of the double tradition shared by Matthew and Luke are the individual contributions of these evangelists to Wisdom Christology. Matthew follows up the wisdom saying located in 11:25–27 with an invitation by Jesus for the weary and heavy-laden to come to him. To those who respond to Jesus’ invitation, he promises rest, an easy yoke, and a light burden (11:28–30). Jesus’ invitation here shows considerable influence from Sir 51:23–27 where the Jewish sage similarly summons his audience to come, acquire Wisdom, and take upon the yoke of her instruction so that they may find rest in her.⁸⁸ By employing many of the same Greek words, Matthew transformed the yoke and rest promised to Lady Wisdom’s disciples from the book of Sirach into the yoke and rest that Christ himself promises to his followers, thus further enhancing Matthew’s Wisdom Christology.⁸⁹

4.2.2 Luke’s Contribution

The Gospel of Luke offers a few additional noteworthy instances where the figure of Jesus is closely associated with the wisdom of God. Luke closely associates Jesus with wisdom from an early age, noting in two passages that as a child, Jesus continued to learn, grow, and increase in wisdom (Luke 2:40, 52).⁹⁰ As a child/disciple of personified wisdom (Luke 7:35), Jesus can provide his disciples with a mouth to speak forth wisdom that their oppressors will be unable to refute or withstand (Luke 21:15). Presumably, followers of the Lukan Jesus would similarly grow in wise teachings so that they may be equipped to carry out wisdom-enabled evangelism. As such, both Matthew and Luke build upon the Wisdom Christology outlined in the shared source “Q” with their individual emphases.

⁸⁵ Celia M. Deutsch, *Lady Wisdom, Jesus, and the Sages: Metaphor and Social Context in Matthew’s Gospel* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press Int., 1996), 64; *Hidden Wisdom and the Easy Yoke: Wisdom, Torah and Discipleship in Matthew 11.25-30*, JSNTSup 18 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 21-112.

⁸⁶ Frances Taylor Gench, *Wisdom in the Christology of Matthew* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1997), 19-20; Marshal D. Johnson, “Reflections on a Wisdom Approach to Matthew’s Gospel,” *CBQ* 36, no. 1 (1974), 44-64.

⁸⁷ The Wisdom Christology would still stand in Matthew and Luke if it turned out that the Farrer hypothesis was the correct solution to the synoptic problem.

⁸⁸ Patricia Sharbaugh, “The Light Burden of Discipleship: Embodying the New Moses and Personified Wisdom in the Gospel of Matthew,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 2.1 (2013), 59-63.

⁸⁹ Deutsch, *Lady Wisdom, Jesus, and the Sages*, 64, concludes, “Matthew identifies Jesus with Wisdom in an explicit way. Jesus is not simply the most important of Wisdom’s envoys; he is Wisdom itself.”

⁹⁰ John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, WBC, vol. 35A (Dallas: Word, 1989), 123, 133.

5. The Gospel of John

The Fourth Gospel has been shown to possess the most complete and thorough portrayal of Jesus as the incarnation of personified wisdom, so my discussion here will only be an attempt to summarize the data.⁹¹

5.1 The Prologue

Over 100 years ago, James R. Harris drew attention to the echoes of personified wisdom behind the prologue of John 1:1-18.⁹² Since then, scholars have continued to be persuaded by the many things formerly said about Lady Wisdom in the Jewish literature that are now applied to the career of the *logos*.⁹³ As many as twenty parallels have been suggested, with the following instances garnering a wide recognition of modern scholarly support:

“*In the beginning* was the Word” (1:1a)

“*In the beginning* [Yahweh] established [Wisdom]” (Prov. 8:23 LXX)

“the Word was *with God*” (1:1b)

“All wisdom is from the Lord and *with him* forever” (Sir. 1:1)

“All things were *made* through [the Logos]” (1:3)

“He *established* the world with his wisdom (Jer. 10:12)

“In [the Logos] was *life*” (1:4a)

“[Wisdom] is a tree of *life* for those who take hold of her” (Prov. 3:18)

“the life was the *light* of humanity” (1:4b)

“Take Wisdom and talk towards the shining of her *light*” (Bar. 4:2)

“The light shined in darkness, but *darkness could not overcome it*” (1:5)

“light is succeeded by the night, but *against Wisdom evil does not prevail*” (Wis. 7:30)

“[The Logos] *came to his own*, but his own people *did not receive him*” (1:11)

“Wisdom went to *dwell with the children of men*, but she *found no dwelling place*” (1 En. 42:2)

“The Word *became flesh*” (1:14a)

“Sarah is *Wisdom*” (Philo, *Leg. Al.* 2:82)

“and *pitched its tent* among us” (1:14b)

“[Wisdom’s] Creator chose the place for [her] *tent*. He said, ‘Make your *tent* in Jacob’” (Sir. 24:8)

“we beheld his *glory*” (1:14c)

“Riches and *glory* are with [Wisdom]” (Prov. 8:18)

⁹¹ The most recent full-length treatment on the Fourth Gospel’s wisdom christology is Smith, *Wisdom Christology in the Gospel of John*.

⁹² J. Rendel Harris, *The Origin of the Prologue of St. John’s Gospel*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917). The ongoing influence of Harris’ wisdom christology is openly admitted by C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 274–76; Painter, John. “Christology and the History of the Johannine Community in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel.” *NTS* 30 (1984), 465–66; Eldon Jay Epp, “Wisdom, Torah, Word: The Johannine Prologue and the Purpose of the Fourth Gospel,” in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 130; R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, Interpreting Biblical Texts (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 111.

⁹³ Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 41.

“the *monogenes* from the Father” (1:14d)

“Wisdom is *monogenes*” (Wis. 7:22)

Since the narrative function of the Johannine prologue is to introduce the contents of the rest of the Fourth Gospel, we should come to expect, rather than be surprised to find, further portrayals of Jesus as the incarnation of personified wisdom.

5.2 Christological Titles

Several of the titles conferred upon the Johannine Jesus, especially those unique to the Fourth Gospel, appear to demonstrate impact from Jewish texts discussion God’s wisdom. For example, the title “Teacher” or “Rabbi” allows Jesus to continue one of Lady Wisdom’s key functions—the communicator of God’s wise teachings and words.⁹⁴ The designation Son of Man appears to have little in common with the portrayal in Daniel 7, but a striking parallel is located in 1 Enoch, where the Son of Man is the authorized agent of God in whom “the spirit of wisdom” dwells.⁹⁵ Since the author of 1 Enoch has already portrayed personified wisdom as a rejected descending and ascending figure,⁹⁶ this offers a glimpse into several descending and ascending Son of Man passages in John.⁹⁷ Jesus’ role as the Christ, the Jewish Messiah, is central to John’s purpose (20:31), and the corresponding title “King of the Jews” appears frequently in the final chapter’s before Jesus’ death.⁹⁸ The sages who composed Proverbs and Wisdom of Solomon often associated the image of Lady Wisdom as one who empowers kings to perform their royal duties, suggesting a wisdom background for Jesus’ messianic role.⁹⁹

Furthermore, the seven titles that the Johannine Jesus claims exhibit considerable influence from the Jewish texts depicting Wisdom with the same metaphors.¹⁰⁰ Consider the following parallels:

“I am the *Bread of Life*” (6:35)

“I rain upon you *bread from heaven*...heavenly wisdom” (Philo, Mut. 259)

⁹⁴ Dorothy Lee, *The Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel: The Interplay of Form and Meaning* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 148.

⁹⁵ 1 En. 49:3.

⁹⁶ 1 En. 42:1-3.

⁹⁷ John 1:51; 3:13; 6:62. See especially James D. G. Dunn, “Let John Be John,” in *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien*, (Tubingen: Mohr, 1983), 330. More to the point is Richard Dillon, “Wisdom Tradition and Sacramental Retrospect in the Cana Account (Jn 2:1-11),” in *CBQ* 24, no. 3 (1962), 284, who concludes, “There seems to be little doubt that, in John’s perspective, the Son of Man title bears the eschatological, heavenly coloring which it received in its usage by the apocalyptic books and its adaptation by the Wisdom traditions.”

⁹⁸ At Jesus’ trial, Pontius Pilate asks, “Are you the King of the Jews?” (18:33). Pilate presses the question further: “So you are a king?” to which Jesus offers an affirmative answer (18:37). Throughout the crucifixion process, Jesus is variously mocked as “King of the Jews,” beginning with the soldiers (19:3), the Jews (19:12), and with Pilate’s inscription on the cross (19:19). The political nature of the role of messiah is confirmed when the Jews argue that “everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar” (19:12) and “we have no king but Caesar” (19:15). The chief priests quibble about the wording: “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews’ but that he said, ‘I am King of the Jews’” (19:21).

⁹⁹ By Wisdom kings reign and rulers decree justice; by Wisdom even princes and nobles rule (Prov 8:15-16). King Solomon attributes the success of his reign to his prayerful petition to God, resulting in reciting the spirit of wisdom (Wis 7:7). Solomon portrays Wisdom as the mother of scepters, thrones, a king’s wealth (7:8-12). His determination to take her to live with him grants him the propensity to govern the people (8:2-16). In Solomon’s prayer, he requests that God send forth Wisdom so that she may labor at his side and wisely guide him to justly judge the people and being worthy of the throne (9:10-12).

¹⁰⁰ Aidan O’Boyle, *Towards a Contemporary Wisdom Christology: Some Catholic Christologies in German, English and French 1965-1995*, *Tesi Gregoriana Serie Teologica* 98 (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 2003), 171-72; Sharon H. Ringe, *Wisdom’s Friends: Community and Christology in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 60-61.

“I am the *Light* of the World” (8:12)

“Take hold of Wisdom and walk to the shining of her *light*” (Bar 4:2)

“I am the Door of the Sheep” (10:7)

“Blessed is he who waits as [Wisdom’s] doors” (Prov. 8:34)

“I am the Good Shepherd...the sheep listen to my voice” (10:11, 16)

“He who listens to [Wisdom] will live” (Prov. 1:33)

“I am the Resurrection and the Life” (11:25)

“Because of [Wisdom] I will have immortality” (Wis. 8:13)

“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (14:6)

“[Wisdom’s] ways are pleasant ways” (Prov. 3:17)

“I am the Vine” (15:1)

“Like a vine, I [Wisdom] bud delights” (Sir. 24:17)

Reginald Fuller’s summary of the influence of Wisdom upon the seven “I am” titles is worthy of consideration: “The ‘I am’ sayings are properly self-predicates of wisdom, whose spokesman and embodiment however is Jesus.”¹⁰¹

6. Conclusions and Implications

The assessment of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza that states that the “earliest Christian theology was sophiology” concurs with the biblical data that we have surveyed in this essay.¹⁰² The New Testament authors, from the earliest period of Christianity, depicted Jesus Christ as the climactic embodiment of personified wisdom, applying to him her roles, traits, characteristics, and functions. Sometimes this christology is explicitly mentioned for the readers. Other times, the reference only becomes apparent to those rooted in the context of Jewish sapiential literature wherein the sages spoke about God’s wisdom. It is suitable at this point in our brief survey to draw some much-needed conclusions.

First, this study demonstrates the ongoing need for readers of the New Testament to strive to set its christological portrayals in their Jewish context. This background for the books of the New Testament not only includes the writings of the Hebrew Bible but also other Jewish works written in the Hellenistic period. Reading and studying the Jewish intertestamental books, Qumran scrolls, and the writings of Philo does not betray *sola scriptura*. On the contrary, setting the scriptural documents in their wider Jewish contexts only enhances the interpreter’s ability to understand what Scripture has to say about the person of Christ.

Second, the portrayal of Jesus as the embodiment of preexistent wisdom raises the question of preexistence and how the New Testament authors attributed Wisdom’s preexistence to Jesus. Since the figure of the wisdom of God is personified as a female, the nature of she who “became flesh” (to take the wording of John 1:14) is that of a preexistent *personification*. This is something quite different than proposing that Jesus himself preexisted *consciously and literally*. To conclude, as many of the New Testament authors did, that the human Jesus is the embodiment of Lady Wisdom,

¹⁰¹ Reginald H. Fuller, “The Incarnation in Historical Perspective,” *ATR Supp. Series* 7 (1976), 65.

¹⁰² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 134.

is to attribute to him a preexistence surely, but it is not a literal preexistence.¹⁰³ Since Judaism distinguished the difference between preexisting as an actual creation and preexisting in God's purposes, we should place *Jesus preexisting as Lady Wisdom* in its rightful category—in the purposes and plans of God.¹⁰⁴

Lastly, the obvious Jewishness of the doctrine of Lady Wisdom becoming flesh raises the important question of how to define “incarnation.” For some unitarian interpreters, the language of incarnation brings about an allergic, knee-jerk reaction. If, however, we take seriously the matrix of thought provided for us by Second Temple Jewish texts of “incarnation” precisely as the personified word/wisdom of God becoming flesh (John 1:14), or in Paul's words, the fullness of the Father's wisdom dwelt in Christ (Col. 1:19; 2:9), then incarnation language is an easier pill to swallow. Instead of a conscious being (God or some heavenly angel) taking on human flesh in a manner that results in something less than an authentic human being—a genuine descendant of Abraham, Judah, and David, we instead have personified wisdom that becomes flesh, just as she did in Proverbs, Sirach, 1Q20, and Philo. Once we accomplish the important tasks of setting Jesus in his Jewish context and framing Jesus' preexistence in terms of personified wisdom, we can embrace a more rightly defined concept of incarnation as proper unitarian theology.

The doctrine of incarnation does not belong to Nicene Christianity, it belongs to Jewish monotheists. It is time to reclaim what we have lost and take back the rightful property of wisdom-inspired Jewish theology. Only then can we truly begin to confidently read Paul and John without having to combat difficult christological passages.

¹⁰³ Lindsay Wilson, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC, vol. 17 (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018), 126, discusses this crucial point in her commentary: “Jesus fulfills and embodies OT wisdom . . . but the personified figure of Proverbs 8:22–31 is not a description of the pre-incarnate Christ.”

¹⁰⁴ See especially Genesis Rabbah 1:4; b. Pes 54a; b. Ned 39b; David B. Capes, “Preexistence,” in *DLNT*, 956; Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Pre-Existence, Wisdom, and the Son of Man: A Study of the Idea of Pre-Existence in the New Testament*, SNTSMS 21 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 11, 21; Larry W. Hurtado, “Pre-Existence,” in *DPL*, 744; George A. Barton, “On the Jewish-Christian Doctrine of the Preexistence of the Messiah,” *JBL* 21, no. 1 (1902), 78–79; Lee Irons, et al., *The Son of God: Three Views of the Identity of Jesus* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 165–66.

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