



The Divine Wisdom of God: Prefigurements of the Holy Trinity in the Old Testament Scriptures

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The Old Testament proclaimed the Father openly, and the Son more obscurely. The New Testament manifested the Son and suggested the deity of the Spirit. Now, the Spirit himself dwells among us, and supplies us with a clearer demonstration of himself. For it was not safe, when the Godhead of the Father was not yet acknowledged, to proclaim plainly the Son; nor when that of the Son was not yet received to burden us further... with the Spirit... It was necessary that, increasing little by little, and, as David says, by ascensions from glory to glory, the full splendour of the Trinity should gradually shine forth.

St Gregory the Theologian, *Oration* 31.26.

In the Old Testament God is always portrayed acting together with his Word – and for that matter – his Spirit. Moreover, God is further depicted as not only accomplishing his plan for the world through his Word but also through his Wisdom. The Wisdom of God is presented as a heavenly figure acting together with God for the world's salvation. Even though, the Old Testament does not present the Word and Wisdom of God as concrete persons, they are understood as personifications of divine activity operating in the world and with identifiably personal characteristics. More specifically, as will be shown, the most striking representations of such personifications in the Old Testament are those relating to the Wisdom of God. In other words, Wisdom takes on characteristics of a person – in this case a divine Person – carrying out actions that only God could execute. Essentially, in light of Christ's incarnation and self-revelation, it was precisely this plurality within the Godhead, hinted in the Old Testament Scriptures, that led the early Church fathers to declare God's tri-unity. Terms, such as Wisdom – but also Word – would subsequently provide the writers of the New Testament with the conceptual terminology to interpret the person and work of Jesus, divine Wisdom in person. In this article we will look at the meaning and significance of Wisdom in the Old Testament.

'Wisdom' [in Hebrew, Hokmah and in Greek, ἡ Σοφία – both feminine nouns]¹ is a complex concept in the Old Testament occurring mostly in the wisdom literature, more specifically in the books of Job,² Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Sirach and Wisdom³. In reading these writings, for example, we can quite easily see that Wisdom was with God before the creation of the world⁴ – and

indeed, will continue to exist with God for all ages (cf. Sir 24:9). Wisdom is depicted as God's 'first-born' (Proverbs 8:22-31), coming forth from the glory of God and imaging his very goodness (Wisdom 7:25-26). Furthermore, she is everywhere present in the world (Sir 24:5) and is depicted as enjoying universal dominion together with God. The book of Sirach for example, which provides one of the most extensive portrayals of the Old Testament understanding of Wisdom, describes her as divine Word coming forth "from the mouth of the Most High" (Sir 24:3) dwelling with God "in the highest heaven" (Sir 24:4) and enthroned with him "in a pillar of cloud" (Sir 24:4). Elsewhere, Wisdom is described with the following divine-like qualities: "steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing all... because of her pureness, she pervades and penetrates all things" (Wisdom 7:23-24). Already, from these brief Scriptural references, we can see not only the extent to which Wisdom is personified but also the way she exhibits characteristics of Yahweh taking on a distinctly divine role, and in so doing mediating and accomplishing God's salvific plan.

In light of the Old Testament conviction of 'Wisdom' in terms of a personified reality with divine attributes, the Wisdom literature developed an understanding that saw her primordially related to God and to creation. The Book of Wisdom, for example, provides a classic passage of Wisdom's intimate relationship with the Lord but also her active role both in the world's renewal and in humanity's reconciliation with God:

For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness. Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets; for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom. She is more beautiful than the sun, and excels every constellation of the stars. Compared with the light she is found to be superior, for it is succeeded by the night, but against wisdom evil does not prevail. She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well (Wisdom 7:25-8:1).

Not only is Wisdom understood to have existed from the beginning of time, but she is presented as having originated from the very same being as God. Moreover, from the passage just cited, we see that whilst Wisdom is distinct, she nevertheless enjoys a profoundly close relationship with God.

Taking on characteristics and functions of God, Wisdom does not only exist with God, but is also involved both in the creation of the world and in God's ongoing care for the world together with its salvation. In a famous description

1. In the Old Testament, this word occurs over 315 times in its noun, adjective and verb forms.

2. In the 28th chapter of the book of Job, the striking feature of wisdom is its inaccessibility. For example, Job 28:20-21: "Where then does wisdom come from? And where is the place of understanding? It is hidden from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air."

3. The Old Testament literature is a genre of writing influenced by the wisdom of the contemporary culture of the time that gradually came to represent an outlook which saw God as true wisdom.

4. Cf. Wisdom 9:9: "With you is Wisdom, she knows your works and was present when you made the world."

of her role in the creation of the world, Wisdom is depicted as cooperating with God in the divine work of its creation:

Ages ago I [Wisdom] was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth— when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil. When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race. (Proverbs 8:23-31).

In connection with Wisdom's continual provision for the world, the book of Wisdom urges God to send Wisdom "forth from the holy heavens, and from the throne of your glory send her, that she may labour at my side and that I may learn what is pleasing to you" (Wisdom 9:10). These examples clearly affirm Wisdom's role in creation and her presence and steadfast care for the world.

Inextricably linked to God, Wisdom is involved in the salvation of God's world. In the book of Proverbs, for example, wisdom is described as a person of inestimable value, preaching her message and leading the Israelites to salvation.

"Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice" (Proverbs 1:20)... "Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding, for her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy. (Proverbs 3:13-18).

Elsewhere, Wisdom is depicted directly speaking to the Israelites and urging the people of God to follow her in the way of righteousness making promises that only God can make possible:

I, wisdom, live with prudence, and I attain knowledge and discretion... I have good advice and sound wisdom; I have insight, I have strength... my fruit is better than gold, even fine gold... I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice, endowing with wealth those who love me, and filling their treasuries... For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from the Lord (Proverbs 8:12-20 & 35).

A most important description of her saving role is found in the book of Wisdom which explicitly states that Wisdom brought the holy people of God "over the Red Sea, and led them through the deep waters" (Wisdom 10:18). Not only was Wisdom present in the world, but she also delivered the righteous from sin. Clearly, in the passages we see an explicit identification of attributes between God and Wisdom. This would later be reflected in St Paul's correspondence to the Corinthians where Jesus Christ would be referred to as the "wisdom of God" whose crucifixion was 'foolishness' and a 'stumbling block' to both Jews and Greeks. (1Cor 1:22-24). In a way,

clearly implicit of Christ's descent into Hades, the book of Wisdom writes:

When a righteous man was sold, wisdom did not desert him, but delivered him from sin. She descended with him into the dungeon, and when he was in prison she did not leave him, until she brought him the scepter of a kingdom and authority over his masters. (Wisdom 10:13-14).

It was for this reason that the early Church would quickly discern clear parallels between Wisdom and Jesus Christ since they saw in the Old Testament obscure intimations of the saving work of Christ in God's Wisdom.⁵

Wisdom's salvific role is also expressed in terms of her ability to provide sustenance and nourishment for life. The book of Sirach records Wisdom saying:

come to me you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruits. For the memory of me is sweeter than honey, and the possession of me sweeter than the honeycomb. Those who eat of me will hunger for more, and those who drink of me will thirst for more. (Sir 24:19-21).

In chapter nine in the book of Proverbs, Wisdom invites all to a heavenly banquet so that they can eat of her bread: "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed" (Prov 9:5). In this verse, the Eucharistic and Christological parallels are explicitly clear: just as God's Wisdom in the Old Testament was food and drink providing sustenance and nourishment for life, so too would Jesus Christ, through partaking of his body and blood, provide communion with God and life ever lasting.

Whilst the Old Testament did not explicitly affirm the fullness of God's self-revelation, it did, nonetheless, provide the New Testament writers with foundational terms with which it could present the Christian understanding of God. It could be said that the Old Testament looked forward with anticipation for the fullness of God's tri-personal being. Yet the unfolding of God's progressive revelation of self finds its roots in the Old Testament. Undoubtedly, it would be the person of Jesus Christ – being "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15) – who would ultimately lead the early Church to the naming of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It would be Jesus' life, death and resurrection that would pave the way for a radically new insight for who God is. Yet, already in the Old Testament, we were able to demonstrate that indications or foreshadowings of a diversity – what would later be seen as a tri-unity – were in fact clearly evident within the Godhead. More specifically, as was shown above, the Old Testament authors of the wisdom literature saw God's Wisdom as a personification and extension of God's activity, united with, yet at the same time distinguished from, God. Accordingly, the Old Testament understanding of the Wisdom of God – together with the Old Testament understandings of the Word and Spirit of God which will be presented in the next issues of *The Voice* – lay the groundwork for the Christian Church's teaching of the distinction yet unity at the same time of God the Father with his Son and Holy Spirit. For this reason, it would be true to make the claim that in failing to affirm and appreciate the Old Testament witness of God, one would inevitably end up with a deficient theology of the mystery of the Holy Trinity.

5. It has to be said that at times the early Patristic tradition connected Wisdom also with God's Holy Spirit. Accordingly, without being identifying exclusively with Christ or the Spirit, nevertheless, Wisdom was portrayed as being clothed with divine attributes and always existing.