

THE SOCIAL ROLES OF WOMEN IN THE WORLD OF WISDOM

Carole R. Fontaine

The purpose of this essay is to explore some of the ways in which the lived experience of women of the past found its way into the wisdom tradition—the literary forms, pragmatic content and theological speculations—of ancient Israel. To this end, I will consider here the social roles played by women in the wisdom movement, the attitude concerning women which they represent in the canonical wisdom books of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, and their reflection in the literary personification of Wisdom as a woman (Woman Wisdom).

It might be useful to pause here to give a definition of 'sage', the general term which describes the social role of one in the wisdom tradition. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue consider the definition of 'sage' to be 'one who has composed a book or piece belonging to the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East'.¹ Other scholars, like R. Harris, working out of cuneiform and hieroglyphic sources, consider 'sage' under the rubrics proposed by A. Leo Oppenheim, that is, 'scribe as bureaucrat, poet and scholar', and then try to adduce evidence of Mesopotamian women who might have fit into such roles.² I will adopt a fuller definition here, reckoning as 'sages' any practitioners or tradents of the wisdom tradition, in addition to those who composed or copied wisdom books. Sages then are any persons who routinely perform one or more of the following tasks associated with the wisdom tradition: authorship, scribal duties (copying, collecting, editing), counselling, management of economic resources,

1. J.G. Gammie and L.G. Perdue (eds.), *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lane, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), p. x.

2. R. Harris, 'The Female "Sage" in Mesopotamian Literature (With an Appendix on Egypt)', in Gammie and Perdue (eds.), *The Sage*, pp. 5-6.

conflict resolution, teaching and healing. By using this broader definition, we are able to number women among the sages because of their practice, even where we cannot attribute specific texts to them.

In general, the wisdom tradition presents us with a paradigmatic illustration of the great paradox observed elsewhere in patriarchal literature with respect to women: that the elevated female figures such as Woman Wisdom (Prov. 1-9) or the Woman of Worth (Prov. 31.10-31) may be inversely proportional to the truth of real women's lives. That is, such fine figures may just as easily be an index of women's lack of power and status as a reflection of a gentler, kinder social reality for women: they must always be examined on a case-by-case basis in conjunction with whatever ethnographic and economic data that can be adduced.¹

It is possible to explain the presence of characters like Woman Wisdom in such androcentric contexts as an example of male 'bad conscience': 'Wisdom: can't live with Her, can't live without Her'. As we shall see below, these exalted representations serve to bind up a variety of ideas about women and goddesses and give expression to their role in the great scheme of things.² One of the most remarkable things about such figures in Israel's traditions is their mobility and strength of presence. They move easily between the public domain of the gates, walls and market-places and the private domain of women's worlds, and they do so, for the most part, without the typical female humility formulae. Woman Wisdom stretches out her hand without asking permission to do so. While that may not have been reflective of her ancient sisters' condition, it is a goal toward

1. For example, veneration of the Virgin Mary in historical Catholicism does not correlate positively with a high value placed on women or their freedom to fill a variety of high-status roles. Likewise, the 'Cult of True Womanhood' in Victorian England coincided with attempts to restrict the social roles of women to the private domain of the household.

2. C. Camp, 'Woman Wisdom as Root Metaphor: A Theological Consideration', in K.G. Hoglund, E.F. Huwiler, J.T. Glass and R.W. Lee (eds.), *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in Honor of Roland E. Murphy*, O. Carm. (JSOTSup, 58; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), pp. 45-76.

which her modern daughters may press.¹

It should be remembered, however, that these literary figures, as well as the social roles of women which influenced them, are all seen from the male sages' perspective; the 'facts' about women's lives recorded here may express only a partial truth, or at least the only parts the sages felt to be worthy of comment. In general, however, wisdom literature is considered to be more closely related to social reality because of its pragmatic concerns.²

1. Preliminary Considerations

One of the peculiarities of dealing with Israel's wisdom tradition is the special need to consider the effects of 'foreign influence' on these texts and their worldview because the subject materials so patently demand this methodological awareness. One cannot speak of wisdom without speaking of Egypt or Mesopotamia, though speaking of wisdom in those 'primary'³ societies is a rather different enterprise, requiring differing areas of expertise of their interpreters. The sages were comparative thinkers: because of their association 'vertically' through time with 'tradition' and 'horizontally' (across cultures during

1. There is a modern 'proverb' to be sought here: if Wisdom's waiting hand is ignored, should human women be surprised when their testimony goes unheard? Is the daughter greater than the mother? Like mother, like daughter... our mother was a Hittite...

2. C.R. Fontaine, "'A Heifer from Thy Stable': On Goddesses and the Status of Women in the Ancient Near East", in A. Bach (ed.), *The Pleasure of Her Text: Feminist Readings of Biblical and Historical Texts* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), p. 72.

3. 'Primary' societies are those which influence the civilizations around them, for whatever reason. In the ancient Near East, Egypt and Mesopotamia represent the primary societies, based on the economic and cultural advantages brought by settling next to major rivers, the Nile, the Euphrates and the Tigris. Israel and those other cultures occupying the 'land-bridge' between the two great river-valley civilizations are 'secondary': their cultures were first incubated in the primary areas, and then transmitted by trade, emigration and war. Naturally, 'secondary' cultures routinely modify the received traditions of their more fortunate neighbors, introducing changes which better harmonize with their unique experience.

the same time period) with wisdom contacts in other cultures, they did not perform their intellectual activities in a theological, ethical, literary or practical vacuum. In the midst of Israel's culture which emphasized its theological 'uniqueness', the sages worked with the connections and similarities of their teachings to those of their neighbors, creating a kind of intellectual ecumenism, as it were. They were 'wise' precisely because they honed their thought on the wisdom of the ages and the experience of the cultures that preceded and surrounded them.

Similarly, our 'ancient ecumenicists' in Israel demand of interpreters a sensitivity to literary issues since we are so clearly dealing with artistic products of verbal artisans, and not merely with a tradition of scribal copies. Literary artistry was a matter of great concern to our authors, and so a literary method is in order to study the language acts which they produced.

One more introductory note is necessary when we think of the social locations and social roles of women sages in Israel. The origin of the wisdom traditions in the scribal bureaucracy and schools of the surrounding primary river valley cultures are well documented, but the situation is not nearly so clear in Israel. The diversity of the origins of Israel's wisdom traditions may be blurred if we make normative the experience of Mesopotamia and Egypt where sages were elite servants of the royal bureaucracy. It is easy to 'underobserve' the role of the 'folk'—certainly the group among whom most of our women sages must be sought—in the origins of Israel's wisdom, elusive creatures that they are. In this respect, questing after the 'folk sage' is a task beset by the same methodological problems as the task of searching out the 'female sage'. While it is true that we may certainly associate the formation of some of our texts with the needs of the royal establishment, the vigorous stream of folk wisdom that fed into the great river of Israel's wisdom often receives less attention than it ought, thus concealing the importance of Israel's tribal heritage in shaping the later monarchic experiment. With respect to the educational enterprise of training sages to carry on the wisdom tradition, many scholars have underestimated what must have been the amazing impact of the movement from cuneiform or hieroglyphic syllabaries to the more or less straightforward phonetic alphabet of Hebrew

used by our Israelite tradents of later times. The scribal education demanded for the mastery of hieroglyphics in Egypt and the diplomatic languages of Mesopotamia was still necessary in Israel to some extent for the purposes of diplomacy. However, this need not have rendered the rest of the non-elite and undereducated population functionally illiterate with respect to their own language. There is no reason to assume that the folk—women included—were without insights into human experience or lacked the linguistic capacities to give verbal expression to such gleanings in the form of traditional sayings, parables, riddles, and so on. Nor were the folk—women included—without the daily conflicts that make proverbial forms so useful for settling disputes in traditional societies; a survey of proverb use among the various peoples of Africa indicates how vital such a folk tradition can be—even in the absence of scribes!¹ Indeed, the Hebrew Bible's indecision on the subject of the monarchy and its interpretation in later tradition may be a survival of the sentiments of the non-elite when considering a form of governance which not only struck at the heart of some of the basic formulations of Yahwism, but ultimately failed to protect its people from surrounding cultural predators. Such ambivalence on the part of the average person in the gate suggests that folk wisdom may not have died a quiet death just because the fancy scribes in Jerusalem had appropriated a few good Egyptian instructions and were now in business for the king.

2. Sage Women in the Private Domain

Wife and Mother as Sage

If women were not normally included among those who might receive a scribal education and the training needed to become an official court scribe, author or counsellor, then where should the

1. See C.R. Fontaine, *Traditional Sayings in the Old Testament: A Contextual Study* (Bible and Literature, 5; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982) for further discussion, as well as Claus Westermann's *Wurzeln der Weisheit: Die ältesten Sprüche Israels und anderer Völker* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990).

search for their connections to the wisdom movement begin? As is often the case in the study of women's lives in the past, we look for women's participation first in the arena to which patriarchal culture routinely assigns them, the 'private domain' of the home.

Initially, we may seek the association of women with 'wisdom' by surveying the traditional roles of wife and mother.¹ The poem in praise of the 'Woman of Worth' (a more literal translation than 'virtuous wife') in Prov. 31.10-31 summarizes well:

A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than
jewels.

The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no
lack of gain.

She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.

She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands.

She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from
far away.

She rises while it is still night and provides food for her
household and tasks for her servant-girls.

She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she
plants a vineyard.

She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong.

She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp
does not go out at night.

She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the
spindle.

She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to
the needy.

She is not afraid for her household when it snows, for all her
household are clothed in crimson.

She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and
purple.

Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among
the elders of the land.

She makes linen garments and sells them, she supplies the
merchant with sashes.

1. C.R. Fontaine, 'The Sage in Family and Tribe', in Gammie and Perdue (eds.), *The Sage*, pp. 155-64; and C. Camp, 'The Female Sage in Ancient Israel and in the Biblical Wisdom Literature', in Gammie and Perdue (eds.), *The Sage*, pp. 185-204.

Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.

She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.

Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her:

'Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all'.

Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates (NRSV).

As we often see reported in the biblical literature, women were the managers of the private world of the home. Obviously, women's sexual services were important to the men of patriarchal societies for providing legitimate male heirs to inherit the father's name and estate. Even beyond that, however, women were critical to the successful functioning of any extended family. Proverbs 31 shows very well the manifold tasks that fell to the good wife or 'Woman of Worth'.¹ Not only did this worthy woman work herself at the day-to-day tasks of 'women's work' such as spinning, weaving and sewing, she is also shown managing her household so well that none of her servants are idle and no one fears 'shortfalls' as fruitful seasons draw to a close. Along with these managerial tasks of economic allocation, she also serves as teacher and even finds time to do good works for the poor. Most interestingly, in her role of wife she goes beyond the boundaries of her own front door: she sells goods she has produced, makes important purchases of real estate, and puts in crops according to her plans (vv. 16, 24).

Although not specifically mentioned in this passage, the mother's roles in teaching, counselling and conflict resolution within the home are also tasks which qualify her as a practitioner of wisdom. The 'mother's teaching' is mentioned in Prov. 1.8 and 6.20, references which are followed up by acknowledging a mother's sorrow when her child does not heed her

1. See C. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Bible and Literature, 11; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1985), pp. 79-96.

instruction (10.1 and, by implication, 15.20). While no examples of the mother's 'Torah' survive with the exception of the passage by the queen mother cited below, the fact that this pedagogy is always mentioned as parallel to the 'father's instruction/commandment' (1.8; 6.20) shows that it was held in high esteem in this traditional society. The mother's role as the instructor of very young children of both sexes, girls of all ages, and the female domestic work force is one of the great sources of her power, making her an 'authority' within the household.

Part of the mother's teaching tasks no doubt found further expression in counselling and conflict resolution, as she modelled effective ways of settling disputes and managing the men of the extended family. While modern persons may look askance at some of the 'crafty' and manipulative behaviour displayed by the wives and mothers portrayed in the biblical tradition, it should be remembered that the use of 'indirect means'—such as gossip, shaming behavior, untruths, promotion of 'harem' rivalries and so on—are typical strategies employed by those who do not have direct access to power.¹ When wives and mothers are not allowed to give peremptory orders, they readily turn to other methods to make their influence felt. In fact, the counsel of women was valued in Israel, if we are to attribute any credence at all to the stories handed down to us. Husbands who do *not* heed the subtle advice of their wives—like Job and Nabal—are doomed to endless repetition of narrative episodes (Job²), or disappear from the story altogether (Nabal).

We may also add to the roles performed by wife and mother those of 'healer' and 'mourner', both of which are particularly associated with wisdom (see discussion below, section 3). It is the mother, wife and sister to whom the care of sick family

1. E. Fuchs, 'Who is Hiding the Truth? Deceptive Women and Biblical Androcentrism', in A. Yarbro Collins (ed.), *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 137-44; and "'For I Have the Way of Women": Deception, Gender, and Ideology in Biblical Narrative', *Semeia* 42 (1988), pp. 68-83; see also Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, pp. 124-39.

2. C.R. Fontaine, 'Folktale Structure in the Book of Job: A Formalist Reading', in E. Follis (ed.), *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry* (JSOTSup, 40; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), pp. 215-16.

members is assigned (see the unfortunate case of Tamar in 2 Sam. 13), so that the activity of nursing was probably taught to daughters and female slaves along with other parts of the mother's Torah. Likewise, the women of the household are mourners par excellence: the Wise Woman of 2 Sam. 14.2 pretends to be mourning in order to carry out her plan to prick the conscience of the king; the harlots of 1 Kgs 3.16-28 implicitly bring their cause for mourning over a dead child to the wise king for a settlement. Women's association with illness and grieving is attested in the earliest materials available from the ancient Near East: when Dumuzi, the shepherd fertility god of Sumerian Uruk, goes to the underworld, his wife, the goddess Inanna, 'weeps bitterly for her young husband'; Sirtur, Dumuzi's mother, weeps for him, saying 'My heart plays the reed pipe of mourning', and his sister Geshtinanna wanders the city weeping for her lost brother.¹ Indeed, the grief of Geshtinanna moves Inanna to accept her offer of taking Dumuzi's place in death for half of every year, thus restoring fertility to the land. The mourning of devoted sisters and daughters is attested in Ugaritic epics as well.²

The positive roles, mostly drawn from the world of the household, which qualify average women as practitioners of wisdom are also balanced by negative ones in the thinking of the sages. While a good wife (and by implication, mother) might be seen as a gift 'from the Lord' (Prov. 18.22; 19.14), a wife who nags, brings shame, or acts foolishly is just as much of a possibility, and a dreadful one at that (Prov. 11.16, 22; 12.4; 14.1; 19.13; 21.9, 19; 25.24). The good wife and mother whose sexuality, when properly contained—that is, kept under the control of men—brings life, is inverted in the negative character of the 'adulteress' or 'loose' or 'foolish woman', who appears as the composite figure of 'Woman Stranger', the evil twin of

1. D. Wolkstein and S.N. Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), pp. 85-89.

2. M. Coogan (ed. and trans.), 'Aqhat', in *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1978), p. 41; cf. also 'Kirta' p. 69.

Woman Wisdom, in Proverbs 1-9.¹ While women in their proper roles (wife, mother, daughter, sister) within the home might well be viewed as 'flowing water'—almost always a symbol of life in the arid Near East—by the sages (Prov. 5.15-20), their negative counterparts are seen as deadly. Those who follow Woman Stranger's ways 'go down to death' (Prov. 2.18-19; 5.5-6, 22.14), never to be seen again. Like the efficacious wisdom on the tongue of the good woman, crafty language use is a hallmark of this negative incarnation of the wise wife: the words of the adulteress or loose woman are 'smooth', dripping honey (Prov. 5.3; 7.3). For men who believe that 'Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits' (Prov. 18.21, RSV), woman Stranger's command of language—the power of the tongue—is damning indeed, and a clear indication that she embodies the inversion of true, life-giving wisdom. Consider the male sage's warning against her in Prov. 7.4-27 (NRSV):

Say to wisdom, 'You are my sister,' and call insight your
intimate friend,
that they may keep you from the loose woman, from the
adulteress with her smooth words.
For at the window of my house I looked out through my
lattice,
and I saw among the simple ones, I observed among the
youths, a young man without sense,
passing along the street near her corner, taking the road to her
house
in the twilight, in the evening, at the time of night and
darkness.
Then a woman comes toward him, decked out like a prostitute,
wily of heart.
She is loud and wayward; her feet do not stay at home;
now in the street, now in the squares, and at every corner she
lies in wait.
She seizes him and kisses him, and with impudent face she
says to him:

1. See C. Camp's excellent study of this multivalent symbol, 'What's So Strange about the Strange Woman?', in D. Jobling, P.L. Day and G.T. Sheppard (eds.), *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1991), pp. 17-31.

'I had to offer sacrifices, and today I have paid my vows;
so now I have come out to meet you, to seek you eagerly, and I
have found you!

I have decked my couch with coverings, colored spreads of
Egyptian linen;

I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon.

Come, let us take our fill of love until morning; let us delight
ourselves with love.

For my husband is not at home; he has gone on a long journey.

He took a bag of money with him; he will not come home
until full moon.'

With much seductive speech she persuades him; with her
smooth talk she compels him.

Right away he follows her, and goes like an ox to the slaughter,
or bounds like a stag toward the trap

until an arrow pierces its entrails. He is like a bird rushing into
a snare, not knowing that it will cost him his life.

And now, my children, listen to me, and be attentive to the
words of my mouth.

Do not let your hearts turn aside to her ways; do not stray into
her paths,

for many are those she has laid low, and numerous are her
victims.

Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of
death.

We can see here that for the sage, this female figure is an embodiment of all the wifely virtues turned upside down. Instead of 'opening her mouth with wisdom' (Prov. 31.26), this woman uses her smooth words to proposition her innocent prey, acting as a sort of tutor in folly. In so far as she uses language so seductively, she is a kind of perverse, if unofficial, 'author'. She understands well the ways of her household, and uses that knowledge to aid her in her wicked pursuits. She understands her religious obligations (7.14), as well as the delights of seduction (vv. 15-16), so that she represents a formidable figure of 'anti-wife', one who brings death and not life to the men she seeks.

Looking at the imagery used by the male sages to describe the figures of wife and mother and loose woman or seductress, we may observe a basic similarity in the sage's depiction of each. The good woman is a 'well', 'cistern', 'flowing water', and a 'fountain' whose love 'intoxicates' her husband (Prov. 5.15-20,

NRSV). Wells and cisterns were dug out through intensive male labor: fountains and springs represent water which comes to surface usefulness without such human interventions, but even there the water must then be channeled or managed by the communities who make use of it. In contrast, the adultress or seductress is consistently associated with Sheol, the marshy pit of the underworld inhabited by the dead. The difference is one of degree for the sages: female reality is associated with murky, underground places of hidden power. Men who dig down only a little bit—as difficult as the digging may be—may find a well that gives flowing water, and hence, life, even though that life comes with the risks associated with loss of control (that is, 'intoxication'). Even such life-giving waters must be rigorously controlled by men. Those unfortunate males who penetrate too deeply into the secret places of female sexuality dig themselves into a cosmic pit from which there is no emergence. In both cases, the images evoke the powerful male fear of being swallowed up and washed away by watery caverns of female potency. Only intensive labor or complete avoidance will serve men when they venture into female domains.

3. *Women Sages in the Public Domain*

Women as Authors and 'Official' Sages

According to cuneiform specialist Rivkah Harris, it is highly unlikely that many Mesopotamian or Egyptian women ever received full scribal educations (or would have wanted to, had it been possible).¹ Since knowledge is power, and training is the key to success, this acted as an effective limit on the roles females could fill in their societies. As always, upper-class and lower-class women might experience more freedom of choice and movement.² Women as a group tend to do better in societies

1. Harris, 'Female Sage', pp. 3-10, where she comments that 'female' and 'sage' were contradictions in terms in the ancient Near Eastern world.

2. Upper-class women have more social possibilities open to them because they are related to males of high status who may make exceptions for them, die and leave them in power, or bequeath significant economic resources into their control. Women of low status usually

which are more egalitarian, less ranked and stratified so that distinctions between the public 'assigned' power of men and the private, informal power of women blur. Because of this, ancient Israel with its two 'pioneer' periods of the Settlement and post-exilic times actually offered more scope for women's inclusion in the world of wisdom. That is, we are able to look for women sages in the same kinds of situations, often informal, where one might look for traditional 'folk' sages.

With respect to authorship of wisdom texts, scholars have not yet decided whether dictating one's text rather than writing it down oneself (for which a full-blown scribal education would have been a prerequisite) compromises the quality of the authorship—in our minds, if not in the minds of the ancients. There are a variety of folk genres whose composition is usually by females—lullabies, working songs, love songs, and so on—and so we must be prepared to see some argue for women as authors even where their work may not have survived. As most working on these topics have found, in the absence of data on the invisible members of society—women, children, slaves—we must work by, as Harris puts it, 'controlled inference'.¹ We also must evaluate better the meaning of slavery and low status and how this intersects with our understanding of wisdom tradents whom we implicitly perceive as having high status roles. If women trained as scribes to serve royal princesses or priestesses—at Mari or in the cloisters of Sippar—were slaves, albeit ones of high status, how shall we number them among the wise? Are they only 'semi-sage', because they are slaves, or are they perhaps 'super-sage', because they practice their craft without the full authorizing qualities of entitlement that come when a free man engages in his profession? How does the fact that such women scribes, according to Harris, usually served only other women affect our ascription of status to them?²

These questions aside, it is still true that some few women *did* find their way into the scribal elite and may even be reckoned as

have more freedom of movement than middle-class women, precisely because their low status frees them from the social codes governing 'respectability'.

1. Harris, 'Female Sage', p. 3.
2. 'Female Sage', p. 7.

successful practitioners of that high literary art. Enheduanna of Ur, high priestess of the Nanna, the moon god, and devotee of Inanna, goddess of love and war, composed a series of hymns to temples, and a great poem of praise to her goddess.¹ Her work became a definitive part of the scribal corpus and represents the first non-anonymous poetry in historical record. One female scribe of Mesopotamia, Ninshapatada of Old Babylonian Uruk, produced a composition which was so excellent an example of the scribal tradition that her work found its way into the official 'canon' at Larsa and was used to train subsequent scribes in literary technique. In modern times, too, the historical information which she so carefully incorporates into her flattering appeal to King Rim-Sin to spare her conquered city of Durum is considered invaluable for the reconstruction of historical dates and scribal conventions.² Her crafty rhetoric, used on behalf of her folk group to achieve the very desirable end of continued existence, shows that she was well educated by scribal school and female experience. Other Mesopotamian women, as well as some Egyptians, may also have composed extant texts and some served as scribes.³

Within the Hebrew Bible, we cannot rule out the possibility that women sages may have contributed to the stock of folk proverbs which found their way into the book of Proverbs, nestled among the artistically crafted two-lined proverbs created (most probably) by the court sages. It is not possible at present, however, to point to any one proverb and say with certainty that it was authored by a woman, since the content of a proverb is not an invariable guide to its origin. Proverbs about the family, or herbcraft, for example, need not be composed by women, although they reflect the (supposed) interests of women. Certainly, if women had written many of the proverbs found in

1. Fontaine, 'Heifer', pp. 77-80.

2. Harris, 'Female Sage', p. 8; and W.W. Hallo, 'Sumerian Historiography', in H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld (eds.), *History, Historiography, and Interpretation: Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Literatures* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1983), pp. 17-20.

3. Harris, 'Female Sage', pp. 9-10, 14-17; and W.W. Hallo, 'The Women of Sumer', in D. Schmandt-Besserat (ed.), *The Legacy of Sumer* (Bibliotheca Mesopotamica, 4; Malibu, CA: Undena, 1976), pp. 30-33.

that book, we would expect to see far more about drunken, violent husbands, and less emphasis on the 'nagging wife' as the sole scapegoat for domestic discord (cf. Prov. 21.9, 19; 25.24; 27.15).

There is, however, one instance within Israel's wisdom tradition where we might reasonably posit female authorship, or at least composition, if not the actual writing down of the text. This is the rather remarkable example of an 'Instruction' attributed to the queen mother of King Lemuel in Prov. 31.1-9. The instruction form is a unified composition known from Egypt, and it may consist of proverbs, admonitions and prohibitions, as well as pertinent examples. A king or aging bureaucrat undertook to place his life-wisdom into a persuasive literary piece that he then passed on to his successors. That this form found its way to Israel is apparent in the number of fatherly instructions by the sages which add structure to Proverbs 1-9 and Proverbs 22-24 (1.1-19; 2.1-22; 3.1-12, 21-35; 4.1-9, 10-19, 20-27, 5.1-23; 6.20-35; 7.1-27; 22.17-24.22). There, the instructions cited deal primarily with the topics necessary for a young man to make his way in the world of court intrigue and professional circles. Table-manners, 'professionalism', and warnings against the wiles of women are among typical themes found in the form. Let us listen to the words of the royal mother.

The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him: No, my son! No, son of my womb! No, son of my vows!

Do not give your strength to women, your ways to those who destroy kings.

It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink; or else they will drink and forget what has been decreed, and will pervert the rights of all the afflicted.

Give strong drink to one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress;

let them drink and forget their poverty, and remember their misery no more.

Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute.

Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy (NRSV).

The queen mother who speaks in Proverbs 31 gives ample evidence of 'the mother's Torah' ('teaching') spoken of elsewhere in Proverbs (1.8b; 6.20) when she addresses her princely son. Like the male sages, she makes use of direct address using familial terms ('No, my son! No, son of my womb! No, son of my vows!', 31.2) and feels free to make direct admonitions and prohibitions, making vigorous use of imperatives (vv. 3, 6, 8, 9), showing that she has authority to speak and expects her words to be heard and obeyed. Again, like the male authors of instructions, she takes up the usual themes seen in the genre: warnings against drunkenness and women (vv. 3-5), and advice about performing the traditional protective tasks assigned to rulers (vv. 8-9). Her instruction is particularly interesting for its ability to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate contexts for a single act: the powerful ought *not* to drink because it will impair their execution of their duties; the powerless, however, might well profit from a drink in which to drown their woes (vv. 4-7). Prov. 26.4-5 shows a similar attention to the variable nature of experience in its counsel for handling fools, but the queen mother of Proverbs 31 introduces a compassionate and thoughtful note not apparent in the other citation. The queen mother presented here is not the only queen known to us who uses the language of wisdom to achieve her goals: Queen Puduḥepa of the Late Bronze Age Hittite empire (see below) also used proverbs to achieve her goals in dealing with the gods.¹

The androcentric Hebrew Bible is not always so positively disposed to view the activity of its queens, however, especially when they show themselves crafty enough to manipulate the legal traditions to their own ends. Just as we have the positive queen mother of Proverbs, she is balanced by the negative portrait of another queen mother, Jezebel of Israel (1 Kgs 16.31-20.20; 2 Kgs 9.30-37). Jezebel's pursuit of her own religious 'reforms' is a source of scandal to the writers of Kings, but it is in the episode of Naboth's vineyard that we see the Israelite conservatives' fears of educated foreign women fully realized.

1. C.R. Fontaine, 'Queenly Proverb Performance: The Prayer of Puduḥepa (KUB XXI, 27)', in Høglund *et al.* (eds.), *The Listening Heart*, pp. 95-126.

In 1 Kgs 21.5-16, we see Jezebel taking matters into her own hands to overturn Israelite customs of land tenure while her husband sulks. She achieves her aims by writing letters in Ahab's name, appropriating his seal to authorize her orders and, furthermore, her entire plot hinges on a sophisticated understanding of community laws and customs which she subtly manipulates for nefarious ends. While commentators dispute whether Jezebel actually conceived of the plan on her own, or wrote the letters herself, it cannot be denied that the authors of this text could fully envision her acting with a kind of perverse wisdom and authority. Jezebel, of course, is only one of the foreign queens who are roundly castigated by the historical writers of the Hebrew Bible for their excessive influence as authoritative counsellors to their innocent husbands (cf. 1 Kgs 11.1-8; 2 Kgs 11).

Wise Women: Counsellors, Healers and Mourners

Many of the roles we have already seen women filling within the relatively private world of the home take them across that threshold and into the 'public domain' of the community at large. Women managing their household's economic stores might venture into buying and selling (Prov. 31.10-31; see discussion above); wives and mothers known for their common-sense teachings and ability to resolve conflicts might be drafted into the service of their neighborhoods, towns or cities. Such women are found in 2 Samuel as 'wise women', and their sisters are well attested in the Indo-European culture of the Hittites, a people who occupied Anatolia from the end of the Middle Bronze Age until the beginning of the Iron Age (see below).

One of the most critical features of Israel's wise women was, once again, their excellent and timely use of language in the resolution of conflicts (2 Sam. 14 and 20).¹ Like any male sage, they take up their public role without hesitation and with an expectation of being heard and valued, although 'mother' imagery is used to 'authorize' their interventions, at least in part. Proverbs and proverbial phrases, the tools of the sage, fall

1. C. Camp, 'The Wise Women of 2 Samuel: A Role Model for Women in Early Israel', *CBQ* 43 (1981), pp. 14-29; and 'The Female Sage', pp. 187-90.

from their lips as needed and are as efficacious as the counsels of their brothers in the craft (2 Sam. 14.14; 20.18). What began as women's wisdom in the world of the home has clearly gone public, to the good of all.

We must add another category to the list of sage functions that mothers and wise women perform: that of folk healer. Those dealing with the cuneiform traditions call our attention to the application of wisdom terminology to physicians in a number of places.¹ Training for the profession of physician (LU.AZU) doubtless required some sort of scribal education, even if an abbreviated one, because of the rituals and incantations necessary to the proper conduct of the role. For this reason, women must be excluded from the 'professional' or 'scientific' class of doctors but this does not mean we should exclude them from the traditional roles of folk healers, nurses and midwives, all of which require some sort of training as well as innate common sense. In fact, the traditional roles of wife and mother include the job description of 'healer' and 'nurse', for the care of sick family members routinely falls to the women of the household.²

The study of Hittite texts provides us with some interesting parallels to interpreting the phenomenon of folk healing by women in Israel. These texts also point to an important connection between the wisdom traditions of cuneiform societies, where wisdom is more tied to incantational and magical rites, and less so to the literary and practical 'clan' wisdom traditions as they were known in ancient Israel.³ In the

1. Harris, 'Female Sage', pp. 11-12, 15-16.

2. S. Sharp, 'Folk Medicine Practices: Women as Keepers and Carriers of Knowledge', *Women's Studies International Forum* 9 (1986), pp. 243-49.

3. These texts are not always as accessible as one would wish, but as a starting place, see G. Beckman's 'Proverbs and Proverbial Allusions in Hittite', *JNES* 45 (1986), pp. 19-30; A. Ünal, 'The Role of Magic in Ancient Anatolian Religions according to the Cuneiform Texts from Bogazkoy-Hattusha', in Prince T. Mikasa (ed.), *Essays on Anatolian Studies in the Second Millennium BC* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1988); O. Gurney, *Some Aspects of Hittite Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); and Fontaine, 'Queenly Proverb Performance', pp. 95-126, and 'Heifer'. *BA* 52.2-3 (1989) is devoted entirely to the Hittite empire

rituals of the Hittite wise women, we find the missing link wherein 'proverbial' phrases and images, the tokens of the sages' art in Israel, are wedded to the magical rituals of Mesopotamia and Anatolia to restore health and harmony.

Hittite wise women or 'Old Women' (literally, MI.ŠU.GI; Hittite: ḫaššawa) are first attested in the reign of Ḫattušili I, and appear to be associated with the old village power bases among the Hattians, the indigenous people of old central Anatolia. Hittite kings tended to become nervous if their palace women had too much contact with these tradents of the older order. The MI.ŠU.GI performed far more healing rituals than any of the other class of Hittite ritual personnel, and were in constant contact with ritual impurities among those they treated. (One wonders how this might have affected their status.) In modern terms, their work encompassed pediatrics, sex therapy, psychology, grief therapy and applied linguistics. Whether it was the proper ritual treatment of royal bones or a common household quarrel, these women were on duty, practicing their craft, burying angry words and turning sorcerous¹ assaults back onto their senders. One of the healing agents in their metaphorical 'black bag' was the proverbial phrase that linked set ritual action to the context in question.² The basic formula was 'Just as X in the natural world happens, so also may X happen in this life.' An example from Tablet 4, ll. 7-14 of 'The Hittite Ritual of Tunnawi', which is directed toward—among other evils—the cure of infertility, reads as follows:

... Then she seizes the horn of the fertile cow, and she says:
 'Sun-god, my lord, as this cow is fertile, and she is in a fertile pen and she is filling the pen with bulls and cows, just so let this sacrificer be fertile; let her just so fill her house with sons

and makes a good entry point for those interested in this culture.

1. 'Sorcery' is the term usually given by anthropologists to magic practiced for illicit purposes. In fact, sorceresses and wise women appear to have used many of the same ritual methods, but for different ends.

2. Ünal ('The Role of Magic') lists 106 proverbial phrases embedded within ritual texts using analogical magic; not all are from rituals recorded from the wise women, but many are. In particular, one wonders if our wily women of 2 Samuel had a copy of KUB XIII 3, because the proverbial phrases using water are a wonderful match.

and daughters, grandchildren and great grandchildren, descendants in successive generations!' Then they drive the fertile cow back to the pen.¹

Keen observation of natural phenomena undergirded these Hittite wise women's practice of medical magic; this is one place where we may observe nature wisdom—the zeal for cataloguing—married to ritual practices. Even sharper assessments of the appropriate use of such observations in context allowed these wise women to make a metaphorical 'match' between the action in their proverbial phrase, now enacted in ritual form before the sufferers, and the hoped-for goal in the sufferers' lives. In other words, in this paradigm of proverbial action, 'proverb performance'² moves from the citation of traditional wisdom to characterize or resolve social ambiguities to a ritualized, formal act whose goal is the same—the restoration of harmony. If a parable might be considered a proverb with a plot-line, then the rituals of the Hittite wise women are proverbs with props and stage direction. The Hebrew word for 'proverb', *māšāl*, carries two meanings, both reflected in the work of these wise women. First, *māšāl* means 'to be similar to' and, secondly, it carries the meaning of 'to rule over'. Every proverb encompasses these two ideas, encapsulating events to which the proverb is 'similar', and thus allowing its users to 'rule over' any situation in which they find a similar set of circumstances in action. In these Hittite healing rituals, the *māšāl* observed becomes the *māšāl* enacted, restructuring reality along the lines indicated in the proverb's similitude, and thus 'ruling over' it.

Though there is little explicit mention of wise women healers in the Hebrew Bible, some intriguing clues are present to suggest this ongoing role for women in the world of folk wisdom. Midwives appear in Gen. 35.17, 38.28 and are key characters in outwitting Pharaoh in Exodus 1. Within these stories, midwives execute the (semi-?) legal functions of pronouncing the child

1. A. Goetze, with E.H. Sturtevant, *The Hittite Ritual of Tunnawi* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1938), pp. 21-23.

2. 'Proverb performance' is the timely citation of a piece of proverbial wisdom in a social interaction in order to evaluate events or influence outcomes. See Fontaine, *Traditional Sayings in the Old Testament*.

alive and announcing its sex; where twins are involved, the midwife certifies which child is the elder. The parable of Ezekiel 16 reveals the typical functions performed for the newborn, no doubt also duties of the midwife:

... Thus says the Lord GOD to Jerusalem: Your origin and your birth were in the land of the Canaanites: your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite.¹ As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in cloths. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things for you out of compassion for you; but you were thrown out in the open field, for you were abhorred on the day you were born (Ezek. 16.3-5, NRSV).

Female sorcery—the negative use of the powers at the healer's command—is alluded to and roundly condemned in Exod. 22.18, Lev. 20.27, Deut. 18.10, 1 Sam. 28 and 2 Chron. 33.6. The rabbis of the postbiblical period give us the following enigmatic proverb from the Mishnaic Tractate *Pirke Abot* ('Sayings of the Fathers'): 'More women, more witchcraft' (2.8; מְרַבָּה כַּשְׁפִּים, מְרַבָּה).² Although the varieties of magical practitioners excoriated in our texts do not include the healer, it is clear from the various oblique references scattered throughout the Bible that such roles for women did exist, required specialized training and skill, and were recognized by the people. As always, the healer who fails to heal becomes an easy target for charges of 'malpractice', or sorcery, and studies show that accusations of witchcraft are often the index of social tensions at large.³ It must be mentioned

1. Given the rather remarkable social status of Hittite women, in practice if not always in law, this pejorative statement by Ezekiel is fascinating. It is repeated in Ezek. 16.45, following Ezekiel's citation of the proverb 'Like mother, like daughter', to characterize the evils of Jerusalem. One wonders if the phrase 'Your mother was Hittite' is also a מְשַׁל, here used to express the author's discomfort with Jerusalem escaping from the control of its husband-god.

2. R.T. Herford, *Pirke Aboth, The Ethics of the Talmud: Sayings of the Fathers* (New York: Schocken Books, 1962), p. 48; although we do not know exactly what the rabbis meant by 'witchcraft', their association of it with the practices of women is indisputable.

3. S.D. Walters, 'The Sorceress and her Apprentice', *JCS* 23 (1970) pp. 27-38.

that it is not only in Israel that the preoccupation with the malevolent use of such skills existed; the Hittites, Egyptians and their Mesopotamian neighbors were obsessed with averting the evils caused by wicked sorcerers.¹

One more group of skilled or 'wise' women may be mentioned in the public domain of ancient Israel, and their existence points to how flexible the definition of 'wisdom' may have been in actual practice. These are the professional mourning women, known to us from Jer. 9.17, 2 Chron. 35.15, and Ezek. 32.16. These women served an important function in their society, which may be related to those of the diplomatic wise women, midwives and healers, for their work in raising an outcry over the dead expressed their peoples' sense of orderly ritual at important times when the stability of the community had been threatened. Their 'art' or skill required training in the poetic conventions of ritual mourning, which some have related to the high literary traditions of the epic poetry of their neighbors.² Hence, they are connected to both the language arts of the wise women of 2 Samuel and the ritual activity of the Hittite MI.ŠU.GI, who performed the funerary activities surrounding royalty. Indeed, the connection of these skilled practitioners to an even more distant past for women's public roles is intriguing.

1. The literature on this subject is extensive. For a discussion of sorcery in Israel with respect to women, see A. Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), pp. 67-77. For parallel cultures, see Walters, 'The Sorceress and her Apprentice'; T. Abusch, *Babylonian Witchcraft Literature: Case Studies* (BJS, 132; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987); *idem*, 'An Early Form of the Witchcraft Ritual *Maqlû* and the Origin of a Babylonian Magical Ceremony', in *idem*, J. Huehnergard and P. Steinkeller (eds.), *Lingering Over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), pp. 1-57. Also S. Rollin, 'Women and Witchcraft in Ancient Assyria (c. 900-600 BC)', in A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (eds.), *Images of Women in Antiquity* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1983), pp. 34-45; M. Vieyra, 'Le Sorcier Hittite', in D. Bernot *et al.* (eds.), *Le Monde du Sorcier* (Sources Orientales, 7; Paris: Seuil, 1966), pp. 101-25; and D.H. Englehard, 'Hittite Magical Practices: An Analysis' (PhD dissertation, Brandeis University, 1970).

2. Brenner, *The Israelite Woman*, pp. 37-38.

In the ancient Sumerian language, we discover that a special dialect, EME.SAL, existed and was spoken only by women, goddesses and eunuchs. This dialect is one associated with the high poetic arts and, in particular, with the laments of the goddesses—and their female devotees—for the dead fertility god who was the yearly partner. When women first 'officially' find their language and raise their voice in public, it is in lament. The mourning women of Jer. 9.12 echo the Ugaritic lament for the fertility god slain by the god of Death who climbs into the palace windows. Clearly, a long history of poetic composition and performance is buried beneath these brief references.

As we look at these three variations on the category of public wise woman—diplomats, healers and professional mourners—we may draw a number of conclusions. First, these women were all 'ritual experts' acting in complex, potentially volatile social situations. Next, deliberate, formalized language acts constituted part of their duties, whether those language acts were the apt citation of proverbs (the wise women of 2 Samuel), healing incantations and pronouncements (midwives and healers), or formalized funeral dirges (professional mourners). In each 'occupation', training of some sort was required, even if that training took place primarily within the family unit. Finally, all of the skills that allowed women to fill these valued public roles originate in the roles attributed to wives, mothers, sisters and daughters within the world of the home (see Figure 1). All of these roles have negative correlates when female action is perceived to be challenging the boundaries of male control.

4. *Conclusions*

We have seen in this brief survey that the wisdom tradition of ancient Israel allowed both private and public expressions of women's competence and contribution to the world of the wise. In many respects, these social roles of women are echoed on the literary level in the twin figures of Woman Wisdom and Woman Stranger. Together these two metaphorical figures embody the social roles, positive and negative, which women filled within society at large and the wisdom movement in particular. While the goddess traditions of surrounding cultures and within Israel

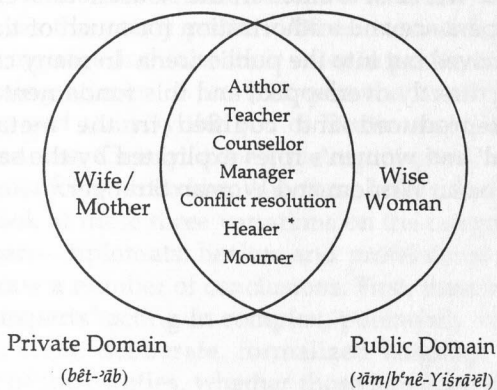
itself may have had a significant impact in shaping the portrait and meaning of these two characters,¹ the actual lived experience of women contributed greatly as well (see Figure 2). In particular, it is important to recognize that the roles played out in the private world of women in the household were a direct source of experience and authorization for much of their power when they moved out into the public arena. In many cases, skills and training directly overlapped, and this fundamental identity was then reproduced and codified in the metaphors of 'womanhood' and women's roles explicated by the sages in the figures of Woman Wisdom and Woman Stranger.²

1. See B. Lang, *Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs: An Israelite Goddess Redefined* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1986); and C.R. Fontaine, 'The Personification of Wisdom', in 'Proverbs', in J.L. Mays (ed.), *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 501-503.

2. I wish to thank Carol Ramsey-Lucas, Lynne Phipps and Rev. Gen Heywood for their technical assistance in the preparation of this manuscript.

Figure 1:
The Social Roles of Women in Israel's World of Wisdom

a. Positive Roles



* Data available from parallel cultures

b. Negative Roles

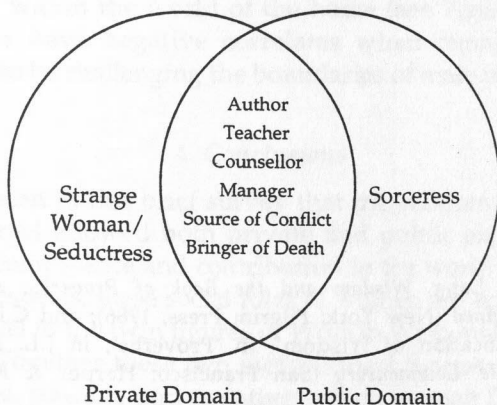
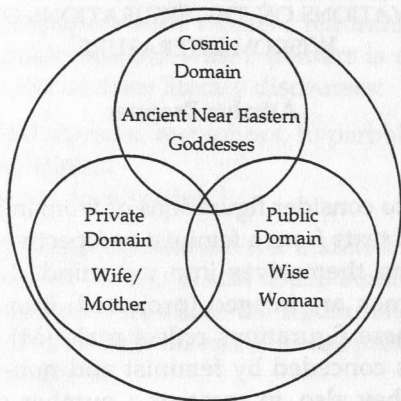


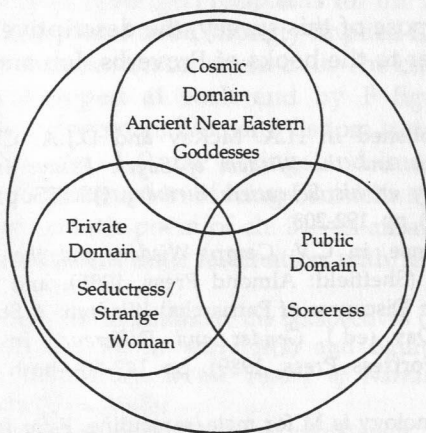
Figure 2:
The Metaphoric Domains of Women's Social Roles in Wisdom

a. *Positive Roles*



Woman Wisdom

b. *Negative Roles*



Woman Folly
 Woman Stranger