

## Holy Wisdom

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

Thursday, May 19, 2016

Cedar River Conference Spring Meeting

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**[SLIDE 22]** As we are in the middle of the week between Pentecost and Holy Trinity I chose for my reflection the one text that Vicar Luci dropped from readings for this coming Sunday. Proverbs 8 also happens to be one of my favorite biblical passages. How to interpret this text is one of the most hotly contested issues about the book of Proverbs. For many Christians this chapter is a theologically transgressive text. It says things about God that don't fit neatly into our common images of the Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.



Here we meet a character called Woman Wisdom who stands on the heights, along the highways, at the crossroads, and at the city gates calling out to all that live. Woman Wisdom calls and invites all people without exception to enter into dialogue with her to learn prudence, acquire intelligence, hear the truth, receive instruction, attain knowledge and discretion, receive insight and strength. Woman Wisdom can offer all this because she was God's first act, set up before the beginning of creation, before there was an earth or seas or mountains. Wisdom was there when God made earth and fields and little bits of soil. She was there when God established the heavens and assigned limits to the seas. Wisdom was there beside God in one of two forms. The original Hebrew is intentionally ambiguous.

Option A: Wisdom was beside God as a master worker — like an architect — infusing her joy and delight into all the structures of creation.

Option B: Wisdom was beside God as a little child — God's delight — rejoicing, perhaps even giggling with joy, clapping her hands, and dancing in the midst of the beautiful universe God was creating.

What are we to do with this character? Is she part of the Trinity? If so, how does she fit?

This is where the history of interpretation goes a long way in helping us connect the dots.

**[STEP 1]** This ancient interpretation is represented in Eastern Orthodox icons such as the one you see on the monitors. It is an icon of Jesus Christ as Holy Wisdom. A red faced angelic figure is seated on a throne that rests on seven pillars. This is Sophia, the Wisdom

of God. The red color depicts the fire of divinity. Above her is a conventional bearded image of Jesus in between the words “Holy” and “Wisdom”. The icon shows Christ in both his human/male aspect and his divine/feminine aspect. Sophia is flanked by the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist.

This icon brings together 4 biblical passages.

First a saying of Jesus, that comes at the end of a passage in which he critiques the people of his generation for not recognizing John the Baptist and himself for who they are. Jesus said, “For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.” The implication seems to be that John the Baptist and Jesus are both Wisdom’s children — they are people who hear and follow her instructions.



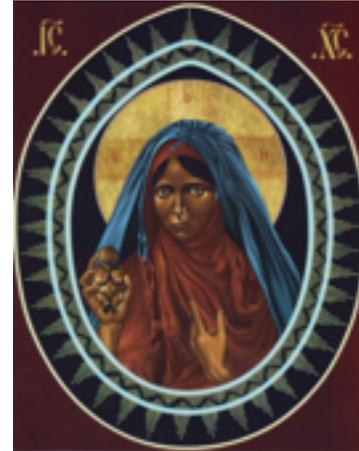
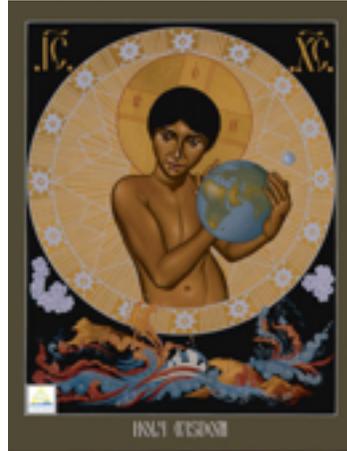
The words of the Apostle Paul from his first letter to the Corinthian church, “we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1:23-24).

And from Colossians, where Jesus is described in the terms very similar to those used to describe Holy Wisdom as “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” in whom, through whom, and for whom all things in heaven and earth were created. He is “before all things and in him all things hold together ... he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead ... in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things ... (1:15-20).

Finally, the words of Augustine, bishop of Hippo, who used the principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture to assert that the second person of the Trinity has many names: Son of God, Word of God, Jesus Christ, Power of God, Wisdom of God. According to Augustine, the Word that became flesh according to the Gospel of John is the same Wisdom brought forth by God before creation (*On Faith and the Creed*). In other words, just as the Word became flesh in Jesus, Woman Wisdom became human in the person of Jesus.

What is intriguing about Augustine’s interpretation is that Christ is the Word and Son of God, i.e. both of which are masculine ways of talking about God, **and Christ is the Wisdom of God**, a feminine way of talking about God. Not only is Christ completely

human and completely divine, but it looks like Christ might also be completely male and completely female. Is this what the author of Colossians means when he writes that through Christ God was pleased to reconcile to God's self **all** things? Clearly early Christians were willing to explore that possibility. A possibility that is again being explored by contemporary Christians as seen in these recent icons of Christ as Holy Wisdom. [STEP 2, 3, 4]



The first by Mary Plaster is called “Sophia, Divine Wisdom” and depicts her as an ageless, androgynous, and indigenous angelic figure cradling the globe in her lap with her hands open in welcome. A golden halo encircles her head and the Greek initials for Jesus Christ appear in the upper corners of the icon.

The middle one is by the Franciscan Brother Robert Lentz who chose to imagine Holy Wisdom as a naked third world child whose gender we cannot determine, embracing material creation. The halo around the child's head is inscribed with the Hebrew letters that represent God's name — Yahweh. The Greek initials for Jesus Christ are inscribed in the upper corners.

The final one, also by Brother Robert Lentz, is even more controversial, depicting a dark skinned female dressed in middle eastern garb, holding the Venus of Willendorf, a statue of the earth mother created by early humans 24,000 years before Christ. She seems to be pointing to it as if saying we are one and the same. The halo around her head also has the Hebrews letters of God's name, and the Greek initials of Christ are inscribed in the upper corners.

Welcome to the mind-bending mystery of the Trinity!