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Precreation Narratives in the Wisdom of Solomon: Genealogy, Gender, and Genre

C. Jan Swearingen

Department of English, Texas A&M University
Blocker Hall 227, MS 4227, College Station, TX 77843, USA
cjan@tamu.edu

Abstract

Examines genres and representations of gender in the Wisdom of Solomon and its counterparts in selected works of the Pre-Socratic philosophers, the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly Ecclesiastes, and Paul's letters to the Romans and Corinthians. Proposes that the Wisdom of Solomon may be understood as a hybrid and transitional rhetorolect created in the context of Hellenistic Jewish movements towards philosophical sophistication. Suggests that the range of styles, genres, and lexica in Paul's letters present similar dexterity in addressing mixed audiences.

Keywords

creation, gender, Genesis, genre, logos, narrative, precreation, rhetoric, rhetorolect, socio-rhetorical, sophia, wisdom

Hence the Scripture does not say “the multitude of the eloquent,” but “the multitude of the wise” is the welfare of the world. (Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 4.5.8 [Robinson])¹

1. Introduction

It may seem redundant to talk about the genealogy of genesis narratives, and even more so to speak of a genealogy of precreation narratives. However, to begin with such a genealogy is to undertake a number of comparisons that can link the various surroundings of early Christian discourse to the rhetorolects that Vernon Robbins invites us to define in socio-rhetorical contexts. He proposes six rhetorical modes of discourse in New Testament literature: wisdom, miracle, prophetic, suffering-death, apocalyptic, and precreation; and identifies four resources among the Hebrew precursors to early Christian rhetorolects that are drawn upon and recombined by the New Testament authors in

¹ Augustine is quoting Wis 6:24.

different ways: Torah wisdom, wisdom story, proverbial wisdom, and argumentative wisdom.² This discussion will take up three threads in the discussion of a particular precreation narrative: the Wisdom of Solomon, especially chs. 6 and 7. I will first examine the socio-rhetorical contexts in which it emerged. Then I will turn to the question of why Wisdom is so often represented as a woman, both as a teaching figure and as an aspect/representative/consort of God. Finally, I will look at the question of genre, particularly the many transitional genres that present themselves in Proverbs, Job, the Wisdom of Solomon, and the discussion of wisdom (σοφία) in 1 Corinthians. What do these issues have to do with precreation narratives, and with rhetoric? Several things.

Robbins posits the emergence of a distinctive and innovative Christian rhetorlect, a discourse community that drew on numerous sources from diverse geographical and cultural domains. The genres and topics that became shared features of this community have often been constrained by narrow philological and cautious historical studies. Socio-rhetorical investigation opens up new areas of contextual investigation, sometimes sociological, sometimes inter-textual. As we consider the emerging New Testament rhetorlect(s), let us also keep track of our focus on topics (*topoi*) apart from genres and look at how they shaped one another. The category of argumentative wisdom, in Job for example, encompasses the topic of human wisdom contrasted with God's wisdom and often takes place in the form of a dialogue or debate. But argumentative wisdom can also be a discourse about λόγος, or knowledge, itself. That is, the topic of argumentative wisdom can be argument (λόγος) or, alternately, the vanity of human contention. Some discourses about argumentative wisdom, such as 1 Corinthians, are teacherly invectives, and only implicitly arguments with an interlocutor. Keeping these distinctions in mind can help us sort out the often double topic-genre identities of New Testament rhetorlects.

Robbins' taxonomy allows us to locate wisdom narratives as subsets of Torah wisdom, Midrash debate and commentary, wisdom stories, proverbial wisdom, and argumentative wisdom. Precreation narratives occur within all four of these source materials, but with increasing brevity as the genres move toward the aphoristic and literary styles characteristic of Hellenistic Jewish writings, including Ecclesiastes and the Wisdom of Solomon. In these texts can be observed a movement away from proverb wisdom tradition and toward

² Vernon K. Robbins and Gordon D. Newby, "A Prolegomenon to the Relation of the Qu'ran and the Bible," in *Bible and Qu'ran: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality* (ed. John C. Reeves; SBL-SymS 24; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 37.

argumentative wisdom traditions, the teacherly and exhortatory modes that Paul employs in 1 Corinthians and elsewhere. In these texts can also be found source materials for the strong association of Jesus with attributes earlier attached to wisdom, including (1) the light of the world, (2) presence with God at creation, and (3) being a constant companion to those who seek him.³ “Wisdom is described as the co-creator and first born of God, as the light, the bringer of life and salvation, as a teacher, and as the designer and controller of history. She comes down to humanity in a variety of guises to offer her wisdom, but is often rejected.”⁴ In another locution, God’s wisdom is often a phrase used to define the prophet’s teaching, as when Paul claims for himself God’s wisdom as his message, in a sharp and explicit contrast to the wisdom of the Greeks (1 Cor 1:18–2:16).

What are the sources of the wisdom traditions that converge and are displaced and dispersed in New Testament rhetorolects? Among the earliest recorded creation narratives from the Near East we find emerging contemporaneously with the use of writing a tendency to locate creation as an act of speech and mind rather than as a product of the union of heaven and earth, male and female, physical generation. Nature (φύσις) creation and word or truth (λόγος) creation inhabit the same world in many of these earliest narratives, and they continue their dual presence into the Wisdom of Solomon. In many of the earlier creation narratives that are the product of transitional literate cultures can be seen the reverse of the Word made flesh. Instead, we find the flesh – physical creation – made word. If we revisit the parallel creation narratives that emphasize mind and word as the agents of creation we can perhaps understand a shared context for shifting concepts of wisdom and its role in creation. Only slightly later, the oral-epic narrative traditions of the Hebrews and the Greeks were supplemented by different forms of narrative and discourse: dialogue, proverb, song, aphorism, and teaching.

³ Helpful characterizations of Jesus and earlier Wisdom attributes are defined by Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala, Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 1963), 164, and Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction Through Paul’s Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 52–55. Wire also attends to the Greek philosophical traditions woven into both the Wisdom of Solomon and New Testament characterizations of and debates about wisdom. At this point, Wire’s fine work on reconstructive and contextual rhetorical readings of the New Testament is well known. John J. Collins, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age* (Louisville: Westminster, 1997), 198–232, provides a well-defined analysis of Hebrew/Jewish and Greek philosophical sources for the Wisdom of Solomon. His analysis of the philosophical sources focuses on the Middle Academy and the Roman Stoics who would have been immediately accessible to the writers of the Wisdom of Solomon. Earlier sources, I suggest here, may also provide valuable comparisons.

⁴ King, *Gospel of Mary*, 52.

The sermons and exhortations of the prophets, like the earliest speeches of the Greek rhetors, emerged in times of cultural upheaval, exile, collision, and reintegration. National and religious identities had to be redefined and renegotiated quickly. A precreation narrative, in this context, might be understood as a rewriting of present history. Just as prophecy and apocalyptic rhetoric attempt to revise present history from the perspective of the future, a precreation narrative does the same from the standpoint of the past. A further issue related to genre emerges in these transitional genres: both the Greeks and the Hellenized Hebrews had become sophisticated enough to recognize that their canonical origin epics were beginning to look like antiquated children's stories.⁵ Drawing on their earlier epics, both the Hebrews and the Greeks began to develop wisdom and then philosophical traditions in which teaching, truth, and precept gradually supplanted epic histories in which event narratives prevailed. Wisdom emerges at this nexus and is in both traditions replaced rather quickly by variations of Logos.

How important is it that Wisdom is a she, and Logos a he? How do the voices and genres of Wisdom differ from those of alternate early Christian traditions: gospel, letter, testimony? Finally, the question of method: how can new socio-rhetorical methods help us restore these discourses to their rhetorical contexts, and what are we finding there?

⁵ “At the putative time of the composition of Wisdom, among Hellenized Hebrews, Homer was a textbook for learning Greek through the study of Greek literature. Yet his stories about the foibles of the gods were often an embarrassment to sophisticated readers. So commentators began to update the Homeric myths by transforming them into psychological admonitions.” Cf. James M. Reese, *The Book of Wisdom, Song of Songs* (Old Testament Message 25; Wilmington, Del.: Glazier, 1983), 179. Rhetorical readers will add here that such readings were also rhetorically pitched. Reese continues, “In a similar vein certain writers of the Jewish diaspora felt that a literal understanding of Mosaic texts was inadequate and unworthy of inspiration – as Philo’s allegorical interpretations show. The Sage . . . draws from details of the narratives about the Exodus insights into universal moral truths.” The focus on drawing an explicitly stated moral precept from earlier history, or from a reading of an earlier text, is one characteristic that defines both teacherly rhetorical discourse and wisdom – philosophical literature, language, and thought. It is precept, word, or idea-centered rather than event-centered. King observes a similar pattern: “Throughout the journey of the soul toward comprehension, dialogue is key. The model for this dialogue is the ancient ideal of a pedagogical relationship in which the teacher’s words and acts comprise a model to which the disciple ought to conform. Ancient culture was deeply suspicious of writing if it became detached from this intimate model, and Christians very early transformed this widespread ideal by understanding Jesus, not Scripture, as the truest revelation of God” (*Gospel of Mary*, 31).

2. The Genesis of Genesis: “Before Being or Not-Being Was” from *Esti Genesthai* to *de Natura Deorum*

From a time earlier than 1200 B.C.E., its first textual preservation, a passage that has come down to us through the *Rig Veda* provides a poetic narrative of origins strikingly similar in places to the Genesis narrative, the Wisdom of Solomon, and to many of the origin poems and teachings of the Pre-Socratic Greek philosophers.

When neither Being nor Not-Being was
 Nor atmosphere, nor firmament, nor what is beyond,
 What did it encompass? Where? In whose protection?
 What was water, the deep, unfathomable?
 Neither death nor immortality was there then.
 No sign of night or day.
 That One breathed, windless, by its own energy:
 Nought else existed then.
 In the beginning was darkness swathed in darkness;
 All this was but unmanifested water.
 Whatever was, the One, coming into being,
 Hidden by the Void,
 Was generated by the power of heat.
 In the beginning this [One] evolved,
 Became desire, first seed of mind.
 Wise seers, searching within their hearts.
 (“Rg-Ved,” 129 [Le Meé])

Parmenides (fl. c. 500–475 B.C.E.) implicitly condemns received accounts of how things come into being by locating traditional creation narratives within “the world of opinion,” the conventional, unexamined, and, in his view, deluded views of those who search for Nothingness, “the way along which wander mortals, knowing nothing, two-headed, for perplexity in their bosoms steers their intelligence astray” (Parmenides, *Fragments* 6, 7, 8, 19 [Freeman]).⁶ Precursors to the inhabitants of Plato’s Cave, Parmenides’ sleepwalkers are ignorant, slaves to their senses. They “wander, knowing nothing, two-headed, for whom To Be and Not to Be are regarded as the same and not the same” (Parmenides, *Fragment* 6). Amidst all his oppositions – permanence and change, the same and the different, the eternal and the ephemeral – and his flowing river, the same river into which you cannot step twice, Heraclitus nonetheless asserts, “that which alone is wise is One” (Heraclitus, *Fragment* 32). He proclaims that this hidden order, an aspect of λόγος, “is willing and

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all citations of the Pre-Socratics are from Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1983).

unwilling to be called by the name of Zeus” (Heraclitus, *Fragment 32*). The Delphic oracle’s injunction, “know thyself” (γνῶθι σεαυτόν), varies from Heraclitus’ emphasis (γνῶθι τὸ αὐτό): develop the capacity to recognize that which is unto itself, a One, a Whole, unified, timeless, transcending space and time. Empedocles and Heraclitus, although often quite different from Parmenides in their emphasis on the wisdom to be gained by observing the flux and change of the natural world, join him in asserting an underlying truth beneath and beyond all material appearances. This is the Pre-Socratics’ new creation, the new heaven and earth, a precreation rhetoric enjoining thinkers to look into themselves, into their own minds, and into the natural world for ἀλήθεια, the unconcealed and revealed: an invisible and unchanging Truth. Among the many Pre-Socratic oppositions, their master tropes, λόγος in opposition to δόξα became paramount. Postulating characteristics and capacities for the All and the One, including characterizations of the discourses in which such postulates are expressed, prompted the analytical and subsequent logical use of generic abstract class terms as the subjects of “true” or “not true” propositions. Creation was made verbal, conceptual, ineffable.

Among the innovations introduced by the Pre-Socratic philosophers, “commonly held beliefs” (Aristotle’s ἔνδοξα) come to be equated with δόξα and νόμος: the beliefs, words, customs, and laws of human making. The displacement of δόξα and νόμος by λόγος had the additional effect of rendering religion myth, in its core Greek meaning, μῦθος: a story.⁷ The Homeric canon, as well as the dramas, came to be regarded, at least among the cogniscenti, as man-made poesis, as deceptive “fiction” wrought of lies, custom, and experience *and thereby* as not reliable. With this displacement of μῦθος by λόγος the gods were overthrown; λόγος became hypostatized, and then apotheosized, made means and object of knowledge and, finally, agent of creation. “That which alone is wise is one; it is willing and unwilling to be called by the name of Zeus” (Heraclitus, *Fragment 32*). It is not far from the language of this λόγος-centered precreation discourse to the first sentences of the Gospel of John.

A generation before Heraclitus, and two before Parmenides, Xenophanes (c. 530 B.C.E.) traced an even earlier cosmology, a different realignment of philosophy and religion. “There is one god (θεός) among gods and men the greatest, not at all like mortals in body or in mind. He sees as a whole, and hears as a whole. Without toil he sets everything into motion, *by the thought of his mind*. He always remains in the same place, not moving at all, nor is it

⁷ For discussions of this transition see Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?* (Chicago: University Press, 1988); Thomas Rosenmyer, “Gorgias, Aeschylus, and *Apate*,” *AJP* 76 (1955): 225–260.

fitting for him to change his position at different times. For everything [that changes] comes from earth and everything goes back to earth at last” (Xenophanes, *Fragments* 23–27).⁸ Empedocles shared this vision of all creation as a huge organism overseen by Thought and Harmony. His *καθαρμοί*, or therapeutic discourses, preserve precreation narratives that are intended to invoke and restore balance in the individual, in society, and in the universe. The form as well as the content of his teaching directly influenced the patterns of later Greek rhetoric, particularly explicit self reference and self-referential discourse: listeners were being taught how to talk and think about how they think and talk, through a number of metacognitive and metadiscursive terms that we have inherited and now take for granted.

I shall tell of a double process: at one time it increased so as to be a single One out of Many; at another time it grew apart so as to be Many out of One. And these (elements) never cease their continuous exchange, sometimes uniting under the guidance of Love, so that all become One, at other times again each moving apart through the hostile force of Hate.

But come, listen to my discourse! For be assured, learning will increase your understanding. As I said before, revealing the aims of my discourse, I shall tell you of a double process, One out of Many, Many out of One. Fire and Water and Earth and the boundless height of Air, and also execrable Hate apart from these, of equal weight in all directions, and Love in their midst, their equal in length and breadth.

Observe her with your mind, do not sit with wondering eyes. She it is who believed to be implanted in mortal limbs also; through her they think friendly thoughts and perform harmonious actions, calling her Joy and Aphrodite. No mortal man has perceived her as she moves in and out among them. But *you* must listen to the undeceitful progress of my argument. (Empedocles, *Fragment 17* excerpts)

Empedocles, reputedly the teacher of Gorgias, was among the first to teach rhetoric to the Greeks. In his “Encomium on Helen” appears a miniature precreation narrative interrogated, using self-reflexive language similar to the phrasings of Empedocles, Heraclitus, and Parmenides. Note the antitheses, the self reference intermingled with narrative rhetoric. Note as well among the first formal definitions of rhetoric, here under the category of speech (*λόγος*).

It belongs to the same man both to speak the truth and to refute falsehood. Helen is universally condemned and regarded as the symbol of disasters; I wish to subject her story to critical examination, and so rescue her from ignorant calumny.

She was of the highest parentage; her reputed father Tyndareus, was the most powerful of men; her real father, Zeus, was king of all. . . .

⁸ Italics mine.

If it was speech that persuaded her and deceived her soul, her defence remains easy. Speech is a great power, which achieves the most divine works by means of the smallest and most invisible form. This I shall now prove. . . .

Their persuasions by means of fiction [the poets, the mythmakers] are innumerable; for if everyone had recollection of the past, knowledge of the present, and foreknowledge of the future, the power of speech would not be so great. But as it is, when men can neither remember the past nor observe the present nor prophesy the future, deception is easy; so that most men offer opinion as advice to the soul. (Gorgias, *Helen* 11)⁹

The distinction made between Helen's reputed versus real father is not only part of the canonical Greek genesis accounting for the genealogical descendants of Zeus; it also calls attention to itself as yet another account among many λόγοι. Speech (λόγος) can persuade but also, often, deceive. And so we are left with an odd conclusion, on the eve of Plato's invention of the term ῥητορική, that λόγος-speech is a very unreliable and even dangerous thing in the hands of men. Gorgias seems to be presenting himself as a prime example, for he concludes: "I have chosen to write this speech as an Encomium on Helen and an amusement for myself" (Gorgias, *Helen* 11). Compare Parmenides' earlier, frame narrative, and his teaching, which like the narrator's in the Wisdom of Solomon, is an account of what was taught to him.

The horses that take me to the
ends of my mind
were taking me now: the drivers had put me
on the road to the Goddess, the manifest Way
that leads the enlightened through every delusion.
I was on the road. Wizard mares
strained at the chariot and maidens drove it.
. . . priestess daughters of the Sun
when they leave on a mission from night-space to light
pushing their veils from their heads with their hands.
. . . creating the vastness of space as they turned
The maidens drove the chariot through
the horses
stayed on the track
and there was the Goddess
friendly
my right hand in hers
a goddess receiving me

⁹ For a fuller discussion see C. Jan Swearingen, "Preface," *Pre/Text: An Inter-Disciplinary Journal of Rhetoric* 7 (Fall/Winter 1986): 117–119; idem, "Literate Rhetors and Their Illiterate Audiences: The Orality of Early Literacy," *Pre/Text: An Inter-Disciplinary Journal of Rhetoric* 7 (Fall/Winter 1986): 145–164.

she saying:

The horses that take you to the ends of your mind
 have taken you here, . . .
 You are here to be taught,
 both the still heart of Truth, unconcealed and committed,
 and human Opinion, on which there can be no reliance.
 But you shall also learn this:
 how the Interpreted World really does exist,
 all of it one throughout space and time.
 (Parmenides, *Fragments* 11–12 [Lombardo])

The older formulaic ways of speaking and teaching – the mythic narrative epics still invoked by Parmenides and Empedocles in their discourses – are replaced by Gorgias’ and other rhetors’ bold invocation of self and logic: my proof, my argument, as the authenticating device of the discourse. Somewhere in between float the glimmers of a conceptual precreation narrative, a place and time and condition where Opinion and Truth are presided over not just by mortals but by gods as well, especially the One god who according to many Greek Pre-Socratics, has no name or prefers not to be called by the name of Zeus. Could this be the “unknown God” whose altar Paul finds in Athens?¹⁰

Perhaps because the Romans inherited so much mythology and cosmology from the Greeks, they were already voraciously eclectic before they became fully literate. Cicero propounds the comparative study of religion and literature for the would-be statesman. *De natura deorum* already engages the danger of comparatism as Kant later defined it: to study religion and ethics within the larger study of comparative anthropology would introduce a fatal relativism into ethics.¹¹ Yet the Romans gathered large compendia from their imperial conquests and travels. Cicero compiled an estimable collection of studies, his own and others’, of religions and religious beliefs in the first century B.C.E. He recommends its study to all statesmen, along with philosophy, history, and literature, prior to any study of rhetoric. Otherwise, he warned, “we shall be putting weapons into the hands of madmen” (*De or.* 3.14.55 [Rackham]). Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius, later in the Empire, continued the Ciceronian practice, as an avid collector of religions and religious practices. Like many Romans, they picked and chose from them for their own meditations. We might say that during the later periods of the Greek and Roman empires alike, *letteraturizzazione* – as George Kennedy defined rhetoric that has become

¹⁰ William Golding’s last, unfinished, but now published novel (*The Double Tongue* [London: Faber & Faber, 1995]) takes up this theme in a narrative about the last Delphic oracle, who commissions this altar.

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* (trans. Thomas K. Abbot; New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1949).

canonical material for reading and recitation more than an active civic discourse – also characterized the knowledge and practices of creation narratives within religious practice.¹² Creation narratives, and their origins, came to be seen as literary and rhetorical in several senses. The Hellenistic Jews who lived among Stoic philosophers, Roman rhetoricians, and literary sophisticates, in an era of apocalypticism and political upheaval, were trying to do what the Pre-Socratic Greeks and later, the Romans, tried to do – be spiritual in their natural science and philosophy, or at least wise in their faith, by seeking a universal harmony linking the natural and human worlds, uniting the Many into One through what Empedocles termed Love.

Observe her with your mind, do not sit with wondering eyes.
 She it is who believed to be implanted in mortal limbs also; through her they think friendly thoughts and perform harmonious actions, calling her Joy and Aphrodite. No mortal man has perceived her as she moves in and out among them. But *you* must listen to the undeceitful progress of my argument.
 (Empedocles, *Fragment 17* excerpts)

Many of the attributes that Empedocles and other Pre-Socratics attributed to Love recur in Hebrew depictions of Wisdom, a composite creator/consort/teacher figure who permeates and holds together all that is.

3. From Sophia to Logos, and Back Again: Why is Sophia a Woman?

Throughout the ancient Near Eastern cultures that surrounded the pre- and post-exilic Jews, a number of female wisdom figures were venerated as teachers, goddesses, and demigods.¹³ Themis and Dike in pre-Olympian Greek tradition represent an immanent god of presence, prudence, patience, and community, the covenant of social cohesion, and the more transcendent rigor

¹² George Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1980), 3, 14, 128–129.

¹³ Recent overviews of these traditions include Lester L. Grabbe, *Wisdom of Solomon* (London: Sheffield, 1997); Claudia V. Camp, “Woman Wisdom,” *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*, 548–550; eadem, “Woman Wisdom in the Apocryphal and Deuterocanonical Books,” *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*, 550–552. Grabbe especially recommends James M. Reese, *Hellenistic Influence on the Book of Wisdom and Its Consequences* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1970) for its attentiveness to questions of audience, genre, and rhetorical sources.

of justice, the judge or dicast.¹⁴ At the creation in Genesis the Spirit of God appears as a co-creator or emissary, a messenger. She is often regarded as a “symbol” of the immanent rather than the transcendent God, the God of mercy rather than the God of justice. In Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom (σοφία) plays several roles: teacher, consort of God, lover of man, and an hypostasized quality that will pass into later discussions of different kinds of wisdom long after the personified Wisdom has vanished. The *Hypostasis of the Archons*, one of the Nag Hammadi codices, distills this history in a short anecdote:

This Ruler, by being androgynous, made
himself a vast realm, an extent without limit.
... And he said to his offspring, “It is I
who am the god of the Entirety.”
And Zoe (Life), the daughter of Pistis Sophia,
cried out and said to him, “You are mistaken.”
(*Hyp. Arch.* II, 4.95 [Bullard and Layton, LCL])

At the very least, this account suggests that there were competing narratives of creation and co-creation, as well as doubts concerning the truthfulness or rightness of the god who says “I alone am god, you shall have no other gods before me.” Significantly, it is Zoe (Life), the daughter of Pistis Sophia, who corrects the god of the Entirety and reminds him of his place.

Similarly, Sophia as consort and co-creator often represents a dual or manifold nature in God. The Wisdom of Solomon develops a precreation narrative rhetoric about wisdom in two guises. Like Empedocles, who exhorts his listeners, “You must listen to the undeciful progress of my argument,” the Sage speaks directly to his auditors in a teacherly invocation: “Be eager then to hear me, and long for my teaching; so you will learn” (Wis 6:11).¹⁵ His direct address to the rulers of earth begins with proverbial characterizations of Wisdom and her benefits to them. What is she, and what will they become if they achieve wisdom? “The true beginning of wisdom is the desire to learn, and a concern for learning means love towards her; the love of her means the keeping of her laws; to keep her laws is a warrant of immortality; and immortality brings a man near to God. Thus, the desire of wisdom leads to kingly stature” (6:17–20). After this chain of connecting and interdependent actions they

¹⁴ See Jane E. Harrison, *Themis* (Hyde Park, N.Y.: University Books, 1962). Tikva Frymer-Kensky provides a brief synopsis of “Woman Wisdom” in the ancient Near East in her *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Myth in the Ancient Near East* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1992), 179–184.

¹⁵ All quotations of Wisdom are from Reese, *The Book of Wisdom, Song of Songs*.

should take, the Sage turns to a discussion of “what wisdom is, and how she came into being” (6:22). After a biographical digression, recounting his discovery of and love for wisdom, he returns to the account of wisdom’s origin and nature. Speaking first of God, the Sage declares:

Even wisdom is under God’s direction and he corrects the wise; we and our words, prudence and knowledge and craftsmanship, all are in his hand. God himself gave me true understanding of things as they are: a knowledge of the structure of the world and the operation of the elements; the beginning and end of epochs and their middle course; the alternating solstices and changing seasons . . . the violent force of winds and the thoughts of men; . . . I learnt it all, hidden or manifest, for I was taught by her whose skill made all things, wisdom. (7:16–22)

Wisdom is characterized as

a spirit intelligent and holy, unique in its kind yet made up of many parts, subtle, free-moving, lucid, spotless, clear doing no harm, loving what is good. . . . For wisdom moves more easily than motion itself, she pervades and permeates all things because she is so pure. Like a fine mist she rises from the power of God, a pure effluence from the glory of the Almighty. . . . She is but one, yet can do everything; herself unchanging, she makes all things new; age after age she enters into holy souls, and makes them God’s friends and prophets, for nothing is acceptable to God but the man who makes his home with wisdom. . . . Against wisdom no evil can prevail. She spans the world in power from end to end, and orders all things benignly. (7:22–30)

Much like the spirit of Love in Empedocles, uniting and enlivening all things, or Heraclitus’ law (*λόγος*) of the universe that holds together a one, a whole, wisdom here is part God’s deputy, part muse to the prophets and kings, the shield against evil, and the guide of human events. Like Themis in early Greek tradition, Wisdom embodies collective wisdom, the collected wisdom of the community, its beliefs and ethics, its codes for the good man, particularly the virtuous ruler. In this guise, she is celebrated as a consort, as well.

Wisdom I loved; I sought her out when I was young and longed to win her for my bride. She adds lustre to her noble birth, because it is given her to live with God, and the Lord of all things has accepted her. . . . She is initiated into the knowledge that belongs to God, and she decides for him what he shall do. . . . If a man longs, perhaps, for great experience, she knows the past, she can infer what is to come; she understands the subtleties and can foretell the outcome of events and periods. So I determined to bring her home to live with me, knowing that she would be my counsellor in prosperity and my comfort in anxiety and grief. When I sit in judgment I shall prove myself acute, and the great men will admire me; when I say nothing they will wait for me to speak; when I speak they will attend, and though I hold forth at

length, they will lay a finger to their lips and listen. Through her I shall have immortality and shall leave an undying memory to those who come after me. I shall rule over many peoples and nations will become my subjects. (8:2–15)

Although created by, or emanating from God, Wisdom advises God. She oversees the harmony of the creation, holds it together, and guides history. It is not hard to understand why a king – or his people, for that matter – would wish her for a consort. Like oracles, prophets, and the “powers of speech” (rhetorical *λόγος*) depicted by Gorgias, she knows the past and can therefore infer what is to come. She is a prophet in that she can foretell the outcome of events and periods. Two powers in particular make her valuable to the speaker: she will make him a great king of many nations who shall live in harmony and peace, and she will grant him immortality. Of him there will be an undying memory. Is this because she will have written it? Or is this the retrospective history of Solomon, an account of the greatness of the first great king whose covenant was sealed with wisdom? It is noteworthy that the “one king among many” theme parallels the “one God greatest among all gods” theme that is singled out in the *Hypostasis of the Archons*. The kingly powers attributed to Solomon – acute judgment, kindness, mercy, and eloquence – are the powers first needed by the monarchic kings of Israel and first attributed to God in Torah wisdom as it began to enumerate the powers and qualities of God as king. Writing, kings, and wisdom emerged in Israel at about the same time. The story of how they were created has become the history that they take with them into various exiles, including contact with the Hellenistic world, and merges eventually with early Christian wisdom traditions. The end point of those early Christian rhetorolects, as far as wisdom is concerned, would seem to be 1 Corinthians, with its double focus on God’s wisdom: Paul’s message, and the false wisdom of the women prophets and the Greeks.

Robbins suggests that the Christian Wisdom rhetorolect derived from household and nature traditions that are preserved in the Solomon and Wisdom narratives in Proverbs and Wisdom of Solomon. Both of these wisdom traditions are explicitly feminine as σοφία in the Septuagint Hebrew scriptures and in the Greek traditions that would have been familiar to Hellenized Jews. How these traditions might have been converted in Paul’s expositions of Christian wisdom traditions, such as the wise and foolish contrast prominent in 1 Corinthians, have been examined in Robbins’ attention to early Christian rhetorolects: prophetic, priestly, apocalyptic, and precreation. Among Paul’s letters the references to wisdom are strikingly infrequent in all but 1 Corinthians where, interestingly, the problem in the community has to do with women, in a city which has been for centuries a center of the worship of Aphrodite

Pandemos, the “common” Aphrodite whose worship had become the source of many sniggering comments about temple prostitution.¹⁶ It is understandable that the state of the household would be a pre-eminent concern for Paul regarding the Corinthian church, and that the head (κεφαλή) – the head of the household, the head of the church, and the covering of women’s heads – would run as a theme throughout the letter. The wisdom of household management, of prudence, of hierarchy, is here emphasized, as well it might be, in addressing a community reportedly divided by upstart prophetesses. But it is not just the prudent wisdom of keeping or restoring peace in the household that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians.

Just as interesting is the heavy emphasis placed upon what might be called a riff, jazz style, upon wisdom and foolishness, that has invited much scholarly commentary. There is ample use of the disjunctive this-not-that antithesis of the kind we also find in Romans – a technique widely taught and practiced in Greek rhetoric as well. Similarly, ample use of *σωρείτης*, a rhetorical form of extended definition, marks the discussion of Love, especially in ch. 13, but elsewhere as well. Is Paul being ironic? Is he forcing the issue and inverting the *topoi* of wise and foolish to rebuke the Corinthians? Well, yes, very probably. In these possibilities can be seen a longer legacy, stretching back to the rhetorical questions posed by God to Job and by the Sage and Solomon to his interlocutors in *Wisdom of Solomon*: who are you to pretend knowledge? Were you there when I created the leviathan? Paul rebukes the foolishness of the Corinthians’ veneration of knowledge and *σοφία* by inversions and sharp oppositions that are themselves quite clever and knowledgeable.

For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discerning of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs, and Greeks demand wisdom: but we proclaim (κηρύσσομεν) Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews, and foolishness (μωρίαν) to Gentiles. (1 Cor 1:19–23; NRSV)

If we trace these formulations backward to the *Wisdom of Solomon* and *Proverbs*, we find precursors that are much less starkly improvisational and elliptical, and much more explicitly gendered. If this is one of the early Christian rhetorolects that has been spliced together from earlier Hebrew and Hellenistic traditions, what are its component parts, and what is its relationship

¹⁶ Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets*, 52, points out that *σοφία* and related terms occur 26 times within the four chapters of the wisdom discussion in 1 Corinthians and only 7 times in Paul’s other letters combined.

to a precreation narrative in Wisdom of Solomon? Here, Paul is like the angry God of Job saying, “How dare you claim to know anything, you fools!” But he is not God, and he is addressing a multiple and diverse audience, not a single man, the protagonist in a moral tale. Who narrates Paul’s story? Paul himself. Would Paul’s audience(s) have recognized his voice? Would they have understood it as variations on a theme of *prosopopoeia*? That is a question of genre. Would they have understood or learned from his sharp dichotomizing of wise and fool? Perhaps that is more to the point in addressing the issue of precreation narratives because it has to do with their understanding of the nature of wisdom and its relation to the creator God and to humankind. When Christ is simply proclaimed a stumbling block to the Jews and a holy fool to the Gentiles he supplants Wisdom as the representative of God on earth, the co-creator with God, and the spouse to whom the Church is now wed. These are the *topoi* and genders of the precreation Wisdom narrative that finally come to rest in 1 Corinthians. By the time the Gospel of John is written, long after Paul’s letters, the replacement of Sophia by Logos is completed in a precreation narrative fused to the apocalyptic genre that collapses time past and present and to come.

4. Genre and Method: Oral and Written “Traditions” and their Discontents

In examining the genres represented in the rhetorolect(s) of the early Christians we must revisit the discussions of oral and literate tradition that surrounded the Christians’ reception of Hebrew and Hellenic discourses, rhetorical patterns, methods of writing and speaking. If it is true that the ancient Near Eastern world distrusted texts apart from their contexts as objects of discussion then we should attend carefully to the Midrashic and Greek dialogue traditions extant at the time of the composition of the Wisdom of Solomon’s composition.¹⁷ This is no simple matter of intertextuality, but rather a question of which earlier texts are being alluded to, synthesized, and

¹⁷ King, *Gospel of Mary*, and Collins, *Jewish Wisdom*, define different aspects of this context. King emphasizes the aversion of the ancient Near Eastern cultures to texts cited outside of the context of a teacherly dialogue or Midrashic discussion. Collins emphasizes the literacy and class differences that may have shaped allusions to Greek philosophy, on the one hand, and familiar Jewish stories, on the other. The literacy level of the auditors is one issue; another is the community values and context that would have affected any given discourse’s presentation, reading, or discussion. Wire’s *The Corinthian Women Prophets* provides several detailed “excursuses” on the class and literacy differences that we may deduce from the different topics and styles of address to the Corinthians. Recently freed slaves may be a part of this community; slaves in Hellenistic cities could be and often were highly educated.

commented upon, however indirectly, within the discourse we have received as the Wisdom of Solomon. The same questions can and should be asked of Paul's letters and of the Gospels.

As genres, how are precreation narratives and apocalyptic discourses similar to and different from one another? Discussion about past, present, and future, and knowledge of these, is the domain of oracles, prophets, rhetors, sages, and stories. The genres of such discussions are shared by highly literate and traditional societies. Where would the different audiences and communities of the early Christians have become familiar with the genres of precreation and narrative and apocalyptic discourse as genres? Mingled Greek and Jewish wisdom traditions were circulating throughout the Mediterranean world in the wake of Alexander's demise and the rise of the Roman Empire. With the Greeks conquered, Jews had a new status in Corinth and Alexandria, but they had already assimilated Greek learning and customs. Much remains to be done on the question of how Midrash and Socratic dialogue came together in this period in the practice of Hellenistic Jews. These different wisdom traditions are inextricably bound up with different rhetorics: the dialogue form practiced by Socrates, the stronger debate pattern of Midrash, and the rhetorical patterns practiced by Paul and his contemporaries drawn from both traditions. We have yet to define the particularities of these many hybrids. In the case of the Wisdom of Solomon, however, it would seem to be particularly important to focus on two genre issues: the prophetic and apocalyptic denunciation of unjust kings and tyrants and the nature of "wisdom" literature in general. Is the rare presence of the term wisdom, outside of the book of Corinthians, something we can further explore as related not just to theme and topic, but to genre, as well? As Jesus became Christ, and Logos, did he supplant the earlier wisdom tradition entirely? The precreation narrative in the Gospel of John suggests that he did.

With the Corinthian and Roman audiences for Paul's letters very clearly mixed – including Jew and Gentile, slave and free, poor and rich – the multiplicity of genres and the possibility of dual and even triple genres becomes more likely.¹⁸ I begin and end with Augustine, because he is a participant-observer in the formalization of Christian rhetoric. Augustine adopts the strategy of simultaneous multi-genres in *De doctrina christiana*, where he explicitly invokes the Pauline wise-fool and wise-eloquent contrasts. Like Paul, very probably emulating Paul, Augustine speaks on several channels, as it were. Alternating direct "quotations" from scripture with more expository and

¹⁸ Grabbe's recent source study is important on this point, even though it is restricted to the Wisdom of Solomon, because it provides an apt example of how to reconstruct audience assumptions from textual details and structures. See Grabbe, *Wisdom of Solomon*.

didactic teacherly discourses, Augustine would have been read (aloud, like Paul, in many settings) to a group of auditors who were at very different levels of literacy and education. The familiar advice to the homilist – tell them what you are going to say, say it, and tell them what you said – is varied in these earlier discourses with an alternate, less linear, technique. Speak the same thing simultaneously in several versions. Can we not observe a similar pattern in the Gospels? If so, might the Gospel writers have taken a cue from Paul as well as from other sources?¹⁹

Today we have interlinear translations of the Scriptures as well as of many other books. Consider the oral equivalent of this practice. In a given early Christian community, a speaker, almost certainly knew that some of his (or her!) listeners were highly literate, and some very traditional, “schooled” only in the oral proverbial and narrative teachings of their immediate communities and families. They would adapt their presentations in an attempt to speak to both audiences simultaneously. Lexicon, genre, and ultimately rhetorolect would be affected by this practice. It is telling that as late as the fourth century C.E. Augustine was referring explicitly to the multiplicity of genres and concepts of wisdom that had shaped early Christianity. These had become part of the rhetorolect that we seek and study.

The Scriptures seemed quite unworthy of comparison with the stately prose of Cicero, because I had too much conceit to accept their simplicity and not enough insight to penetrate their depths. It is surely true that as the child grows these books grow with him. But I was too proud to call myself a child. (Augustine, *Conf.* 3.5 [Pine-Coffin])

It was not until the seventh century that Bede completed the task Augustine had begun in *De doctrina christiana*: to completely replace all of the classical literary examples in rhetorical handbooks with examples from Scripture. The point was twofold: first, to eliminate offensive words and phrasings and, second, to replace human with divine authors. In the end, this led to the doctrine first expressed by Augustine, that because God uses rhetoric in the words of scripture he is the creator of rhetoric. This, too, is part of an argument, that is, Augustine’s enjoinder that no human author or speaker, then, should shun rhetoric for it, too, is part of God’s creation. The eloquence of the wise is the

¹⁹ Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (2d ed.; Bloomington: Indiana University, 1997), and Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (New York: Cambridge University, 1992), provide a point of entry into these genre questions, cross indexed with literacy-orality studies (Kelber) and Hellenistic *bios* traditions (Burridge). What we rhetorical scholars have to add is manifold, for we are looking at the community that both shaped and received these discourses.

best synthesis of all, and sometimes that eloquence will be very simple and plain.

According to many accounts, early Christian genres and rhetoric mark a return to “primitive” or “oral” tradition, perhaps due to the need to address non-literate audiences among the first Christians and then among the groups of recent converts. The rhetorical examination of many early Christian discourses tells a different tale. Paul, and Augustine, could place themselves into the congregation of the artless when they chose to, and this was a rhetorical decision. But they could ascend to the language of the educated as well, and this is just what Paul does in Corinthians and in Romans. Does the Wisdom of Solomon exemplify an educated rhetoric in its teacherly, confessional, narrative address to the kings of the earth, or is it in a more humble tradition of prophetic advice and exhortations to kings? Both. It no doubt functioned as a kind of oral chapbook for later speakers such as Paul who adopted the theme of wisdom, with its many subdivisions. As we continue to study the rhetoricals of the early Christians, and the arts they may have studied and used in composing them, we should keep a sharp eye out for our highly textual habits, and remember that almost all of what we are scrutinizing, even in its written form, was intended for oral delivery. Robbins’ work calls for several points of attention that can help us remember the orality and rhetoricality of early Christian discourse: its evolving neologisms and shared topics, its hybrid rhetorical genres, and its ways of adapting to the increasingly diverse and scattered communities that it both shaped and held together.²⁰

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²⁰ Robbins and Newby, “A Prolegomenon to the Relation of the Qu’rān and the Bible.”

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