

Creation and the Role of Wisdom in Proverbs 8: What Can We Learn?¹

Matthew McAfee

Welch College, Gallatin, Tennessee

The literary relationship between Prov 8:22–31 and Gen 1–2 has been a topic of interest among scholars. The traditional view of the composition of the Pentateuch assumes the chronological priority of Gen 1–2, which means the topic of creation in Prov 8:22–31 is naturally informed by it. Critical theories postulating a later date for the creation material of Genesis have upended the traditional assumptions regarding Prov 8:22–31 and its awareness of Genesis. If any literary relationship exists between these two texts, Gen 1–2 would have to be dependent upon Prov 8. This formulation poses significant exegetical challenges that will be explored in this article. It will be argued that it is difficult, if not impossible, to argue for the chronological priority of Prov 8. Nonetheless, the contents of these two passages strongly favor the original notion of a literary relationship between them. Also central to this discussion is the relevance of parallels from Babylonian creation stories and how much they should inform one's interpretation of creation in the Old Testament.

Key Words: Akkadian, Atra-basis, Babylonian, creation, Enuma Elish, ex nihilo, Ugaritic, חכמה (wisdom), בראשית (beginning), תהום, (deeps), קנה (acquire/create), אמן (craftsman), רחף/rhp (hovering), מעינות (springs)

Proverbs 8:22–31 celebrates the origins of wisdom. Personified wisdom argues for her preeminence over the rest of the created order, having been brought into existence before the world began. She was there with God in the beginning when he established the heavens and the earth.

Proverbs 8:1–36 is the second of three speeches from the mouth of

Wisdom: (1) Prov 1:20–33, (2) Prov 8:1–36, and (3) Prov 9:1–6. The content of this second speech suggests three natural divisions: (1) overture (8:1–11), (2) lesson (8:12–31), and (3) closure: invitation and admonition.² The speech opens with Lady Wisdom's appeal from the street corners for all who would heed her voice. The lesson from 8:12–31 can be further divided into two sections: vv. 12–21 presenting the desirable qualities of Lady Wisdom and vv. 22–31 explaining her origin from before the creation of the world.³ The contents of 8:22–31 can be outlined as follows:

1. Wisdom's origin in God (vv. 22–23)
2. Wisdom's preexistence to creation (vv. 24–26)
3. Wisdom's role in the creation event (vv. 27–30a)
4. Wisdom's place in the created order (vv. 30b–31)

The structure of the poem obviously shows that the main topic of interest is not creation per se, but rather the commendation of Wisdom as worthy of one's pursuit and the elevation of her status as having been in existence long before creation. In fact, she was already with God at the beginning of time when he created the world. This caveat does not, however, lessen the importance of this text as another witness to the Hebrew understanding of creation, since the assumptions underlying the poem complement other treatments of creation in the Bible. The following discussion will highlight several terms and expressions relevant to the theme of creation in Prov 8: (1) the meaning of קנה (v. 22), (2) the interpretation of ראשית (v. 22), (3) the significance of the statement “when there were no deeps” (v. 24), (4) the meaning of אמן (v. 30), and (5) the relevance of personified Wisdom for the “hovering” Spirit of Gen 1:2. Once I have surveyed these exegetical items I will proceed to explore the poem's literary relationship to the creation narratives of Genesis (if any) and the compositional assumptions that are involved. My purpose is to demonstrate the negative consequences in assuming the literary priority of Prov 8 over Gen 1–2 and to suggest that it is more exegetically viable to assume Gen 1–2 preceded Prov 8.

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² Adapted from Bálint Károly Zabán, *The Pillar Function of the Speeches of Wisdom: Proverbs 1:20–33, 8:1–36 and 9:1–6 in the Structural Framework of Proverbs 1–9* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 130.

³ Zabán, *The Pillar Function of the Speeches of Wisdom*, 130.

Wisdom's Role in Creation: Proverbs 8:22–31

The Meaning of קנה

The meaning of the verb קנה in v. 22 is a key component of one's interpretation of the whole passage. The verse describes God's creation of wisdom as his first creative activity, prior to the creation of the physical universe: "YHWH created me (קנני) at the beginning of his way, before his works from of old."⁴ This verb has been interpreted primarily in one of two ways: (1) acquire, possess or (2) create. In light of what he calls "meager support" for the meaning "create," William A. Irwin proposes yet a third meaning, "to be, or become, parent of."⁵ He points to Eve's giving birth to Cain, which could hardly mean "create" since mothers do not "create" their children.⁶ This objection, however, may in fact be ill founded since it is the divine blessing upon the marital union that ultimately produces offspring and in some way images God's creative powers. I am not convinced by Irwin's argument and maintain that our translation options are limited to two: acquire or create. Michael V. Fox has argued that while both "acquire" and "create" are legitimate translation values, "possess" is not. He believes that the word's lexical meaning indicates "acquire," and "one way something can be acquired is by creation." Although the English word "acquire" seems to imply that its object existed beforehand, this is not necessarily the case for Hebrew קנה.⁷ This semantic opposition may in fact be unnecessary, since the meaning "to create" for this root is well established in both the Old Testament and extra-biblical literature.⁸ I would argue that the meaning "acquire" is more likely a semantic development of "create," since the act of creating something grants the creator ownership of his creation.

In addition to Eve's acquisition of a son in Gen 4:1, I should also mention the divine epithet in Gen 14:19, 22. Here the root קנה occurs with God as subject and שמים וארץ ("heaven and earth") as objects. The full epithet reads אל עליון קנה שמים וארץ ("God Most High, creator of

heaven and earth"). The origin of this epithet is rather old, first attested as *^dEl-ku-ni-ir-sa* in the Hittite myth *Elkunirsu and Ashertu* (fifteenth to twelfth century BC),⁹ which I have interpreted elsewhere as "El, the creator of the earth."¹⁰ It is also well-attested in a number of Northwest Semitic inscriptions from the eighth century BC onward, all of which likewise refer to God as creator of earth:

'l qn r's "El, creator of earth" (Phoenician Karatepe inscription, eighth cent. BC)

[] qn r's "creator of earth (Jerusalem inscription, eighth to seventh cent. BC)

'lqnr' (tesserae from Palmyra)

'lqwnr' (Catherine); 'lqn'r' (Levi Della Vida) (Palmyrene inscription, first cent. AD)

b'šmyn qnb dy r' (Hatra inscription, second cent. AD)¹¹

The origin of the expanded form of this epithet attested in Gen 14:19, 22, "El Most High, Creator of heaven and earth," has been the subject of much inquiry. The biblical version adds two elements: עליון ("Most High") and שמים ("heaven"). At the very least, the fact that it includes all three elements from the earliest attestations in Hittite and Phoenician ('l + qny + r's) suggests it likely preserves an earlier tradition, perhaps associated with cultic activity performed in Jerusalem.¹² John Van Seters is unwilling to allow for any connection between the epithet in Gen 14 and the West Semitic parallels, but this stance is unfounded. He concedes that even if there were a connection, the biblical author is radically altering it for his own purposes. However, the inclusion of "heaven and earth" is not without earlier precedent, as seen in Mesopotamian sources. Frank M. Cross identifies several Akkadian parallels for this formula, one of which utilizes

⁴ All translations mine unless indicated otherwise.

⁵ William A. Irwin, "Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?" *JBL* 80 (1961): 133–42.

⁶ Irwin, "Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?" 135.

⁷ Michael Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, AB 18A (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 279.

⁸ See Helmer Ringgren, *Word and Wisdom: Studies in the Hypostatization of Divine Qualities and Functions in the Ancient Near East* (Lund: Ohlssons, 1947), 101; Alice M. Sinnott, *The Personification of Wisdom*, Society for Old Testament Study Monographs (New York: Routledge, 2017), 27.

⁹ See the translation of this myth in Harry A. Hoffner and Gary M. Beckman, *Hittite Myths*, 2nd ed., SBLWAW 2 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 69–70.

¹⁰ Matthew McAfee, "A Grammatical Analysis of Hittite *^dEl-ku-ni-ir-sa* in Light of West Semitic," *UF* 44 (2013): 213.

¹¹ For references, see McAfee, "A Grammatical Analysis," 203.

¹² According to Norman C. Habel, "Yahweh, Maker of Heaven and Earth": A Study in Tradition Criticism," *JBL* 91 (1972): 323. See also Frank M. Cross, "Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs," *HTR* 55 (1962): 43, who asserts that "to judge from parallels, the longer title has every claim of being original."

the verb *banû* “to create.”¹³ Needless to say, there is ample biblical and extra-biblical evidence for *qny* = “create.”

My treatment of this epithet here is only meant to supplement the numerous discussions that already exist on this root in favor of its meaning “create,” so I will not try to rehash them here. The broader context of the poet’s interest in showing that wisdom preexisted creation obviously strengthens this point.¹⁴ Lady Wisdom originated from God himself, and for that reason her existence falls outside the created order.¹⁵ As a literary device in the hands of the poet, God “created” her at the beginning of his ways. From a theological standpoint, wisdom represents the outflow of divine activity, or to use the language of Prov 8:22, it is the essence of “his way” (דרכו). God’s activity or “way” becomes the standard by which all other behavior is deemed to be wise or foolish. The poet locates the origin of wisdom in God, prior to “his works from of old.”

ראשית—Beginning or Foremost?

Another crucial term for understanding this passage is ראשית (“beginning”; v. 22). Contextually, the sense of ראשית most naturally means “beginning” and not simply “the first” or “foremost (act),” as some commentators have suggested.¹⁶ William A. Irwin argues that even though a temporal meaning is possible here, the absence of the ב preposition makes it less likely. Furthermore, the origin of Wisdom long preceded the creation of heaven and earth “in the beginning,” which stresses a “sharp contrast” between them. Irwin thus translates it “first in importance.”¹⁷ At

¹³ E.g., *bānī šamē u eršeti* (“creator of heaven and earth”); *bēl šamē u eršeti* (“lord of heaven and earth”), *abu šamē u eršeti* (“father of heaven and earth”), *bānāt šamē u eršeti* (“creatress of heaven and earth”), *bēlit šamē u eršeti* (“mistress of heaven and earth”). For references, see Cross, “Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs,” 443–44.

¹⁴ See the conclusion of Sinnott, *The Personification of Wisdom*, 29: “The use of created coheres with what is surely the logic of the text. Since God is named as the author of Wisdom throughout the biblical wisdom literature, the sense of ‘brought into existence’ or ‘created,’ is the more likely understanding.”

¹⁵ Similarly, R. N. Whybray affirms that “the ancient wisdom tradition and the revealed knowledge of Yahweh are compatible and complementary” and that Prov 8:22–31 states “plainly in more theological language that all wisdom comes from Yahweh” (*Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9*, SBT 45 [London: SCM, 1965], 98).

¹⁶ E.g., R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, AB 18 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 68, 73.

¹⁷ Irwin, “Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?” 140.

the beginning of all things, however, stands God in his wisdom, who created the world by the word of his power.

Contrary to Irwin’s reasoning, the point of the passage is to establish Wisdom’s preexistence to the created order, which ראשית essentially does. George M. Landes interprets the word here in Prov 8 in light of his assumptions about the meaning of בראשית in Gen 1:1, also preferring “first” or “foremost,” over “beginning.” He explains: “I am unaware of any creation tradition within Israel or elsewhere in the ancient Near East which refers to an absolute beginning—that is, a beginning of all things, including the gods.”¹⁸ The uniqueness of this concept in the ancient world leads Landes to reject “beginning” as a likely translation. Roland E. Murphy, however, believes that “beginning” should be the preferred translation, arguing that the “beginning of the Lord’s ways would mean that Woman Wisdom is the firstborn, and therefore preexistent to anything else, despite the various translations.”¹⁹ He also wonders if this could be a reference back to Gen 1:1, which is a plausible suggestion, given the parallels between these two passages.²⁰ Similarly, William McKane rejects Irwin’s proposal, instead favoring “first of his ways” signifying “first of his creative modes.”²¹ Fox renders it “the first stage,” noting the parallel קדם in the subsequent line, which simply indicates a prior time period.²²

I take ראשית as an adverbial accusative, meaning “in/at the beginning,” much like בראשית in Gen 1:1.²³ The absence of a ב preposition poses no real difficulty, especially in light of the penchant for terseness in poetry. The temporal markers in the parallel line also support this interpretation, namely, that God’s wisdom existed before his creative works that brought the known world into existence. Behind all of this stands wisdom. It is therefore unnecessary to conclude that Proverbs’s use of ראשית in a context dealing with wisdom’s existence prior to the creation of the deep

¹⁸ George M. Landes, “Creation Tradition in Proverbs 8:22–31 and Genesis 1,” in *A Light Unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M. Meyers*, ed. Howard N. Bream et al., Gettysburg Theological Studies 4 (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1974), 287.

¹⁹ Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, WBC 22 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 52.

²⁰ Murphy, *Proverbs*, 48.

²¹ William McKane, *Proverbs*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 354.

²² Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 280.

²³ Similarly, Mitchell Dahood, “Proverbs 8.22–31: Translation and Commentary,” *CBQ* 30 (1968): 513.

cannot have any relationship to בראשית in Gen 1:1. I will entertain this question further below.

“When There Were No Deeps”: The Preexistence of Wisdom

Thus far in our analysis it is sufficiently evident that Prov 8 situates wisdom’s origin before the creation of the world. The assumption of a creation *ex nihilo* is explicitly substantiated in v. 24: “When there were no deeps.” Fox distinguishes the place of *tehom* in the creation account of Gen 1 versus its place here in Prov 8. He explains that in Gen 1 *tehom* exists before creation as the unformed substance that God eventually shapes and fashions, whereas in Prov 8 it is the first created substance. Fox is not inclined to harmonize these two portrayals of creation, but simply admits that “Prov 8 exhibits some unusual notions.”²⁴ Gerhard von Rad similarly notes that “wisdom introduces herself in a very strange way, speaking of primeval existence, and of her preexistence before all the works of Creation.”²⁵ Fox’s admission may actually undermine the standard interpretation that assumes the preexistence of *tehom* in Gen 1.²⁶ It is especially problematic for those who affirm Gen 1 must have been composed after Prov 8 since this would mean that the later view attributed to Hellenistic influence (i.e., creation *ex nihilo*) is actually attested in the Bible prior to the earlier idea of preexisting unformed substance known from Babylonian sources. I will revisit this point again toward the end of this article.

Much of the interpretive support for *tehom*’s preexistence as unformed substance comes from its comparison with Mesopotamian sources like *Enuma Elish* and *Atrahasis*.²⁷ The central passage from *Enuma Elish* comes from the opening lines of the myth:

(1) When on high no name was given to heaven,

²⁴ Fox, *Proverbs* 1–9, 282.

²⁵ Gerhard von Rad, *The Theology of Israel’s Historical Traditions*, vol. 1 of *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 447.

²⁶ For an overview of the history of interpretation on Gen 1:1–3, see Martin F. J. Bastaan, “First Things First: The Syntax of Gen 1:1–3 Revisited,” in *Studies in Hebrew Language and Jewish Culture: Presented to Albert van der Heide on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Martin F. J. Bastaan and Reinier Munk (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 169–88.

²⁷ See the important treatment of this issue in Hermann Gunkel, *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton: A Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12*, trans. K. William Whitney Jr. with foreword by Peter Machinist (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 5–20.

Nor below was the netherworld called by name,
Primeval Apsu was their progenitor,
And matrix–Tiamat was she who bore them all,
(5) They were mingling their waters together,
No cane brake was intertwined nor thicket matted close.
When no gods at all had been brought forth,
None called by names, none destinies ordained,
Then were the gods formed within the[se two].²⁸

The temporal marker at the beginning of line 1 (*inuma* “when”) sets up a series of negative statements describing reality before the gods were formed (line 9). *Atrahasis* begins similarly: “when (*inuma*) gods like men . . .”²⁹ Both of these introductions assume the existence of something prior to the creation of the gods. Ever since the publication of these texts, scholars have argued that the biblical materials are drawing upon earlier Mesopotamian traditions, rendering the traditional translation of Gen 1:1–2a less likely:

בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ
והארץ היתה תהו ובהו וחשך על פני תהום

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
Now the earth was formless and void, and darkness was upon the
face of the deep.

In this translation, God’s initial act of creation is described in v. 1, while v. 2 depicts the formless substance that the initial act of creation produced.³⁰ Some scholars suggest that the introduction with *inuma*

²⁸ Translated by Benjamin R. Foster, “Epic of Creation (1.111) (*Enūma Elish*),” in *COS* 1:391.

²⁹ See W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-ḥasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood with the Sumerian Flood Story* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 42, 43.

³⁰ Gordon J. Wenham outlines four interpretations that have been proposed for these verses: (1) v. 1 is a temporal clause subordinate to v. 2: “When God began creating the heavens and the earth . . . the earth was formless and void”; (2) v. 1 is a temporal clause subordinate to v. 3: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth . . . (now the earth was formless and void) . . . God said”; (3) v. 1 is an independent clause summarizing all the events of creation: “In the beginning God was the creator of the heavens and the earth”; and (4) v. 1 is an independent clause expressing the first act of creation: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (*Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1 [Grand

“when” in parallel Akkadian sources should inform our interpretation of בראשית in Gen 1:1, yielding the following translation:

When God began creating the heavens and the earth, the earth was formless and void and darkness was on the face of the deep . . .³¹

This translation typically assumes the preexistence of the unformed substance introduced in v. 2.³²

E. A. Speiser defends this interpretation on two grounds: the Mesopotamian parallels and the syntax of בראשית. His syntactical argument is that for “in the beginning God created” to be correct, the ב preposition would need to have the definite article, as others have argued. The current form would have to be taken as a construct, “at the beginning of the creation of heaven and earth.” In this construction, the prepositional phrase would typically be followed by the infinitive construct, but in Gen 1:1 a suffix conjugation follows instead: בראשית ברא אלהים. Speiser admits the oddity of this proposal but cites Hos 1:2 as a parallel exception.³³ This argument is not altogether convincing, however. As Gordon Wenham has observed, the absence of an article in בראשית is not really a problem in

Rapids: Zondervan, 1987], 11). See also the helpful treatment of these views in Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, NAC 1A (Nashville: B&H, 1996), 136–44.

³¹ This interpretation goes back as early as Ibn Ezra, who rendered this clause: בראשית בריית שמים וארץ “at the beginning of the creation of heaven and earth” (see his commentary on Gen 1:1, online: <http://mg.alhatorah.org/Full/Bereshit/1.1#e0n6>).

³² Note, however, Nahum M. Sarna, who adopts this interpretation of v. 1 but does not rule out the concept of creation *ex nihilo* contextually. He suggests that the Genesis narrative contains “intimations of such a concept.” He further observes the stark contrast between the biblical and Mesopotamian creation accounts: “Precisely because of the indispensable importance of preexisting matter in the pagan cosmologies, the very absence of such mention here is highly significant.” He continues, “This conclusion is reinforced by the idea of creation by divine fiat without reference to any inert matter being present. Also, the repeated biblical emphasis upon God as the exclusive Creator would seem to rule out the possibility of preexistent matter. Finally, if *bara*’ is used only of God’s creation, it must be essentially distinct from human creation. The ultimate distinction would be *creatio ex nihilo*, which has no human parallel and is thus utterly beyond all human comprehension” (Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary [Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989], 5).

³³ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, AB 1 (New Haven: Yale University, 1964), 12.

Hebrew since temporal phrases routinely lack the article.³⁴ Furthermore, the fact that Prov 8 refers to the beginning of all creation (e.g., מראש in v. 23), before the earth and the deep had been fashioned, would seem to favor the traditional understanding of Gen 1:1.³⁵ Besides, the apparent parallel with the opening lines of the Akkadian text of *Enuma Elish* should not determine the Hebrew syntax of Gen 1:1. To be sure, from a surface reading both accounts are talking about the origins of the universe, but on a deeper level the content of these two texts is starkly different, not to mention their divergent literary purposes. It is even more problematic to posit Gen 1:1 assumes preexistent matter against the inner-biblical witness of Prov 8 where creation *ex nihilo* is operative. It unnecessarily introduces an inconsistency in the biblical Hebrew tradition.³⁶

More recently Robert D. Holmstedt has supplemented the appeal to comparative literature with a linguistic argument for taking Gen 1:1 as a temporal subordinate clause.³⁷ Holmstedt believes בראשית is “the head of

³⁴ Wenham cites Isa 46:10; 40:21; 41:4, 26; Gen 3:22; 6:3, 4; Mic 5:1; Hab 1:12.

³⁵ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 12. See also Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 106–8.

³⁶ My point here touches on a broader problem involving the comparative method in general. We need better methodological controls in our appeals to comparative literature for interpretive purposes. If a comparative reading of a given text introduces inconsistency with the broader tradition that produced that text, it may call into question the validity of the comparison itself. This is especially true if there is a plausible interpretation of that text that is more consistent with its internal tradition (e.g., comparing Babylonian texts with other Babylonian texts, Ugaritic texts with other Ugaritic texts, Biblical Hebrew texts with other Biblical Hebrew texts, and so on). For any parallel to be valid, one has to establish that the author of the text in question was aware of the comparative material. If such an awareness can be reasonably established, one also has to demonstrate its effect on interpretation. In other words, if the author was aware of this comparative material, was he adopting it wholesale, adapting it to suit his own purposes, critiquing it, or rejecting it altogether? These questions are too large to be handled adequately here but simply illustrate why I think it is important to give priority to parallel passages within the Hebrew canon over comparative literature, which may or may not be relevant.

³⁷ Holmstedt cites the following passages as containing constructions parallel to this one: Hos 1:2; Isa 29:1; Lev 25:48; 1 Sam 25:15; Jer 48:36 (Robert D. Holmstedt, “The Restrictive Syntax of Genesis 1:1,” *VT* 58 [2008]: 60). In none of these examples does one find an unmarked relative dependent upon a circumstantial clause. Furthermore, they are from genres other than narrative prose

an unmarked, restrictive relative clause.”³⁸ By restrictive he means that the referent “beginning” in this grammatical setting can only refer to the beginning of God’s creation activity, not an “absolute beginning,” at which point God created. In other words, “beginning” is relative to the event described in the main clause, which would be v. 2: “The earth was formless and void.” He rejects the idea that בראשית is in construct with the verb ברא, rightly noting that nouns are in construct with other nouns, not verbs. Instead, Holmstedt proposes that בראשית functions as an asyndetic relative (i.e., the relative indicator is omitted) of the following clause—“the beginning that God created.” In such an environment, the head noun is always a construct form with or without the relative אשר. He provides the following two examples:

Lev 13:46

כל ימי אשר הנגע בו

all the days that the disease is in him (Lev 13:46)

Jer 48:36

על כן יתרת עשה אבדו

therefore the abundance of it [Moab] made has perished

Holmstedt’s interpretation must assume that בראשית is indeed an unmarked relative. Furthermore, this interpretation of Gen 1:1 does not account for the syntax of the following clause in v. 2 where the noun is fronted. Clauses with fronted nouns in narrative prose are typically circumstantial to the main clause, thus introducing background information. If we follow Holmstedt’s analysis, a markedly circumstantial clause becomes the main clause of the entire creation narrative.³⁹ This problem undermines the likelihood that בראשית is an unmarked relative. If, however, we take בראשית adverbially, ברא provides the baseline of the narrative, which is then followed by the circumstantial clause in v. 2. The main

(poetic, legal, direct discourse).

³⁸ Holmstedt, “The Restrictive Syntax of Genesis 1:1,” 65.

³⁹ For more on the narrative “foreground” versus “background” frame-work, see Robert E. Longacre, *Joseph: A Story of Divine Providence: A Text Theoretical and Textlinguistic Analysis of Genesis 37 and 39–40* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1989); Francis I. Anderson, *The Sentence in Biblical Hebrew* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974); and Alviero Niccacci, *The Syntax of the Hebrew Verb in Classical Hebrew*, trans. W. G. E. Watson (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990).

line of the narrative would resume in v. 3: “Then God said.”⁴⁰ Again, such an interpretation is more consistent with the use of ראשית in Prov 8:22.

The Meaning of אמון

Perhaps one of the most discussed terms from Prov 8 is אמון (v. 30). The difficulty of its interpretation is evidenced from ancient times and has left behind a well-worn pathway of discussion up into modern times. My treatment of this term here is purposefully brief due to the voluminous secondary literature already dedicated to this question.⁴¹ My interest lies primarily in the relevance of this term for understanding wisdom’s role in creation.

Three principal views have been espoused for the meaning of Hebrew אמון. The first and perhaps oldest approach interprets the word as “artisan, craftsman.” Its etymology would come from Akkadian *ummānu* meaning “military force, work force.”⁴² This view is not without its problems: its only other occurrence is in Jer 52:15 (הָאֲמֹנִי) where it is thought to indicate “craftsman, artisan,” although this meaning has been disputed; the more established artisan term אָמֵן, attested once in Song 7:2, evinces a significantly different morphology.⁴³ This view applies the term to Wisdom, describing her as a master artisan who actively participated in God’s creation work. The second suggestion derives this word from the root אָמַן meaning “to confirm, support,” here in the sense of nurture as a parent nurtures a child.⁴⁴ As an active participle (i.e., one who supports) it would

⁴⁰ For a recent defense of the traditional interpretation of Gen 1:1–3, see Jeremy D. Lyon, “Genesis 1:1–3 and the Literary Boundary of Day One,” *JETS* 62 (2019): 269–85, esp. 272–75.

⁴¹ For an excellent overview of the interpretation of this word see Sinnott, *The Personification of Wisdom*, 29–34. See also H. -P. Rüger, “amôn—Pflegekind: Zur Auslegungsgeschichte von Prv. 8:30a,” in *Übersetzung und Deutung: Studien zu dem Alten Testament und seiner Umwelt, Alexander Reinard Hulst gewidmet von Freunden und Kollegen*, ed. D. Barthelemy et al. (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1977), 154–63; Gerlinde Baumann, *Die Weisheitsgestalt in Proverbien 1–9*, FAT 16 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 131–38; C. L. Rogers, “The Meaning and Significance of the Hebrew Word אמון in Proverbs 8,30,” *ZAW* 109 (1997): 208–21.

⁴² CAD, 2:102–8.

⁴³ On the etymology of אָמֵן, see William F. Albright, *JBL* 60 (1941): 210, citing the earlier proposal of Ewald tying together Akkadian *ummānu* (“artisan, scholar”), Aramaic *ummān*, Hebrew *ommān*, and Phoenician *ammūn* (**ommōn* > **ammōn* > *ammūn* [by dissimilation]).

⁴⁴ See BDB, 52–53; HALOT, 63.

refer to Wisdom supporting God's creation work; as a passive participle (i.e., one who is raised) it characterizes Wisdom as a passive onlooker making sport and bringing delight to God as he created the world. Fox has proposed a variation of this view, arguing that it is an infinitive absolute meaning "being raised" or "growing up" (relying on medieval scholars Ibn Janah and Moshe Qimhi), which depicts Wisdom as a young child growing up under God's care.⁴⁵ Scholars have noted problems with this suggestion, one of them being that Wisdom as a young child does not seem to fit the context of the poem at large.⁴⁶ Stuart Weeks has defended a third option, identifying this word with the noun or adjective חֶסֶד/חֶסֶד meaning "trusting" or "faithfulness," which in this context would assert the value and reliability of Wisdom.⁴⁷

Apart from the meaning of the term itself, the main dispute concerns Wisdom's participation in creation. The artisan interpretation understands Wisdom as integrally involved in the creation event, being used of God as a master craftsman—he made the world with the aid of Wisdom. The other proposals emphasize Wisdom's presence at creation and the fact that she stands outside the created order, but only as a spectator witnessing God's creation activity. In all such proposals one dominant aspect persists—prior to God's creation of the material world, Wisdom was there with him from the very beginning. The context of the poem would seem to support the notion of Wisdom's participation in God's creative activity. The fact that rulers are said to rule under the guidance of Wisdom in vv. 15 and 16 ("by me") may offer support for a similar understanding here—with the aid of Wisdom God created the world. And if God "created" Wisdom at the beginning of his way (v. 22), it is also logical to assume that this was done so that God might utilize Wisdom as he created the world.⁴⁸ The interpretive thrust of the poem is to urge the reader to live life by the principles of wisdom, which is patterned after the wisdom

⁴⁵ Michael V. Fox, "'Amon Again," *JBL* 115 (1996): 701–2.

⁴⁶ Sinnott, *The Personification of Wisdom*, 31.

⁴⁷ Stuart Weeks, "The Context and Meaning of Proverbs 8:30a," *JBL* 125 (2006): 440–42.

⁴⁸ Bruce Vawter questions the validity of simply arguing for Wisdom's priority in the order of creation without having had any role in creation itself. As he argues, "it seems to me that here wisdom is said to have pre-existed the created order and therefore to be outside it, though in some fashion it subsequently became instrumental in the production of the created order" ("Wisdom and Creation," *JBL* 99 [1980]: 213). Note, however, that Vawter interprets the root *qnh* in v. 22 as "acquire" rather than "create" (p. 213).

of the Creator.

Wisdom and the "Hovering" Spirit of God in Genesis 1:2

Genesis 1:2 curiously depicts the Spirit of God "hovering" over the face of the deep in anticipation of God's activity in giving shape to the material world. In his discussion of this passage and its relationship to Prov 8, Landes suggests the presentation of the Spirit of God hovering over the face of the deeps in Gen 1:2 hints at a negative connotation, "where the image is either of the eagle or the hawk circling its prey, thus possibly suggesting some hostility."⁴⁹ Landes supports this interpretation by citing the Ugaritic Aqhat Epic and Anat's consignment of YTPN to hover over the hero Aqhat as an eagle or vulture hovering over its prey (KTU 1.18 19–20). However, even though this Ugaritic parallel suggests a hostile encounter, it does not necessitate that the main idea of the Ugaritic root *rhp* is in fact hostility. The context of this Ugaritic passage actually suggests preparation to act, which just so happens to be in an aggressive and hostile manner.

I would like to suggest that the hovering Spirit of God in Gen 1:2 may provide an initial kernel in the development of Wisdom's position with regard to creation.⁵⁰ My proposal would temper Landes's assertion that the theme of wisdom (חֵכֶמָה) is entirely absent from Gen 1, unlike Prov 8 where it stands at the foreground of the text with creation as its background. Since the term חֵכֶמָה ("wisdom"), much less a wisdom motif, is not detected in Gen 1, he concludes that Prov 8:22 "has not left the impression that this passage was composed under the influence of Gen 1 or vice versa."⁵¹ Recently, however, JoAnn Scurlock has proposed the following interpretation of Gen 1:2: "With darkness over the face of the Abyss and the spirit of God **surveying** the face of the waters." Her translation is based upon two lines of argument: (1) a parallel from the Mesopotamian creation story *Enuma Elish*, and (2) the meaning of the root *rhp* attested in Hebrew and Ugaritic.⁵²

⁴⁹ Landes, "Creation Tradition," 286.

⁵⁰ I first raised this connection in McAfee, review of *Creation and Chaos: A Reconsideration of Hermann Gunkel's Chaaskampf Hypothesis*, ed. JoAnn Scurlock and Richard H. Beal, *BBR* 24 (2014): 553.

⁵¹ Landes, "Creation Tradition," 289.

⁵² JoAnn Scurlock, "Searching for Meaning in Genesis 1:2: Purposeful Creation out of Chaos without Kampf," in *Creation and Chaos: A Reconsideration of Hermann Gunkel's Chaaskampf Hypothesis*, ed. JoAnn Scurlock and Richard H. Beal (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 56–61.

She draws her first line of evidence from the Akkadian term *hiātu* meaning “to watch over; to explore, survey, or examine.”⁵³ It occurs in *Enuma Elish* describing the activity of Marduk as he prepares to create the world from the carcass of Tiamat. It is preparatory work whereby Marduk carefully plans out his creative acts. She cites the following passage from *Enuma Elish*, “He crossed heaven and inspected (*i-hi-tam-ma*) (its) firmament, he made a counterpart to Apsu, the dwelling of Nudimmud,”⁵⁴ which she believes demonstrates his planning in preparation for the creation event.⁵⁵ As Scurlock explains, “creation was not mere mechanical separation but a process requiring a cognitive, pre- or para-creative act, just like Michelangelo with his block of stone.”⁵⁶

Scurlock calls this Akkadian term a “functional equivalent” of the Hebrew root רחף and Ugaritic *rhph*.⁵⁷ The Hebrew participle מרחפת in Gen 1:2, typically rendered “hovering,” depicts the activity of God’s Spirit as he prepares to give shape to the unformed substance of the deeps. Deuteronomy 32:11 offers a helpful parallel usage for this root:

כנשר יעיר קנו על גוזליו ירחף
יפרש כנפיו יקההו ישאהו על אברתו

As an eagle stirs up its nest,
Over its young **it hovers**,
He spreads out his wings,
He takes them,
He bears them upon his pinions.

This passage compares the care of YHWH for his covenant people with an eagle giving instruction to its young teaching them to fly, perhaps warranting the idea of the eagle “watching over” its young.⁵⁸

A similar notion for this root occurs in the Ugaritic Aqhat Epic where the goddess Anat devises a plan to kill the hero Aqhat in exchange for his coveted bow (KTU 1.18 IV:12–27). She determines to send YTPN to hover (*trhpn*) over Aqhat like a hawk as it eats, in preparation to strike him with three deadly blows to the head.⁵⁹ The passage in question reads:

[*lh*] *nšrm trhpn*
ybsr [hbl d] iym

[over him] hawks **will hover**,
the [flock of b]irds will keep watch.

As Scurlock has rightly noted, the parallel word in the second line is *bšr*, meaning “to examine, watch over,”⁶⁰ much like Akkadian *hiātu*. The context of the passage suggests that Anat sends YTPN to kill Aqhat in the manner of a hawk soaring above its prey in preparation for the kill.

This comparative evidence leads Scurlock to conclude that the Spirit’s activity in Gen 1:2 “implies purposeful movement” of an “all-knowing and all-wise God” preparing to fashion the cosmos.⁶¹ This proposal opens up a plausible means of understanding the inner-biblical relationship between these two texts. Let me be clear in qualifying that I am not arguing that the Mesopotamian parallels Scurlock cites are necessarily being borrowed by the biblical authors.⁶² Rather, her study highlights a shared understanding of similar expressions in Mesopotamian, Ugaritic, and Hebrew sources. It is reasonable to argue that this shared understanding of “purposeful movement” that was utilized in the Genesis creation account provides a unifying theme shared with the personification of wisdom in Prov 8. I would therefore suggest that the portrayal of personified wisdom pre-existing the formation of the deeps parallels the purposeful movement of God’s Spirit presented in Gen 1:2.

Proverb 8 and Literary Relationships: ANE Borrowing or Inner-Biblical Development?

The literary development that scholars propose for Prov 8 is not uniform, but it is often assumed that vv. 22–31 may have existed as an independent literary unit.⁶³ Part of the basis for this suggestion is the abrupt shift in topic from v. 21 to v. 22—the initial subject of the chapter is the role of Wisdom in governing the affairs of the historical community, while

Eisenbrauns, 2019), 45–48.

⁶⁰ See Gregorio del Olmo Lete et al., *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition*, 3rd ed., HdO 112, The Near and Middle East (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 239.

⁶¹ Scurlock, “Searching for Meaning,” 60.

⁶² See comment in n. 34 above.

⁶³ Crawford H. Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, ICC (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1899), 171; McKane, *Proverbs*, 351–52; R. N. Whybray, *The Composition of the Book of Proverbs*, JSOTSup 168 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 120–21; Alan Lenzi, “Proverbs 8:22–31: Three Perspectives on Its Composition,” *JBL* 125 (2006): 691–92.

⁵³ CAD 7:159.

⁵⁴ *Enuma eliš* IV 141 (see Lambert, “Epic of Creation” [1.117] in *COS* 1:398).

⁵⁵ Scurlock, “Searching for Meaning,” 58.

⁵⁶ Scurlock, “Searching for Meaning,” 59.

⁵⁷ Scurlock, “Searching for Meaning,” 59 n. 50.

⁵⁸ Scurlock, “Searching for Meaning,” 53, 59.

⁵⁹ See Matthew McAfee, *Life and Mortality in Ugaritic: A Lexical and Literary Study*, Explorations in Ancient Near Eastern Civilizations 7 (University Park:

vv. 22–31 shift to a cosmological setting wherein Wisdom precedes the natural order.⁶⁴ Not everyone accepts this conclusion, however. Some scholars instead propose that the poem represents a single literary unit, which Fox describes as exhibiting “balance and symmetry.”⁶⁵ Patrick W. Skehan argues rather extensively for the literary unity of Prov 8, observing that Wisdom speaks uniformly throughout the entire chapter. One major problem for those who divide vv. 22–31 from the rest of the chapter is that they are apparently “locked in place by v. 35b of the concluding stanza.”⁶⁶ Wisdom describes her delight (שְׂשׂוֹן) in the sons of man in v. 31 and then announces that those who find her will find life and obtain favor (רִצּוֹן) from YHWH in v. 36. Skehan further argues his case from the poetic structure of Prov 2, a literary unit whose structure corresponds to that of Prov 8:1–36. The thematic connections throughout Prov 8 support its literary unity, and the shift in topic between the first and second half of the chapter hardly necessitates that vv. 22–31 once existed separately.

Setting aside for the moment the poem’s literary unity, it is generally agreed that this material is relatively early, which has led scholars to propose literary borrowing from ancient Near Eastern sources, much like Gen 1. Landes, for instance, proposes that Prov 8 may have been composed as early as the tenth century, perhaps borrowing a number of ideas from Canaanite-Phoenician sources.⁶⁷ He believes they shared “a common heritage in specifically Canaanite-Phoenician traditions about creation, mixed with other ancient Near Eastern traditions which came into Israel through a Phoenician alembic.”⁶⁸ This suggestion is similar to that of William F. Albright who drew the same conclusion several decades earlier.⁶⁹ He argued that the personified Lady Wisdom of Prov 8 represented the adaptation of a Canaanite goddess of wisdom, appropriated sometime before the seventh century BC.

Other scholars have drawn attention to the appearance of wisdom in the Aramaic text “The Wisdom of Aḥiqar” as a predecessor for

personified wisdom. James M. Lindenberger renders the pertinent passage as follows:

[From] heaven [or “by Heaven”] the peoples are [fa]vored,
[W]isdo[m] is [of] the gods;

[Her] kingdom is [et]er[nal].
She has been established by Sha[ma]lyn;
Yea, the Holy Lord has exalted [her].⁷⁰

Unfortunately, this parallel has been rendered uncertain due to Bazale Porten and Ada Yardeni’s recent study of the papyrus on which this text was written. This manuscript is a palimpsest, which means that a previously written text had been erased prior to the current one. Porten and Yardeni were able to make out a large portion of the erased text and determined the join between the above two sections was incorrect, requiring a new ordering of the material.⁷¹ The cumulative effect of this discovery is that wisdom is no longer presented as a personified woman, thus nullifying the proposed parallel.⁷² As Fox has noted, the Aḥiqar text offers the only extra-biblical parallel to the biblical conception of personified wisdom.⁷³ This recent development in the study of Aḥiqar therefore means that an ancient Near Eastern precedent for the biblical personification of wisdom thus far has not been found. This situation may suggest that we are dealing with an inner-biblical development, one that is not necessarily dependent upon outside cultural/religious influences, but one that arose organically within the Hebrew wisdom tradition.

Other proposals look to Mesopotamia for parallels to personified wisdom. Alan Lenzi describes the development of Wisdom’s role in creation as a polemic against Babylonian wisdom, highlighting literary connections with *Enuma Elish* I:79–108.⁷⁴ He does so for the following three reasons: (1) an abundant use of words for “water,” like מַיִם נִבְכִּי מִים (“springs abounding with water”; v. 24), עַל פְּנֵי תְהוֹם (“upon the face of the deep”; v. 27), מַיִם (“water”), יָם (“sea”), and מוֹסְדֵי אֶרֶץ (“foundations of the earth”;

⁶⁴ McKane, *Proverbs*, 351.

⁶⁵ Fox, *Proverbs* 1–9, 292.

⁶⁶ Patrick W. Skehan, “Structures in Poems on Wisdom: Proverbs 8 and Sirach 24,” *CBQ* 41 (1979): 366, 373.

⁶⁷ Landes, “Creation Tradition,” 290.

⁶⁸ Landes, “Creation Tradition,” 291.

⁶⁹ William F. Albright, “Some Canaanite-Phoenician Sources of Hebrew Wisdom,” in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, ed. D. Winton Thomas, VTSup 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1955), 7.

⁷⁰ See James M. Lindenberger, “The Gods of Aḥiqar,” *UF* 14 (1983): 105–17.

⁷¹ Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni, *TAD* C1.1 and 3.7.

⁷² Lindenberger, “‘Wisdom Is of the Gods’: An Aramaic Antecedent to Proverbs 8 (Or: ‘The Case of the Vanishing Evidence!’),” in *In the Shadow of Bezalel: Aramaic, Biblical, and Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honor of Bezalel Porten*, ed. Alejandro F. Botta (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 271–74.

⁷³ Fox, *Proverbs* 1–9, 333.

⁷⁴ Lenzi, “Proverbs 8:22–31,” 699.

v. 29); (2) the occurrence of so-called birth language like קנה (“to acquire”; v. 22), נסך (v. 23; cf. סך in Ps 139:13 “woven in the womb”), and חוללתי (“I was brought forth”; vv. 24, 25), suggesting that Wisdom came into existence through birth; and (3) the phonological correspondence between Hebrew נסכתי (v. 23) and Akkadian *našṣiki*, an epithet for Ea, the Mesopotamian god of water and wisdom. He concludes that there is only one ancient Near Eastern text known to contain all three of these elements—*Enuma Elish* I:79–108. He explains, “I believe this passage informed Prov 8:22–31 in its presentation of Wisdom’s origin as a birth and provided a motivation to emphasize Wisdom’s absolute chronological priority to everything.”⁷⁵ As I have already argued above, the so-called “birth language” is not altogether prominent, if at all. It rests solely on חוללתי (“I was brought forth”; vv. 24, 25). The term קנה in v. 22 is better rendered “create,” not “give birth,” and נסכתי is not necessarily associated with birth. Nonetheless, Lenzi takes Prov 8 as a polemic against Ea, the Mesopotamian god of wisdom, and his son Marduk, by presenting them as “latecomers in comparison to Israel’s figure of Wisdom.” The wisdom of Mesopotamia is no match for Israelite Wisdom because “she existed before the very element (תהום/*tiāmtu*) that gave rise to Ea and Marduk.”⁷⁶

Even though Lenzi argues for an anti-Babylonian wisdom polemic, he sees it as a literary development of Prov 3:19–20.⁷⁷ Proverbs 3:19–20 reads:

יהוה בחכמה יסד ארץ כונן שמים בתבונה
בדעתו תהומות נבקעו ושחקים ירעפו טל

YHWH by wisdom formed the earth, establishing the heavens by understanding;
With his knowledge the deeps were divided, and the clouds drip with dew.

In addition to the similar vocabulary shared between these two texts, Lenzi offers three more reasons for this literary relationship: (1) YHWH is the first word in both texts (cf. 8:22), (2) both texts describe creation activity with the verb כון (“to be, exist”; cf. 8:27: שמים), and (3) the unusual parallelism of מעינות (“springs”) // תהומות (“deeps”) in 8:24 (the only time these two words are parallel in the Bible) can only be explained if 8:22–31 is interpreting 3:19–20 in its current literary form.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Lenzi, “Proverbs 8:22–31,” 699–700.

⁷⁶ Lenzi, “Proverbs 8:22–31,” 710.

⁷⁷ Lenzi, “Proverbs 8:22–31,” 698, already suggested by Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs*, 103.

⁷⁸ Lenzi, “Proverbs 8:22–31,” 694–95.

Lenzi’s first two arguments for literary dependency may be justified, but reason three is less likely. He argues that the first four letters of מעיניך (“from your eyes”) in 3:21 informed the poet’s use of מעינות (“springs”) as a parallel for תהומות in 8:24. I am not convinced that this novel argument provides the best explanation for the “unusual” choice of “springs” as a parallel for “deeps,” especially given the fact that it is based upon a speculative theory involving the association of two similar sounding words in the mind of the author. In other words, it is not an actual poetic pair. A more concrete example comes from the Genesis flood account where these two words appear in a construct chain—מעינת תהום (“springs of the deep”; Gen 7:11; 8:2)—which Lenzi does cite in a footnote.⁷⁹ I should also observe that the semantic association between “springs” and “deep” occurs again in Prov 8:28, this time in a construct chain: עינות תהום (“springs of the deep”). This means that the association of these two terms (or concepts) is not as unprecedented as he suggests, unless of course one wants to rigidly distinguish association via poetic parallelism versus association via a construct chain. Obviously, one text is poetic and the other is narrative, but both similarly associate the springs with the deeps.⁸⁰ Remarkably, Gen 7 and 8 are the only other biblical contexts where these two terms are associated. Furthermore, they occur in a narrative setting (i.e., the flood) that harkens back to the creation story of Gen 1, essentially highlighting the fact that God’s work in the flood somehow signifies new creation or re-creation activity. We especially see new creation language in God’s blessing Noah and his family in Gen 9:1–7.⁸¹ Once again we see another literary touch point between Prov 8 and the broader story of Genesis.

Scholars are generally skeptical about the prospects of seeing any literary relationship between Gen 1 and Prov 8. R. N. Whybray has registered perhaps the most negative assessment of this possibility. He outlines the elements of creation found in the Egyptian *Book of the Aphosis*, Mesopotamian *Enuma Elish*, Babylonian *The Creation of the World by Marduk*, Gen 1:1–3, Gen 2:4b–7, and Prov 8:22–31.⁸² Even though he surmises that the likelihood of borrowing from Phoenicia is more plausible than these other

⁷⁹ Lenzi, “Proverbs 8:22–31,” 695 n. 35.

⁸⁰ The fact that תהום is singular (“deep”) here and not plural (“deeps”) does not lessen the significance of its association with “springs.”

⁸¹ E.g., “Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen 9:1b; cf. 9:7).

⁸² R. N. Whybray, “Proverbs VIII 22–31 and Its Supposed Prototypes,” *VT* 15 (1965): 505–6.

more distant texts, it is nevertheless unlikely. He relegates all commonalities between these texts as coincidence, meaning that any account dealing with the creation of the world will inevitably contain similar thematic elements.⁸³ I believe this assessment is too pessimistic. He may be right in his hesitancy over purported borrowings of Hebrew authors from Mesopotamian, Egyptian, or even Canaanite traditions. However, it is harder to deny any familiarity between Gen 1 and Prov 8. The fact that creation is not the main topic of focus in Prov 8 does not eliminate its commonalities with Gen 1 in its assumptions about creation in support of Wisdom's priority.

Others have expressed similar doubts about the likelihood of a literary linkage. Landes concludes that it is highly unlikely that a literary relationship ever existed between these two texts and stresses the importance of recognizing their unique literary purposes even though they share common themes and expressions related to creation.⁸⁴ For instance, the nature of creation portrayed in these two texts is not entirely uniform, according to Landes. In giving priority to wisdom over creation, Prov 8:22 depicts the cosmic situation before God created the heavens and the earth, maintaining that wisdom was there at the beginning "when there were no deeps." This portrayal, Landes believes, contrasts Gen 1 in its assumption that the primordial waters were already in existence prior to the creation of the heavens and the earth.⁸⁵ As he explains, "It is already assumed to be in existence, along with darkness and *h'rs* in the state of *thw wbh*, in Gen 1:2. All these are 'givens' when God begins to create the heavens and the earth."⁸⁶ Likewise, McKane is rather adamant that the creation account represented in Prov 8 is entirely inconsistent with a "pre-existent watery chaos," which in his estimation exhibits one of the noteworthy features of the passage.⁸⁷

The main hesitancy in drawing any literary connections between Prov 8 and Gen 1–2 stems from the view that Gen 1:1–2 assumes the preexistence of the unformed substance of creation. As scholars have argued, the doctrine of *ex nihilo* is altogether foreign to Gen 1 and has been foisted upon the text rather intrusively by later exegetes. But as I have already intimated above, it may be that this interpretation of Gen 1:1–2 has been forced upon the Hebrew text by reading a perfectly helpful background

⁸³ Whybray, "Proverbs VIII 22–31 and Its Supposed Prototypes," 507.

⁸⁴ Landes, "Creation Tradition," 282.

⁸⁵ Landes, "Creation Tradition," 283.

⁸⁶ Landes, "Creation Tradition," 286.

⁸⁷ McKane, *Proverbs*, 355.

text like *Enuma Elish* into the foreground of the interpretive process. Although the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is often assumed to be the result of Greek philosophical influence on Christian interpreters, it is actually already attested in a Jewish source from the Hellenistic period.⁸⁸ In 2 Maccabees we read, "I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed" (2 Macc 7:28 NRSV). Scurlock believes this passage shows that the Jewish doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* constituted a reaction against a more rationalistic view of God, one that was informed more by Greek philosophy than it was biblical understanding.⁸⁹ Even so, this doctrine did not originate in the Second Temple period either, since it is already present in Prov 8:24, demonstrating that it is a much earlier concept firmly grounded in the biblical tradition, no doubt in contrast to the sensitivities of other ancient Near Eastern worldviews. This text essentially negates Bernard F. Batto's claim that ancient Near Eastern peoples "had no concept of creation *ex nihilo*" and that the idea first "made its appearance no earlier than the second century B.C.E. with the arrival of Hellenistic ideas in the region, after the heyday of ancient near Eastern culture."⁹⁰

A number of scholars also assume that, should a relationship between Gen 1 and Prov 8 be entertained, it would require that Gen 1 was dependent upon Prov 8, not the other way around. The broader theoretical basis for such a viewpoint goes all the way back to the classic Documentary Hypothesis, which was given its fullest expression in the work of Julius Wellhausen. According to this theoretical framework, the composition of Gen 1 (E source) actually followed the composition of the Deuteronomistic History, upending the traditional chronology that assumed Genesis was composed before the historical books of Samuel and Kings.⁹¹ More recent advocates of this theory, sometimes called "Neo-Documentarians," have made refinements to Wellhausen's theory but by and large retain his overall approach to the compositional history of the Pentateuch.⁹²

⁸⁸ Scurlock, "Searching for Meaning," 49; Sarna, *Genesis*, 5.

⁸⁹ Scurlock, "Searching for Meaning," 49.

⁹⁰ Bernard F. Batto, *In the Beginning: Essays on Creation Motifs in the Ancient Near East and the Bible*, Siphut: Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures 9 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 10.

⁹¹ Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel: With a Reprint of the Article 'Israel' from the Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Cambridge Library Collection: Biblical Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁹² See Joel S. Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary*

In fact, much of the secondary literature treating this topic apparently operates under this premise. It requires that the direction of borrowing, if it happened at all, would have been from Prov 8 to Gen 1. This is the working hypothesis of Landes's treatment of these two texts.⁹³ He assumes the chronological priority of Prov 8 but is also willing to grant, hypothetically, that Gen 1 could have existed poetically prior to its narrative form, perhaps as early as the seventh century BC.⁹⁴ We have no evidence to support this observation; it is mere speculation.

On the other end of the spectrum, however, Ronald E. Clements assumes that the Hebrew wisdom tradition would have had access to the creation account in Gen 1–2. As he describes it,

In the later OT period, the written accounts which have been preserved for us in Gen 1–3 were available in virtually their extant form to the writers of wisdom. So it is not surprising to find that in Prov. 8:22–31 and also in Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth) the Genesis text has plainly provided the interpreter with a starting point for deeper reflection and elaboration.⁹⁵

Allen P. Ross suggests that the reference to God delighting in his creation (vv. 30–31) “recalls that ‘God saw that it was good’” in Gen 1.⁹⁶ Earlier in this essay I cited Murphy, who at least entertains the possibility (see above). This direction of borrowing is more plausible than the other because Prov 8 is not actually a creation account but is merely alluding to the creation of the world as a context for understanding wisdom. It is less understandable how a theology of creation would arise from a theology of wisdom since the latter is not primarily about creation in the first place. Commentators have speculated about the existence of a lost creation

Hypothesis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); Jeffrey Stackert, *A Prophet Like Moses: Prophecy, Law, and Israelite Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁹³ See also Donn F. Morgan, *Wisdom in the Old Testament Traditions* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 112–14.

⁹⁴ Landes, “Creation Tradition,” 290.

⁹⁵ R. E. Clements, “Wisdom,” in *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture*, ed. D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 68.

⁹⁶ Allen P. Ross, “Proverbs,” in *Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 5 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 946; and noted in Dexter E. Callender Jr., *Adam in Myth and History: Ancient Israelite Perspectives on the Primal Human*, HSS 48 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 198 n. 393, as an intriguing suggestion.

account from which the author of Prov 8 may have drawn inspiration. Were this the case, Whybray surmises that the purpose of the creation materials in Prov 8 was to bridge the gap “between the wisdom tradition and the main Israelite religious tradition” in emphasizing “that all wisdom comes from God.”⁹⁷ Nevertheless, the appeal to a lost creation account is unfounded and unnecessary. It assumes that the views on creation in Prov 8 and Gen 1 are irreconcilable, but the purported discrepancies are overstated.

Essentially, I agree with the growing consensus that Gen 1 could not have been literarily dependent upon Prov 8. Instead, there seems to be a better case to be argued in favor of Prov 8 being informed by, or at the very least aware of, the creation account in Gen 1. This suggestion admittedly upends the view that Gen 1 could have been composed after Prov 8 and would require an earlier date for the composition of Genesis, much more along the lines of the longstanding traditional view.

In addition to the fact that Prov 8 is poor fodder for developing a fuller creation narrative, one also finds that the more limited number of verbs for creation attested in Gen 1 are surpassed in Prov 8. Paul E. Koptak observes that while Gen 1 uses three verbs describing God's creative acts (e.g., ברא [“create”], עשה [“make”], and בדל [“divide”]), Proverbs contains at least ten (קנה [“create, acquire”], נסך [“set”], חול [“brought forth”], טבע [“sunk”], עשה [“make”], כון [“be, establish”], אמן [“be made firm”], עזז [“be made strong”], שים [“set”], חוק [“inscribe”]).⁹⁸ Furthermore, the lexical links between these two texts (or more broadly with Genesis) are rather remarkable when taken as a whole, as the following table demonstrates:⁹⁹

⁹⁷ See Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs*, 104; cited in J. A. Emerton, “Wisdom,” in *Tradition and Interpretation: Essays by Members of the Society for Old Testament Study*, ed. G. W. Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 233.

⁹⁸ Paul E. Koptak, *Proverbs*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 253 n. 21; also referencing Michaela Bauks and Gerlinde Baumann, “Im Anfang war...?: Gen 1,1ff und Prov 8,22–31 im Vergleich,” *Biblische Notizen* 71 (1994): 24–52.

⁹⁹ Similar links can be shown with other creation texts throughout the Hebrew Old Testament, such as Job 26, Isa 40, Ps 74, and Ps 104. These lexical links with other passages strengthen the case that these poetic texts are informed by the creation narrative of Genesis.

Lexical Links with Genesis 1–2			
בראשית, “in the beginning”	Gen 1:1	ראשית, “beginning”	Prov 8:22
תהום, “deep”	Gen 1:2	תהמות, “deeps,” תהום, “deep”	Prov 8:24, 27, 28
מים, “water”	Gen 1:2, 6 (3x), 7 (2x), 9, 10 (2x), 20, 21, 22	מים, “water”	Prov 8:29
ימים, “seas” ים, “sea”	Gen 1:22, 26, 28	ים, “sea”	Prov 8:29
ארץ, “earth”	Gen 1:1, 11, 12, 15, 17, 20, 22, 24, 25, 26, 28 (2x), 29, 30; 2:1, 4, 5 (2x), 6, 11, 12, 13	ארץ, “earth”	Prov 8:26, 29, 31
שמים, “heavens”	Gen 1:1, 8, 9, 14, 15, 17, 20, 26, 28, 30; 2:1, 4 (2x), 19, 20	שמים, “heavens”	Prov 8:27
עשה, “to make”	Gen 1:7, 16, 25, 26, 31; 2:2 (2x), 3, 4, 18	עשה, “to make”	Prov 8:26
אדם, “man”	Gen 1:26, 27; 2:5, 7, 8, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25	בני אדם, “sons of man”	Prov 8:31
עפר מן האדמה, “dust from the ground”	Gen 2:7	עפרות תבל, “dust of the world”	Prov 8:26
Other Lexical Links with Genesis			
קניתי איש את יהוה, “I created a man with <i>the</i> <i>help of</i> YHWH”	Gen 4:1	יהוה קנני, “YHWH cre- ated me”	Prov 8:22
מעינת תהום, “springs of the deeps”	Gen 7:11; 8:2	מעינות//תהום, “deep” // “springs” עינות תהום, “springs of the deep”	Prov 8:24, 28
אל עליון קנה שמים וארץ, “El Most High,	Gen 14:19	יהוה קנני, “YHWH cre- ated me”	Prov 8:22

Creator of heaven and earth”			
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These parallels give the impression of a poet alluding to the creation story from Gen 1, but in a way that further develops isolated points of the narrative in the service of defending Wisdom’s priority over and preexistence to creation.

Summary

Scholars have rightly questioned the merits of proposing a literary scenario wherein Gen 1 is dependent upon Prov 8. It is my view that one of its primary problems is the ideological move it would require—how could a text that assumes God created the world out of nothing provide the exegetical basis for creation from preexisting matter? It is an illogical development since the two perspectives in question are irreconcilable, which has led many interpreters to abandon any literary relationship between these two texts whatsoever. Its problems do not end here, however, but are only exacerbated by the anachronistic circumstances it requires. To put it simply, the presumed older text (Prov 8) preserves a purportedly late Hellenistic view of creation, while the assumed younger text (Gen 1) preserves a much earlier Babylonian one.

But if one were to argue, as some scholars have, that Prov 8 offers commentary on creation in Gen 1, this suggestion poses fewer problems. It does raise questions, however, about the legitimacy of interpreting Gen 1:1–2 in light of Babylonian parallels. Were the poet familiar with the Genesis materials, it would be rather curious for him to ignore or even correct its ancient Near Eastern assumptions about a preexistent primordial chaos. The view of creation espoused in Prov 8 does not comport with ancient Near Eastern norms. And this factor raises yet another query: Is it valid to read Gen 1 in light of more distant parallels from Mesopotamian literature over and against the Hebrew wisdom tradition reflected in Prov 8? Of course, the thornier issue lurking in the shadows of this discussion is the composition of Genesis itself. Here, it would seem that the comparative method and source criticism’s commitment to a late date for the materials of Gen 1 are at an impasse. Older Babylonian literature governs the way late biblical sources are read.

Instead, it may be the case that the assumed lateness of Gen 1 is incorrect. What if it were earlier than Prov 8, as the canonical form of the Hebrew text leads us to believe? Were that true—and I think there is reason to believe it is—the inner-biblical witness would strongly support a cohesive, yet complementary reading of these two texts. The Babylonian

context for Gen 1 would seem more likely under these strictures, not as an adaption of its views, but as a polemic against them. Prov 8 therefore draws from this interpretive well in promoting the place of wisdom in the origins of the world. This formulation provides a more plausible solution for explaining the strong literary ties between these two creation texts.