THE EGYPTIAN GODDESS MAʿAT AND LADY WISDOM IN PROVERBS 1–9: REASSESSING THEIR RELATIONSHIP*

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Scholars of the Hebrew Bible have a long tradition of seeking out parallel texts and concepts in the surrounding cultures of the ancient Near East for use as comparative data or as precedents available to the authors of the Hebrew Bible. This is particularly true in descriptions of YHWH or in the depictions of mythological, or what appear to be mythological, entities. The presentation of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9 has been one of these entities to receive a large amount of attention. As with most issues, the significant amount of attention has produced a variety of positions on whether it is possible to trace this female character to a particular female deity in any of the surrounding cultures. This essay reassesses the relationship, which has been both accepted and denied in scholarship, between the Egyptian goddess Maʿat as described in ancient Egyptian literature and the depiction of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9, with a particular focus on the description in Prov 8:22–31.

Maʿat According to Egyptologists

Rather than begin with biblical scholarship, it is instructive to examine first the positions held by Egyptologists regarding the portrayal of the goddess Maʿat in ancient Egyptian literature. Egyptologists stress repeatedly that Maʿat (m3ʿ.t) is the word for both a goddess and a concept. There is some debate over whether Maʿat was first a goddess

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1 Maʿat (m3ʿ.t) is variously spelled by scholars: Maʿat, Maat, and Maʿat. The original spellings used by scholars will be retained in quotations, while I will use Maʿat throughout this essay.
whose qualities were subsequently abstracted into abstract principles or whether she became a goddess through the process of hypostatization.\(^2\) Whichever may be the case (and it is difficult to determine which is more probable), it is apparent that these two separate aspects are not distinguished in ancient Egyptian literature. Often it is unclear whether the goddess or the principles which she represents are intended in the ancient texts.\(^3\)

A dictionary entry on Ma’at defines her as:

Daughter of Re and the incarnation of cosmic order and social justice. Ma’at was always portrayed as a woman with an ostrich plume on her head and often in miniature as offered by the king during the holy services to demonstrate his role as upholder of order. It was said that the gods 'lived on' Ma’at, as if partaking of her as their food. In that way they could maintain the cosmic order she represented. Ma’at is credited with giving mankind a code of ethics. She is among those goddesses regarded as the daughter of Re, and she had a cult place of her own in the precinct of Montu at Karnak and perhaps other important places. Juridical matters may well have been decided in these 'temples of Truth.'\(^4\)

The famous Egyptologist E. A. Wallis Budge concludes his definition by describing Ma’at as “the personification of physical and moral law, and order and truth.”\(^5\) He provides more detail elsewhere:

Maat, the wife of Thoth, was the daughter of Ra, and a very ancient goddess; she seems to have assisted Ptah and Khnemu in carrying out rightly the work of creation ordered by Thoth. There is no one word which will exactly describe the Egyptian conception of Maat both from a physical and from a moral point of view; but the fundamental idea of the word is "straight,” and from the Egyptian texts it is clear that maat meant right, true, truth, real, genuine, upright, righteous, just, steadfast, unalterable, etc. . . . Maat, the goddess of the unalterable laws of heaven, and the daughter of Ra, is depicted in female form, with the feather, emblematic of maat, on her head, or with the feather alone for a head, and the sceptre in one hand, and ankh in the other.\(^6\)

\(^2\) Vincent A. Tobin (Theological Principles of Egyptian Religion [New York: Peter Lang, 1989], 79) argues emphatically that Ma’at is a cosmic principle which only secondarily became a goddess through personification of this principle.

\(^3\) See the further discussion of this point by Tobin, Theological Principles, 77.

