WISDOM IN CREATION: THE ʾĂMÔN OF PROVERBS VIII 30

BY

R. B. Y. SCOTT

Princeton

The remarkable picture of the role of Wisdom in creation in Prov. viii 22-31 is significant both for its place in the Old Testament thought of Wisdom, and for its subsequent influence on the language and substance of Jewish and Christian theology. These verses form a distinct section of one of the gnomic discourses which distinguish Prov. i-ix from the following collections of pithy maxims. Sometimes in these discourses Wisdom is personified as one who will reward those who love her, and in particular as a gracious hostess inviting the ignorant to her banquet. 1) In two striking poems (i 20-33 and viii 1-36) Wisdom assumes the role of a prophetess, standing in places of public concourse and pronouncing oracles of reproach and exhortation, threat and promise. In chap. viii the stress is laid first on the intrinsic worth and blessings of what Wisdom has to offer, and then—in verses 22-31—Wisdom declares that the source and ground of her authority are to be found in her primacy in the creative work of God. "Yahweh himself made 2) me as his first act" 3).

Widely differing views have been held on three important problems which emerge in consideration of this passage. When Wisdom speaks here as a person closely associated with but distinct from Yahweh ("at his side"), is this only a daring figure of speech, or does the writer imply that he thinks of Wisdom as a self-existent being, however closely related to God? A second question concerns the possibility of foreign mythological influence in the picture presented—whether it be metaphorical or something more—, and, if this be

1) Cf. iii 15-18, iv 6, 8-9, vii 4, ix 1-6.


accepted as probable, the source and extent of such influence. The answers to these two problems depend largely on the answer to a third: what is the meaning of the key-word 'āmôn in verse 30, of which such divergent translations as "master workman" and "nursed child" have been given? If 'āmôn means something like "master workman" or "architect", as most scholars seem to think, or even "nursling, little child", strong support is given to the view that Wisdom is here pictured as a distinct being and not simply as a personified attribute or function of Yahweh. The same might be said of other possible renderings of this word as a noun, to be considered below.

Vocalized as it stands in M. T., 'āmôn appears nowhere else in the Old Testament, except as a personal name of a king, among others 1), and as the transliterated name of the Egyptian deity 2). It is found also, apparently, in Jer. lxi 15 as a collective noun translated "artisans" in RSV 3), but the text is suspect; LXX omits the word, and the parallel text in 2 Kings xxv 11 reads hāmôn, "multitude". It will be noted that there is no k prefixed to 'āmôn, as is implied by the translation "like a master workman" in RSV. The word must be construed as in apposition to the subject of the verb in the predicate of a nominal sentence.

Since the translation "nursed child" points to the vocalization 'āmôn 4) rather than 'āmôn, the question at once arises whether the Massoretic form is what was intended by the author. If so, there are two possibilities: (a) that the word is an adjective meaning "faithful" 5), and (b) that it is a noun indicating an occupation, of the type bāhôn "assayer", corresponding to 'ommān "skilled craftsman" (Cant. vii 2) and to Akkadian ummānu.

If, on the other hand, the vocalization is open to question, there are several additional possibilities: (a) the word may be 'ommān, "skilled artisan", as in Cant. vii 2; or (b) it may be the noun 'ōmen, or the commoner 'ēmôn, "faithfulness"; or (c) the adjective 'āmôn or

1) I.e., "faithful (servant) of . . . ."? Cf. 1 Kings xxii 26; 2 Kings xxi 18 ff.