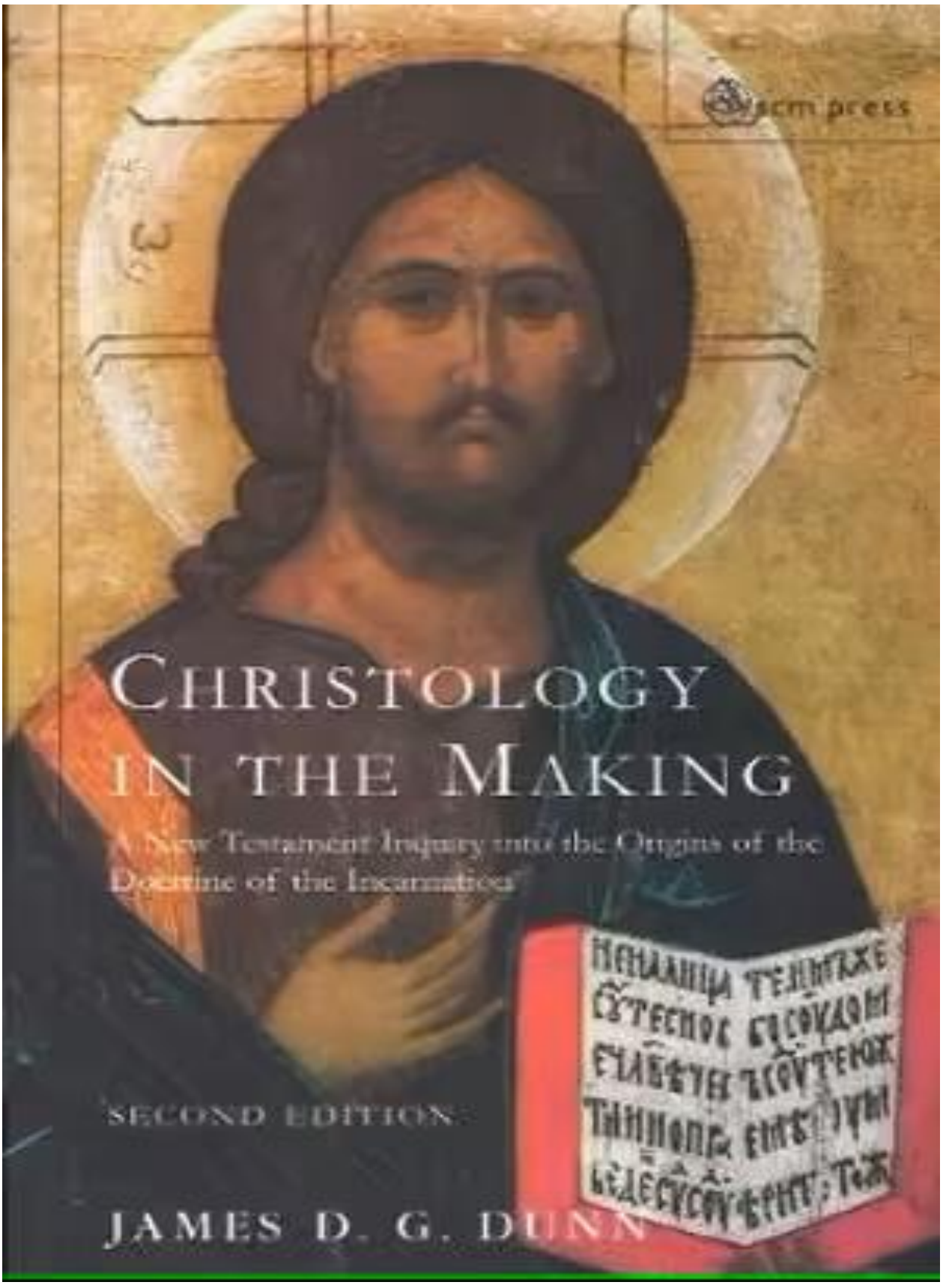

scm press
CHRISTOLOGY
IN THE MAKING
A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation
SECOND EDITION
JAMES D. G. DUNN

[00:00:01.450]

This is from the book by James Dunn. Christology in the making. And this is under the headline **Wisdom in Pre-Christian Judaism** on **page 168.** What or who was this Wisdom whose discovery, inscriptions and functions attributed to Christ in such a broad sweep of New Testament writings? What, or who was this Wisdom with which whom Christ seems to have been identified as early as Paul, because Paul calls Jesus the Wisdom of God?

[00:00:46.030]

To answer this question, we must inquire into the meaning of the term Wisdom and pre–Christian Judaism in particular in those passages where it is described as pre-existent and having a role in creation. The key passages here are and then he quotes Job 28, Prov.8..22-31, Syriac 24, (which is extra canonical) Barrack 3,9-4.4(that's also extra canonical) the Book of Wisdom, (which is also extra canonical) 6.12-11.1, I Enoch 42, (which is also extra canonical) and various references to wisdom in Philo. What or who is Wisdom in all these passages? Unfortunately, the answer is not clear, and we find ourselves at this point caught up in a still unresolved debate.

[00:01:51.880]

The principal options held out to us are as follows (1) Wisdom is a divine being, an independent deity, as in the near parallels in Egyptian and Mesopotamian religions. The second one (2) is Wisdom is a hypostasis, that is, a quasi-personification of certain attributes proper to God, occupying an intermediate position between personalities and abstract beings. Number three, (3) Wisdom is nothing more than the personification of a divine attribute. And number four, (4) Wisdom is a personification of cosmic order and is not thought of as a divine until a relatively late stage, namely the Wisdom of Solomon, which, however, it remains uncertain whether a conceptually clear identification is achieved. If we are here to answer our question, What did it mean that the first Christians identified Christ as Wisdom?,

[00:02:59.200]

We must attempt to reach some sort of decision as to which of these options is the best interpretation of these Old Testament and intertestamental passages. That is to say, which of these options best represents the meaning that the first Christians could read off from these passages? When we look more closely at the passages, several points become clear. (a) First, if we set out the passages in the most likely chronological order, it becomes evident that there is both a development in the talk about Wisdom and that the development is due in large part to influence positive and negative from religious cults and philosophies prevalent in the ancient Near East at the time. {**My remark:** So, there is some crossover of thought, and that's going to be understandable.}

[00:03:50.710]

For example,
Job 28 - Surely there is a mine for silver,
and a place for gold which they refine,
but where shall Wisdom be found?

Here we cannot really speak of divine attributes or of personification. Wisdom may simply be the order given to the world by God. In Prov.8, wisdom speaks in the first person, clearly a personification, at least. Moreover, the fact that Wisdom is represented as a woman **[p.169]** attractive to young men is best explained as due to the influence of the figure of Ishtar-Astarte the Mesopotamian goddess of love.

[00:04:30.980] - Speaker 1

That is to say, proverbs one, verse 20 to 33, eight, verse one to 35 and nine, verse one to six probably constitutes the author's attempt to counteract the influence of the astartic cult by representing Wisdom as much more attractive than the strange woman against whom he warns in chapters two, five, six and seven. {**My remark:** And I would agree with him here. Some of this use is polemical because they were counteracting the cults of the day. So here Wisdom is represented then as a woman, as opposed to the strange woman}.

More attractive to many scholars is a thesis that Proverbs eight, verse 22 to 31, and more clearly Syriac 24 has been generally influenced by the cult of ISIS from Egypt. The chief point of comparison is that ISIS proclaims herself as a divine agent who created and sustains the universe. As a teacher who has revealed to mend the principles of morality and the laws and arts of civilization.

[00:05:42.850]

We know of at least one hymn in the first person to this effect, which circulated widely throughout the empire of the Ptolemies, probably as early as the third century before Christ. {My remark: It's a possibility, but I'm going to show you some of my discoveries on Proverbs eight. It's very interesting}. With the wisdom of Solomon, the divine status of Wisdom and her role in creation becomes comes to clearest expression - Wisdom, the fashioner of all things (7.22;8.5f).

[00:06:17.690]

She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other,
and she orders all things well (8.1);
[Wisdom, who] sits beside God's throne (9.4).

Most striking of all is the influence of Stoic thought about cosmic reason, the Logos that pervades all creation, most clearly seen in the long description of Wisdom in 7.22f.

Intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile…
For Wisdom is more mobile than any motion;
because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.
For she is a breath of the power of God,
and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty.

[00:06:59.690]

Finally, in the case of Pharaoh, the influence of both Platonic and Stoic thought is clearly evident (see below pp.221f.). More disputed is a question of Philo's dependence on the ISIS myth. We can see in his quiet frequent description of Wisdom as *'mother of all things'*, {**my remark:** and he gives a load of quotes}, a possible illusion {…..} and his characterization of Wisdom as of many names{…}. And he gives another quote to one of his works. It's easy to parallel with ISIS the *'mirrored named'* {….**My remark:** and he [Dunn] quotes Plutarch, et cetera}.

[00:07:38.170]

Though whether we should speak of dependence specifically on the ISIS myth is much less clear. {**My remark:** So there's no clear cut answer to this…..} *We may conclude, however, that deeply rooted in Palestinian soil and Jewish faith was the late Israelite talk of Wisdom.* Many of the images and words used to describe her were drawn from wider religious thought and worship.
[p.170] -the aim being to present the worshippers of Yahweh with as an attractive as possible alternative to the cults and speculations more widely prevalent at their time.

[00:08:16.370] – MY REMARK:

Now, I can agree with that. I can agree with that. I think that's exactly what happened. They used the terminology and the mythology of the day. They demythologized it and reframed it.

[00:08:33.670]

{**My remark:** And I think that's what happens often happens}
(b) *Second, we should bear in mind that language we should denote a hypostasis or independent deity in polytheism would certainly have a different connotation within a monotheistic religion*. Where a polytheistic faith would have little difficulty encountering wisdom as one more god within the heavenly pantheon, a monotheistic faith could make no such accommodation. However much some Jews might be willing to diffuse their monotheism under the impact of Hellenistic culture, there is no clear evidence that the wisdom tradition we have been examining ever did so {**My remark:** and I would agree with that.} There is no evidence that this is talking about another God. It is as he says, it is the influence probably of Hellenistic culture and other cultures.}

[00:09:35.050]

But it isn't the elevation of wisdom to God like status. It is personification or hypostasis or whatever. This is why we cannot simply abstract statements and words out of the context of, for example, an ISIS him on the one hand, and Ben Sira on the other, and interpret them as equivalence, one of the mistakes too often made by the history of religious schools. And I see this a lot. I see this a lot in the history of religious schools and people saying, oh yes, well, you could find this in Canaanite religion, or you can find this in this is how they used to worship Bal, or this is what the Greeks did, or this is what so therefore it must be equivalent.

[00:10:16.080] – My remark

It must mean exactly the same thing. No, it doesn't. It's a different context. It's being reframed. It doesn't mean the same thing like us celebrating Christmas. There are pagan elements in the Christmas celebration, but it's been completely reframed. Doesn't mean the same as as it, as it did to people doing certain pagan rituals 2,000 years ago. Most people wouldn't even know …same sort of thing. So, what he goes on to say is…. that it's precisely he says, in order to understand what meaning such words and statements had for those who used them, we must interpret them within the context in which they were used.
Thus, when Ringgren examines the *'hypostatiztation of divine qualities and functions in the ancient Near East',* the classic study in this field, he concludes that the words like *Maat,* (which is the Egyptian word for truth, righteousness, order and regularity in the cosmos).

[00:11:31.800]

{My remark Now, that's an interesting word just by the side, *maat,* because I'm a Dutch speaker and it has to do with measuring in Dutch. And that comes you can see the word mart comes from Egypt. It's about cosmic order, measuring or judging something}.

He concludes that the words like *Maat,* truth, righteous, order, regularity in the cosmos, and *Mesaru* (righteousness) come to denote independent deities. In Egypt, *Maat,* originally a function of the high god in Egyptian religion, becomes a *'self- existent being'*.

[00:12:08.100]

And since the word *Maat* is female, it was natural that this being should become a goddess and the daughter of the god. {**My remark:** So, we see that what they did was they took attributes and qualities, and they elevated these qualities to godlike status that became gods in their own right.} *Maat* became a female goddess in Egypt, similarly with *Masaru* in the Babylonian pantheon. But what makes it clear to Ringgerin that these are more than merely poetic personifications or abstractions is that we know of many priests of *Maat*. We know that *Mesaru* had his own image in the temple and was worshiped there.

[00:12:48.490]

And this is precisely what is lacking in the Wisdom tradition used by Proverbs, Ben Sera, et cetera. {**My remark:** So, in pre Christian, pre-Judaism times, the Wisdom tradition in Israel didn't turn Wisdom into a god, didn't have priests or idols that depicted Wisdom and didn't worship it, which is in complete contrast to what the Babylonians and the Egyptians did.} That is to say, *when set within the context of faith in Yahweh, there is no clear indication that Wisdom language of these writings had gone beyond vivid personification.*

[00:13:30.290]

And then he goes on to say….. So too ben Sira does not make use of or allusion to the hymns of the ISIS cult in order to present Wisdom as a figure like ISIS in all respects. On the contrary, his purpose is quite clearly to identify Wisdom with the Law. As he says explicitly,

All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God,
the Law, which Moses commanded us
as an inheritance for the Congregation of Jacob.
It fills men with wisdom, like the Pishon (Sir.24.23,25).{that's the river.}

Evidently then ben Sira is saying in effect that those attracted by the ISIS cult, “This wisdom, this cosmic order which you see expressed in the figure of ISIS and seek for in her cult, we most certainly most definitively express in the Torah.

[00:14:22.570]

And similar passages can be found in the Book of Barrack and the Wisdom writings. And it goes on, but I think you get the idea. And even Jesus quotes some of this Wisdom literature, if I can find it. I don't know if it's here, but I highly recommend this book by James Dunn. It's a big book about Christology in the making. I'm going to read another section later on.

– the aim being to present the worshippers of Yahweh with as attractive as possible an alternative to the cults and speculations more widely prevalent in their time.

(*b*) Second, we should bear in mind that *language which denoted a hypostasis or independent deity in polytheism would certainly have a different connotation within a monotheistic religion.* Where a polytheistic faith would have little difficulty in counting Wisdom as one more god within the heavenly pantheon, a monotheistic faith could make no such accommodation. However much some Jews might be willing to diffuse their monotheism under the impact of Hellenistic culture, there is no clear evidence that the Wisdom tradition we have been examining ever did so. This is why we cannot simply abstract statements and words out of the contexts of, for example, an Isis hymn on the one hand and ben Sira on the other, and interpret them as equivalents – one of the mistakes too often made by the History of Religions school. *In order to understand what meaning such words and statements had for those who used them, we must interpret them within the context in which they were used.*

Thus when Ringgren examines 'the hypostatization of divine qualities and functions in the ancient near East', the classic study in this field, he concludes that words like *Maat* (truth, righteousness, order and regularity in the cosmos) and *Mēšaru* (righteousness) came to denote independent deities. *Maat*, originally a function of the high god in Egyptian religion becomes 'a self-existent being. And, since the word *maat* is female, it was natural that this being should become a goddess, the daughter of the god'. Similarly with *Mēšaru* in the Babylonian pantheon.[30] But what makes it clear to Ringgren that these are more than merely poetic personifications or abstractions, is that we know of many priests of *Maat*, we know that *Mēšaru* had its own image in the temple and was worshipped there.[31] And this is precisely what is lacking in the Wisdom tradition used by Proverbs, ben Sira, etc. No worship is offered to Wisdom; Wisdom has no priests in Israel. That is to say, *when set within the context of faith in Yahweh there is no clear indication that the Wisdom language of these writings has gone beyond vivid personification.*[32]

So too ben Sira does not make use of or allusion to the hymns of the Isis cult in order to present Wisdom as a figure like Isis in all respects. On the contrary his purpose is quite clearly to identify Wisdom with the *law* – as he says explicitly:

> All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God,
> the law which Moses commanded us
>
> as an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob.
> It fills men with wisdom, like the Pishon . . . (Sir. 24.23, 25).

Evidently then ben Sira is saying in effect to those attracted by the Isis

cult, 'This wisdom, this cosmic order which you see expressed in the figure of Isis and seek for in her cult, we see most clearly, most definitively expressed in the Torah' (similarly with Bar. 3.36–4.4; and cf. Wisd. 6.18).[33]

The same indeed could be said of Philo, although he does not seem to equate Wisdom and Torah explicitly (cf. *Virt.* 62–5), since in fact Wisdom is wholly subordinate to the less personal Logos of Stoic pantheism (and Platonic idealism) in his thought, is indeed not much more than an occasional variant for the Logos when an allusion to the female figure becomes appropriate,[34] and since the Logos itself is clearly to be identified in Philo's mind with the law (explicitly *Migr.* 130)[35] – although of course, Philo's Logos concept is much more complex (see below §28.3). For the Jew of Alexandria as well as the Jew of Palestine the wisdom of God had been most fully and clearly expressed and embodied in the Torah.

It would appear then as though the Jewish wisdom writers do indeed take up some of the more widespread language of Near Eastern religious speculation, and do so *in conscious awareness of its use elsewhere*; but they do *not* draw the same conclusions for worship and practice as the polytheistic religions do. On the contrary they *adapt* this wider speculation to their own faith and make it serve to commend their own faith; to Wisdom understood (and worshipped) as a divine being (one of Isis' many names), they pose *the alternative of Wisdom identified as the law given to Israel by (the one) God.*[36]

(*c*) Thirdly, we should observe how *fluid* is the concept of Wisdom in the passages we have examined and in the context within which they appear, and how *the Jewish wisdom writers use it alongside affirmations of Jewish monotheism without any sense that the latter is in any way threatened by the former.* In Job 28 wisdom is presented as something inestimably precious, something which is sought as men seek precious stones, something whose location only God knows, something which is found by the man who fears the Lord. In Proverbs the first person poem of chapter 8 is probably for the author of Proverbs simply a more vivid way of saying what he has already said in 2.6 and 3.19:

> For the Lord gives wisdom;
> from his mouth comes knowledge and understanding (2.6).
>
> The Lord by wisdom founded the earth;
> by understanding he established the heavens (3.19).

In ben Sira we may consider the following passages:

In ben Sira we may consider the following passages:

> All wisdom comes from the Lord
> and is with him for ever (1.1).
>
> To fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;

she is created with the faithful in the womb (1.14).

He (the seeker after wisdom) will place his children under her shelter,
and will camp under her boughs;
he will be sheltered by her from the heat,
and will dwell in the midst of her glory.
The man who fears the Lord will do this,
and he who holds to the law will obtain wisdom.
She will come to meet him like a mother,
and like the wife of his youth she will welcome him (14.26–15.2).

He who devotes himself
to the study of the law of the Most High
will seek out the wisdom of all the ancients,
and will be concerned with prophecies (39.1).

The Lord has ordained the splendours of his wisdom,
and he is from everlasting and to everlasting;
Nothing can be added or taken away,
and he needs no one to be his counsellor (42.21).

Is ben Sira doing any more here than ringing the changes in a sequence of metaphors designed to encourage study of the Torah as the way to ensure a life ordered by divine wisdom? Contrast the fact that in at least two other passages he speaks of creation as God's act without any reference to Wisdom:

The works of the Lord have existed from the beginning of his creation,
and when he made them, he determined their divisions . . . (16.26).

He who lives for ever created the whole universe;
the Lord alone will be declared righteous.
To none has he given power to proclaim his works;
and who can search out his mighty deeds? (18.1, 2, 4).

Quite obviously the man who wrote these lines had *no intention of giving Wisdom the status of an independent entity*, far less a divine personality side by side with Yahweh. As he himself says in summary:

Though we speak much we cannot reach the end,
and the sum of our words is: 'He is the all' (43.27).

For ben Sira then, Wisdom is just a way of speaking about God's ordering of creation and design for man in the law.[37]

Similarly with the Wisdom of Solomon, 'Wisdom is a kindly spirit' (1.6), an attribute of his own words (6.9); wisdom is like a woman (6.12–16), is defined as 'the most sincere desire for instruction' (6.17), is a something like gems or radiant like the light (7.8–10, 29), is the mother of all good things (7.11f.); wisdom is the cosmic order (7.17–21, 8.1), a spirit pervading all created things (7.22ff.); wisdom is a bride (8.2), an

intimate of God (8.3f.), a teacher of profoundest mysteries (8.8); and so on. But again, lest there be any mistake, the author states clearly:

> God is the guide even of wisdom
> and the corrector of the wise.
> For both we and our words are in his hand,
> as are all understanding and skill in crafts (7.15f.).

> I perceived that I would not possess wisdom unless God gave her to me –
> and it was a mark of insight to know whose gift she was –
> so I appealed to the Lord and besought him,
> and with my whole heart I said:
> 'O God of my fathers and Lord of mercy,
> who hast made all things by thy word,
> and by thy wisdom hast formed man
> . . .
> give me the wisdom that sits by thy throne
> . . .
> for even if one is perfect among the sons of men,
> yet without the wisdom that comes from thee
> he will be regarded as nothing' (8.21–9.6).

Once again the position is clear: for all that the author of the Wisdom of Solomon uses the language of Stoicism, he has not the slightest thought of equating wisdom with some pantheistic ultimate reason; and for all the vigour of his imagery, he has not the slightest thought of wisdom as an independent divine being. From start to finish the wisdom of which he speaks is *the wisdom of God* and signifies *God's wise ordering of creation and of those who fear him.*[38]

So too with Philo. Wisdom is pictured as a city and dwelling or a turtle dove (*Leg. All.* III.3; *Heres* 127), is identified with the tent of meeting and the tree of life (*Leg. All.* III.46, 52), or in a favourite metaphor is likened to a fountain (*Leg. All.* II,86f.; *Det.* 117; *Post.* 136–8; *Som.* II.242; *Spec. Leg.* IV.75; *Prob.* 13,117; cf. *Leg. All.* I.64f.). His picture of Wisdom as a mother (particularly Sarah – *Leg. All.* II.82; *Det.* 124; *Cong.* 12f.) should not be abstracted as a separate strand distinct from this consistent allegorizing method, as though the mother imagery proved that Wisdom was a divine personal being or goddess for Philo. It is certainly very unlikely that he intended to evoke the Isis-Osiris myth when he spoke of God as 'the husband of Wisdom' (*Cher.* 49), any more than he expected to be taken literally when he spoke of God impregnating Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Zipporah (*Cher.* 44–7; see above II n. 52). And though he depicts Logos as the fountain of Wisdom (*Fuga* 97), which indicates that no specific mythological formulation is in mind but *simply a kaleidescope of imagery none of which may be pressed too hard in isolation from the wider context*

of his thought.[39] Further elucidation of that wider context must await the next chapter. But thus far we can say even with Philo there is no real indication that his monotheism is in any way challenged by such talk. On the contrary, he himself affirms that God is 'the fountain of Wisdom . . . the only wise (being)' (*Sac.* 64), that 'the maker of this whole universe was and is God' (*Leg. All.* III.99; see further below pp. 224f.).[40]

In short, if we attempt to give clearer definition to the figure of Wisdom within the monotheism of Israel's religion we seem to be shut up to two alternatives. Either Wisdom is a being clearly subordinate to Yahweh, like the angels, or the heavenly council in Job 1 and 2 (see above pp. 149f.). And yet the functions of Wisdom in creation seem to give her a much greater significance. Or else, and this seems the more plausible, the Wisdom passages are *simply ways of describing Yahweh's wise creation and purpose.*[41] The seemingly attractive third alternative, Wisdom as a divine hypostasis, involves the importation of a concept whose appropriateness here is a consequence of the technical meaning it acquired in the much later Trinitarian controversies of the early church. It has *not* been demonstrated that Hebrew thought was already contemplating such distinctions within its talk of God.[42] On the contrary, for a Jew to say that Wisdom 'effects all things', that Wisdom 'delivered Israel from a nation of oppressors', that 'love of Wisdom is the keeping of her laws' (Wisd. 8.5; 10.15; 6.18), was simply to say in a more picturesque way that God created all things wisely, that God's wise purpose is clearly evident in the exodus from Egypt and most fully expressed in the law he gave through Moses.[43]

(*d*) Finally, we should observe that Wisdom is only one of a number of words which are used in the OT and intertestamental literature as though they denoted divine entities independent of God. For example:

Ps. 85.10f. – Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.

Ps. 96.6 – Honour and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

Ps. 43.3 – Oh send out your light and your truth;
let them lead me,
let them bring me to your holy hill
and to your dwelling!

Ps. 57.3 – God will send forth his steadfast love

Job 25.2 – Dominion and fear are with God.[44]