

**Raising Her Voice:
Archetypal Images of Women in Education
from Biblical Curricula to Ursuline Women**

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In this examination of images of women in the history of religious instruction and educational systems, we look to the images of women represented in the book of Proverbs and in the life and writing of Angela Merici. Separated by time and culture, both sources offer unique, interrelated images of women as a strong, self-reliant, spirit-filled catalysts for God's work in the secular world. In addition, these images of women were produced and conveyed through oral and written systems of instruction with the purpose of community formation based on the status and role

of women.

Chapter eight of the book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Bible begins this way:

It is Wisdom calling,

Understanding raising her voice.

She takes her stand...

Near the gates at the city entrance...

she shouts,

“...My cry is to all mankind...

Listen for I speak noble things...

Happy are those who keep my ways.

Heed discipline and become wise...ⁱ

In his recent work, David Carr asserts that early forms of “wisdom literature,” including the book of Proverbs, served an educational purpose within multiple ancient Mesopotamian cultures, including ancient Israel. According to the archeological and epigraphic evidence, Egyptian and Semitic epic texts as well as many proto-scriptural texts “appear to have played an important bridge function between elementary lists and higher level texts” in the oral and written education of scribes.ⁱⁱ

Most ancient Israelite education probably occurred in the home with mothers and

fathers acting as the instructors using memorization and recitation of oral and some written texts. When education did occur outside the home, the teacher became the symbolic “parent” to all the students. According to Carr, “a key goal of such (largely) family-based education was the cultural reproduction of the parent/teacher: enculturating a son (and some daughters) to play a similar sociocultural role to that of the parent (or pseudoparent).”ⁱⁱⁱ In this context, the images of women in the Proverbial education materials are especially salient. The narrator or teacher uses discernment between two alluring female characters—Woman Wisdom and the “loose” or “strange” woman—as a metaphor for choice of the appropriate cultural and religious paths.

If we date the oral tradition and subsequent written composition of Proverbs by its use in early educational systems, these are some of the first representations of women immortalized in the biblical canon. In fact, their appearance dates earlier than the written text—before the eighth century BCE—and spans numerous ancient cultures. Biblical scholars of all inclinations, feminist and not, have been fascinated by Woman Wisdom and her less honorable foil, the “strange woman” for generations and have found similar archetypal female images when comparing Proverbs 1-9 with other ancient Near Eastern literary works such as the Epic of Gilgamesh. The questions we should ask ourselves then: Who are these women?

Who do they represent? And what were the educational and cultural purposes of these early literary archetypes? Let us turn to the text.

Personified Wisdom enters the scene early, in the first chapter of Proverbs. She *cries out in the street and raises her voice in the squares. At the entrance of the city gates*—the symbol of the very center of ancient Israelite society—she speaks, saying: *How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will...fools hate knowledge?*^{iv}

Woman Wisdom is more than just another biblical prophet offering guidance along the path toward righteousness. She is intimately tied Yahweh, the patriarchal deity of Israelite religion and culture. She speaks of her unique identity saying, *The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.*^v She goes on to describe her part in creation, stating: *I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight...rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.*^{vi} Students are admonished to “attain” Wisdom and bind themselves to her so as to obtain riches and favor with God. Forsake her, and they will face death or—perhaps worse—be *cut off from the land*^{vii} and cast out of society.

As the text continues, Wisdom again speaks in her own voice, describing herself in

chapter eight: *I, wisdom, live with prudence, and I attain knowledge and discretion...I have good advice and sound wisdom; I have insight, I have strength. By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just*^{viii} She is pure and powerful, but surprisingly not asexual, as one might expect an ancient religious model of a woman to be. Indeed, students are instructed to seek Wisdom as they would a wife, saying to her *you are my sister*^{ix}, a common biblical phrase for the marriage relationship.

Moreover, she God's *daily delight*; her relationship with Yahweh described is obviously sexually suggestive. She provides the young student not only advice, but nourishing food and hospitality, and yet, according to Camp, attains authority not as a mother or wife as in the case of other biblical women. Instead, Woman Wisdom is authoritative on her own terms as a party to creation and a wise counselor for all humanity.

In order to choose the path of life and peace Wisdom offers, students must resist the advances of the "loose woman" also translated as *strange* or *foreign*.

Wisdom's foil is deceptive and destructive, luring unwary young men into adultery with lips that "*drip honey*" and *speech smooth as oil*.^x The unsuspecting victim is warned that, in fact, *she does not keep straight to the path of life* and *her feet go*

down to death. What is more, *she does not know it.* She is evil and foolish.

Contrasted with the right paths of Wisdom, her adulterous ways are said to undermine the very fabric of society. Indeed, in so far as we can reconstruct ancient Israelite society from the biblical record, adultery—the act of intercourse with a married woman—was an act punishable by death for both male and female parties. However, HoHow Claudia Camp stresses that it is the text, not ancient Israel, that created the archetype of the “loose woman.” Camp states, “[the] poetic and editorial layering of concerns and consequences [in Proverbs] has, then, shifted our vision of the strange woman from her stereotypical to her archetypal dimensions, i.e. from her characteristic patterns of behaviors to the meanings and values she embodies.”^x It is the biblical text, then that has formed this image (and I would argue, others) of woman. If woman is not respectable as Wisdom, then, she is relegated to the edges of society, forever strange, “loose” and dangerous.

When we consider the role of the biblical text in religious and cultural educational settings we understand the contrast between wise and strange women as a “lesson” for students and society alike. Not only does the text illustrate how young men should behave; it also clearly states (and creates) expectations for women. David Carr states that an “important characteristic of the writing of trans-generational, long-duration texts like the Bible” is that “writing makes language

permanent...de-contextualizes expression, and adds normativity.” Thus the textual images of these two women—wise and strange—have become models for female behavior and identity across cultures and time because of their inclusion in the biblical canon.

Struck by the power of these early archetypes and especially by the strength of the character of Woman Wisdom, I found myself seeking other historical images of women religious in cultural and educational settings. Because of my own educational experience as a young woman at Ursuline Academy in Cincinnati Ohio, in the U.S., my search for led me to the writings of St. Angela Merici, foundress of the first non-cloistered company of religious women in the Catholic Church, the Company of St. Ursula. I was hoping for a possible mention of wisdom as a virtue for young women, I found much more.

As we trace the development education of women from ancient Israel through the creation and expansion of the Christian Church, we see repeatedly that instruction of women became viewed as a means of salvation from women’s inherent weakness and strangeness. The possibility of the self-reflective woman—honorable in her own right and connected to God—was lost as centuries of biblical interpretation placed Eve and Mary, the mother of Jesus as the primary models of

and for women. Women were seen then as either corruptible and deceptive like the wife of the first man, or virtuous due to their lack and/or denial of sexuality as in the case of Mary.

These biblical representations were combined with other cultural perceptions of women, and, women's pedagogical models by the sixteenth century were, according to Querciolo Mazzonis, "constructed mainly around a misogynistic ideology inherited from biblical, Greek, patristic and medieval thought." Women's worth was tied to their fathers, husbands and the patriarchy of the Church, their education identity formation carefully constructed by men in the supposed interest of creating social order.

In this context, forty year old Angela Merici was known to men and women alike in Brescia, Italy as a holy and wise woman. Merici founded the Company of St. Ursula in 1535. Ten years later, she dictated the "rule"—an eleven chapter document outlining behavioral expectations of women members of the Company, Ursulines, and how the Company would be governed. In her prologue, Merici introduces the Rule to the young women she calls her *very own sisters*, instructing them to adhere to the way of life they have each chosen in the face of a dangerous and deceptive world. She says: *strive with all your might...to observe this rule*

which has been composed to be useful to you, indeed as the road for you to walk by.^{xii}

The non-cloistered Ursulines were to live a life in the world, but not of the world. Unlike other structured female religious orders, members lived at home among their families or employers—many of them worked as indentured servants. They were to be virgins upon entering the company and henceforth to resist the temptations and dangers of the secular world that threatened their “spiritual virginity” or religious devotion. To this end, they were counseled regularly by an organized cohort of “governors”—lay women and men chosen from the Brescian community to provide support and guidance. Ursuline nun and scholar, Mary-Cabrini Durkin, posits that Angela Merici’s visionary creation of this community of women was an alternative to the prescribed roles for Renaissance women and was stabilized as a result of “its integration into Brescian society.” But is it the written “rule” that created the institutional memory that provided future members of the company access to Angela’s unique vision and her ideals for the development of an Ursuline’s identity based on each individual’s relationship with the divine.

While Angela's rule appears to adhere some of "traditional" Renaissance values for female behavior—obedience, modesty, sexual piety—Durkin argues that Angela's interpretations of these values allowed women to interpret their worth not according to societal norms, but based on their individual spiritual knowledge and experience of God. The one woman Angela holds up as a model for her members is Judith of the Book of Judith in the biblical apocrypha. *Let us conduct ourselves courageously, like holy Judith after she boldly lopped off the head of Holofernes,* Angela states.^{xiii} Considering this reference to the apocryphal Judith, as well as the use of other quotations from both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, and historical records of citizens and monks seeking her biblical interpretation, we know Angela's knowledge of scripture was exceptionally broad. One can only imagine she knew the book of Proverbs well.

Querciolo Mazzonis puts forth Angela's rule as an example of women's empowerment within religion through "adaptation of mainstream ideas about femininity."^{xiv} I would go further to say that within the written rule, Angela adapts and re-interprets biblical archetypes of women. One can see within the rule both similarities to proverbial wisdom instruction as well as the archetypal characteristics of Woman Wisdom. Ursuline women were encouraged to know themselves, to trust their experience of God, and to seek justice and create ways peace in the world by sharing their understanding.

Through both the rule and the later adoption of formal religious education of girls and women as the mission of Order of St. Ursula, Angela's model for self-aware women continues. Indeed, the philosophy of my alma mater is stated prominently on their website: *In the vision of St. Angela Merici, Ursuline [Academy] empowers the young woman to recognize her unique gifts, to give voice to her ideals, to strive for personal and academic excellence, to seek justice through actions inspired by Gospel values, and to accept the challenge of human freedom with its accompanying responsibilities.*^{xv}

Today we find ourselves in a world where the status of women is certainly not static

and by no means universal. Women are both heads of state and yet still sold as slaves. Across all faith traditions, clergy and lay women are increasing in leadership roles and yet again, across all faith traditions, women are not only still kept from speaking in pulpits or praying with men, but hundreds are killed each year under “religious” law. Women in many parts of the world are choosing to remain unmarried and unpartnered, focusing on careers and electing to raise children on their own. At the same time, girls as young as twelve are married by the millions to men of their parent’s choosing. Today, two-thirds of illiterate adults worldwide are women, and seventy percent of the 1.3 billion people living in poverty around the world are women and children.^{xvi}

Our times call for a re-examination of historical understandings of the societal significance of women’s experience and the individual worth of all women. In examining sources such as early biblical educational texts like Proverbs and the Rule of the Company of St. Ursula, we find that images of strong and self-determined women have been produced for millennia. Lost in the writing and re-writing of andro-centric history, these powerful images offer great potential for women—scholars and non-scholars, religious and secular alike. Fortified by our past, we continue to adapt mainstream ideas of femininity as we construct conceptions of what it means to be wise women in our own time. We are called to raise our voices and instruct our sisters and daughters and our brothers and sons in the ways of *wisdom, righteousness, and justice*.

[i](#) Proverbs 8:1-6, 32-33.
[ii](#) p. 132.
[iii](#) Ibid. p. 130.
[iv](#) Proverbs 1: 20-22.
[v](#) Proverbs 8:22.
[vi](#) Proverbs 8:30-31
[vii](#) Proverbs 2:22
[viii](#) Proverbs 8:12-15
[ix](#) Proverbs 7:4
[x](#) Proverbs 5:3.
[xi](#) Camp, 119.
[xii](#) Ibid, v. 22-25.
[xiii](#) The Rule, Prologue, v.30.
[xiv](#) Mazzonis, 132.
[xv](#) Ursuline Website
[xvi](#) USAID