

THE EGYPTIAN GODDESS MA'AT 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 Ma'at 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 8:22–31.¹

MA'AT 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 Ma'at in ancient Egyptian literature. Egyptologists stress repeatedly that Ma'at (*m3'.t*) is the word for both a goddess and a concept. There is some debate over whether Ma'at was first a goddess

* It is my privilege to submit this essay in honor of James VanderKam, my professor, dissertation director, and colleague. This work originated in a seminar led by Jim on Wisdom Literature at the University of Notre Dame in Spring 2002. Jim's attention to detail, his reasoned use of sources, his affirmation of family, and his demonstration of respect to everyone he meets have all contributed to my own development as a scholar, as an individual, and as one who seeks wisdom.

¹ Ma'at (*m3'.t*) is variously spelled by scholars: Ma'at, Maat, and Ma'at. The original spellings used by scholars will be retained in quotations, while I will use Ma'at 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.

⁴ Barbara S. Lesko, *The Great Goddesses of Egypt* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 268–69.

⁵ E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians: Or Studies in Egyptian Mythology* (2 vols.; New York: Dover Publications, 1904; repr., 1969), 1:417.

⁶ E. A. Wallis Budge, "Introduction," in *The Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani* (New York: Dover Publications, 1967; repr. from London: British Museum, 1895), cxix.

Emily Teeter notes this connection with Thoth plus the notion of her being food for the gods and provides an additional point: "The deity Maat pervaded the world of the gods."⁷ It is precisely her popularity and the sheer number of references to associated actions that lead to the conclusion that she was no minor deity but rather was at the center of Egyptian rituals, possibly second in importance only to Re himself.⁸ It is also this pervasiveness that allows for conclusions about the importance of those principles which she represents in the religious practice and ethics of the ancient Egyptians.⁹ Thus,

Ma'at was...the basis for the unity of all things, the basis of cosmic order, of political order, of morality, of life itself, of art and science, and even of good etiquette in normal everyday affairs,¹⁰

and

Maat is right order in nature and society, as established by the act of creation, and hence means...[that] which is right, what is correct, law, order, justice and truth. This state of righteousness needs to be preserved or established, in great matters as in small. Maat is therefore not only right order but also the object of human activity. Maat is both the task which man sets himself and also, as righteousness, the promise and reward which await him on fulfilling it.¹¹

If Ma'at is always represented positively, then its opposite is "[u]ntruth, falsehood, disorder,...that of which one dies, [which] makes life impossible...; it is chaos, 'the abomination of God,' that which is perennially defeated in the order of the universe.¹² Hence it is fatal for a man to identify himself with it."¹³ The intertwining of the goddess, her characteristics, and the ethical code associated with her provide a

⁷ Emily Teeter, "Maat," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* (ed. D. Redford 3 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2:319–21, esp. 319.

⁸ Tobin, *Theological Principles*, 31, 80.

⁹ See Roland G. Bonnell, "The Ethics of El-Amarna," in *Studies in Egyptology: Presented to Miriam Lichtheim* (ed. S. Israelit-Groll 2 vols.; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990), 1:71–97 for further discussion of this point about ethics.

¹⁰ Tobin, *Theological Principles*, 77.

¹¹ Siegfried Morenz, "Ethics and Its Relationship to Religion," in *Egyptian Religion* (trans. A. E. Keep; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1973), 110–36, esp. 113.

¹² As argued by Vincent A. Tobin, "Ma'at and DIKH: Some Comparative Considerations of Egyptian and Greek Thought," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 24 (1987): 113–21.

¹³ Henri Frankfort, "The Egyptian Way of Life," in *Ancient Egyptian Religion: An Interpretation* (TB 77; New York: Harper & Row, 1948; repr., 1961), 59–87, esp. 74–75.

rich but complex semantic field whenever the term *Ma'at* is used in ancient Egyptian literature.¹⁴

The failure to distinguish between the goddess and her characteristics, mentioned above, in addition to “[t]he prominence given to the actual deity *Ma'at* in Egyptian religion, the fact that she is the object of a cult and the strong tendency to personify her seem to indicate that to the Egyptian mind *Ma'at* was more than simply a personification of a principle of order.”¹⁵ This more comprehensive and accurate view of the goddess supplements the more conceptual, but well-articulated, statement by Assmann that “*Ma'at* ist eine regulative Energie, die das Leben der Menschen zur Eintracht, Gemeinsamkeit und Gerechtigkeit steuert und die kosmischen Kräfte zur Gesetzmäßigkeit ihrer Bahnen, Rhythmen und Wirkungen ausbalanciert.”¹⁶

In Assmann's earlier research he noted the great consistency of Egyptian religion over the millennia while allowing for an appropriate amount of conceptual development.¹⁷ Assmann's claim, however, that *Ma'at* was diminished in the personal piety of individuals during the period of Akhenaten's reform can be easily refuted.¹⁸ It is highly significant that *Ma'at* was the only deity to escape assimilation or rejection under the religious upheaval of Akhenaten's monotheistic movement.¹⁹ When other deities were losing their identity or being “demythologized” this goddess remained intact; yet, some interesting shifts in thinking about her and the ethical code associated with her are discernible. “In the Amarna system the traditional idea of living

¹⁴ See the Appendix below for the text of selected examples from ancient Egyptian literature.

¹⁵ Assigned to the New Kingdom both by Miriam Lichtheim (“Maat in Egyptian Autobiographies,” in *Maat in Egyptian Autobiographies and Related Studies* [OBO 120; Freiburg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992], 9–101, esp. 12); and by Teeter (“Maat,” 320). Cf. Tobin, “Ma'at and DIKH,” 120.

¹⁶ Jan Assmann, *Ma'at: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im Alten Ägypten* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1990), 163. “Ma'at is a regulative power, which steers the life of men to harmony, mutuality, and justice, and balances the cosmic forces towards lawfulness in their paths, rhythms, and effects” [my translation].

¹⁷ Jan Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt* (trans. D. Lorton; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 149.

¹⁸ As articulated persuasively by Emily Teeter, *The Presentation of Maat: Ritual and Legitimacy in Ancient Egypt* (SAOC 57; Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1997), 81–85.

¹⁹ David P. Silverman, “Divinity and Deities in Ancient Egypt,” in *Religion in Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myths, and Personal Practice* (ed. B. E. Shafer; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 7–87, esp. 82; Lichtheim, “Maat in Egyptian Autobiographies,” 61–65; and Tobin, *Theological Principles*, 85.

by Ma'at was replaced by the requirement of living by the teaching of the king;... the acceptance of the teaching of Akhenaten was in essence the doing of Ma'at and hence the acceptance of truth."²⁰ While Akhenaten's personal status was enhanced by this shift, however, it should be noted that, by requiring the obedience of all people to the principle of Ma'at, Ma'at was now directly accessible to all people rather than solely to the king.²¹ Thus, rather than being diminished, Ma'at was the one deity who actually increased in the role of private religious piety during this and subsequent periods. This is confirmed by the number of non-royal inscriptions mentioning Ma'at that come from this period in comparison to prior dynasties.

Finally, the goddess Ma'at is mentioned in the dual form (Maaty or Maati or "Two Truths" or "Double Maat," in translations) in the judgment scene of the *Book of the Dead* and in other texts which have judgment as the immediate context.²² The early appearance of this dual form in the Pyramid Texts demonstrates that this form is not a later development, but an extremely early variant.²³ In addition, the association of Ma'at with the Solar Barque of Re occasionally mentions her in this dual form.²⁴ Budge provides two different speculations regarding why this form is attested:

(1) [i]n the judgement scene two Maat goddesses appear; one probably is the personification of physical law, and the other of moral rectitude,²⁵

and

(2) [a]s a moral power Maat was the greatest of the goddesses, and in her dual form of Maati, i.e., the Maat goddess of the South and the North,

²⁰ Bonnell, "Ethics," 83.

²¹ Teeter ("Maat," 321) notes that all the deceased make claims regarding their adherence to Ma'at, and not only the king (as could be implied from the Pyramid Texts, which seem to concern only deceased pharaohs).

²² Pyramid Text 317; Coffin Text Spell 660; Book of the Dead 125.1, 125 A pl30 1-2; 125 A pl32 5b-7; Sarcophagus-Lid Inscription of Wennofer; Great Hymn to Osiris; Hymn to Re from Neferhotep. This judgment hall is called "The Hall of Ma'at" (singular) on the Stela of Intef son of Sent 26.

²³ R. O. Faulkner ("Preface," in *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1969], v) dates the Pyramid Texts to the Fifth and early Sixth Dynasties, ca. 2300 B.C.E.

²⁴ Coffin Text Spell 659, 660, 682, 693. The Coffin Texts are dated between ca. 2100 and ca. 1750 B.C.E. by Miriam Lichtheim, and some are direct descendants of the Pyramid Texts (*Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings* [3 vols.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973], 1:xii-xiii, 131).

²⁵ Budge, "Introduction," cxix.

she was the lady of the Judgment Hall, and she became the personification of justice, who awarded to every man his due.²⁶

Thus, Budge connects this dual form both with her dual function in creation and ethics and with her position as the goddess who unifies the Two Lands together in purpose and in politics.²⁷ In light of both of these suggestions, it may be significant that she is the only goddess whose name is attested in both a singular and a dual form.²⁸

In conclusion, Egyptologists view Ma'at both as a goddess and as an ordering principle for life, neither of which is separable from the other. Ma'at is also pervasive in Egyptian society: in the literature of its elite, in the inscriptions of its "middle-class," in the ritual descriptions concerning the role of the king and the afterlife, in its consistent portrayal over millennia, and in the cultural milieu of its society has a whole.²⁹ There is relatively little disagreement over how Ma'at should be understood; Egyptologists tend to agree with the basic definitions and implications set out above.³⁰ It is not difficult to come to an understanding of the function and importance of Ma'at in ancient Egyptian society as depicted by these Egyptologists.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF MA'AT AND LADY WISDOM ACCORDING TO HEBREW BIBLE SCHOLARS

Far from this coherent picture of Ma'at and the consensus opinion held by Egyptologists, scholars of the Hebrew Bible have a variety of opinions regarding not only how Ma'at is presented but also whether (and how) she is connected to Lady Wisdom. These positions can be divided into a few larger groups: (1) Lady Wisdom is dependent on Ma'at, but has distinct elements; (2) Lady Wisdom bears a vague

²⁶ Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, 1:418.

²⁷ The political function of this dual form is held by J. G. Griffiths, "Isis as Maat, Dikaiosunè, and Iustitia," in *Hommages à Jean Leclant* (ed. C. Berger, G. Clerc, and N. Grimal 4 vols.; Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire, 1994), 3:255–64, esp. 256.

²⁸ Further speculation on this point will be offered in the section on Lady Wisdom below.

²⁹ While "middle class" is clearly an anachronistic term, the presence of a social stratum between the elite and the poor in ancient Egypt is nonetheless accurate.

³⁰ It also seems to me that, as a whole, these Egyptologists have used the primary texts in a conservative manner to construct their rather straightforward depiction of Ma'at.

resemblance to Ma'at, but connections are not definitive; (3) Lady Wisdom bears a resemblance to Isis who has assimilated the functions and descriptions of Ma'at, so any parallels are not authentically to Ma'at; (4) Lady Wisdom in no way resembles Ma'at. It is significant to note that no scholars hold to a direct relationship between the two figures. The views of representative scholars will be briefly summarized in chronological order within each category.

1. *Lady Wisdom is dependent on Ma'at, but has distinct elements which preclude a one-to-one relationship*

In her highly influential and controversial book, Christa Kayatz makes several claims regarding the relationship of Ma'at and Lady Wisdom. First, she notes that while Lady Wisdom speaks, no parallel can be found for Ma'at, and thus cannot be a "direktes Vorbild."³¹ Second, she claims that in Coffin Text Spell 80 "Die Maat wird hier als Kind vorgestellt, als Kleines, das 'vor' dem Gott ist. In verschiedenen Wendungen wird dann das zärtliche Verhältnis zu dem Kind Maat umschrieben."³² While Ma'at is depicted before Atum (Re) as his daughter, she is not explicitly a "small child" and the relationship is barely what one would call "affectionate." The language here is only the same "living, kissing, eating" that appears in numerous other texts. Third, she constructs a text from the *Book of Opening the Mouth* which happens to become a parallel text to Proverbs 8 by pulling out similar phrases, but not exact lines or even in the same order, from the ritual. It is from this reconstructed summary text that she concludes her argument for a relationship between Ma'at and Lady Wisdom by stating "Die Ähnlichkeit der Vorstellungen läßt sich nicht übersehen."³³ While Kayatz has a good argument that Ma'at may have served as a source for constructing Lady Wisdom, several aspects of her interpretation of the data are questionable if not simply incorrect based on the texts themselves.

³¹ Christa Kayatz, *Studien zu Proverbien 1-9: Eine form- und motivegeschichtliche Untersuchung unter Einbeziehung ägyptischen Vergleichsmaterials* (WMANT 22; Neukirchener-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1966), 87; she is correct in her claim of finding no parallel texts in which Ma'at speaks.

³² Kayatz, *Studien*, 96: "Maat is here portrayed as a child, as a small child, who is 'before' the god. In different phrases, then, the affectionate relationship with the child Maat is circumscribed" [my translation].

³³ Kayatz, *Studien*, 98: "The similarity of the concepts cannot be overlooked" [my translation].

Othmar Keel argues that the description of the “scherzenden” Wisdom playing before YHWH finds a parallel in Ma‘at, but not necessarily a “historische Abhängigkeit.”³⁴ He provides thirty-four figures, several of which depict people “playing,” but none which pictures Ma‘at “playing.”³⁵ His conclusion that a playing Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 8 is paralleled to Ma‘at in iconography is rather questionable.

Gerhard von Rad notes the depiction of Ma‘at as a child as a “striking” parallel on which Lady Wisdom is probably dependent, but believes that as a whole Lady Wisdom “can be compared only with difficulty with the Egyptian concept Maat.”³⁶

Roland Murphy notes that “There seems to be reason to claim that the figure of *ma‘at* had some influence on the description of Wisdom in Prov 1–9.”³⁷ He adds [citing Kayatz] that Ma‘at does not speak, but Isis does.³⁸ He also notes the possible connection between the amulet of Ma‘at worn by Egyptian officials and the statements of Prov 1:9; 3:22; 6:21.³⁹

2. *Lady Wisdom bears a vague resemblance to Ma‘at, but connections are not definitive*

Leo Perdue maintains an interesting, though highly suspect, position on this issue. The divine speeches made by goddesses, including Ma‘at, serve as the pattern for this literary form.⁴⁰ He finally concludes, however, that Lady Wisdom is only “a literary personification to foil the fertility goddess depicted as Lady Folly.”⁴¹ His blatant misappropriation

³⁴ Othmar Keel, *Die Weisheit spielt vor Gott: Ein ikonographischer Beitrag zur Deutung des mesahäqät in Sprüche 8,30f* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974), 67–68.

³⁵ Figure 34 on p. 62 is the only picture that I have ever seen of Ma‘at sitting before Re. She is, however, clearly sitting and not playing, and this is from a relief from Dendera dated to around 100 C.E. (!).

³⁶ Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 153.

³⁷ Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 161.

³⁸ Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 161–62. I would argue that the connection between Ma‘at and Isis is particularly important in this discussion.

³⁹ Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 162.

⁴⁰ Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult: A Critical Analysis of the Views of Cult in the Wisdom Literatures of Israel and the Ancient Near East* (SBLDS 30; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977), 143, 151–52. He cites Kayatz for this point, but no primary text; in addition, he fails to mention Kayatz’ observation that Ma‘at does not actually speak.

⁴¹ Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult*, 153.

of Kayatz is unfortunate, while his conclusion that one of these female entities is an actual goddess (implicitly, the evil Canaanite fertility goddess) while the other is merely a literary type (explicitly, the one created first by YHWH and through whom he created the world) seems arbitrary.

Nili Shupak, drawing heavily on Kayatz, briefly highlights both the parallel and the dissimilar elements of the depictions of Ma'at and Lady Wisdom; he concludes, rather simply, that they are "not identical."⁴² John Collins states, without clarification, in his very brief discussion that "there is probably some influence from the Egyptian concept of Maat, which embodies truth, justice, and world order."⁴³ He makes no explicit claims about the goddess, only about the abstract concept.⁴⁴ While he eventually rejects it, Richard Clifford admits that "The analogy is possible, but Wisdom in Proverbs displays a vigor and a personality in pursuit of her lovers that goes far beyond the abstract Egyptian goddess."⁴⁵

3. Lady Wisdom bears a resemblance to Isis who has assimilated the functions and descriptions of Ma'at, so any parallels are not authentically to Ma'at

Wilfred Knox, in an influential article that contains much circular logic, argued that Proverbs 1–9 is to be dated to the third century B.C.E. and that the figure of Lady Wisdom parallels Isis. This connection is consistent with its dating to this period.⁴⁶

Joseph Blenkinsopp dates Proverbs 1–9 to the third century B.C.E. and states that "there seems to be no good reason to deny the possibility of such a borrowing [from Isis]."⁴⁷

⁴² Nili Shupak, *Where Can Wisdom Be Found?: The Sage's Language in the Bible and in Ancient Egyptian Literature* (OBO 130; Fribourg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 402; see also pages 268–70 and his comments on pages 96 and 345.

⁴³ John J. Collins, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 11; he is more confident of connections between Isis and the wisdom goddess Sophia in Sirach 24, but still hesitates to be specific (203–4).

⁴⁴ Given the discussion of the Egyptologists above, Collins' position seems to split inappropriately something that is united in the Egyptian literature. This is a common problem among biblical scholars on this issue in general.

⁴⁵ Richard J. Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 34, 55.

⁴⁶ Wilfred L. Knox, "The Divine Wisdom," *JTS* 38 (1937): 230–37.

⁴⁷ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament: The Ordering of Life in Israel and Early Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 161.

Michael Fox, in his detailed article on Ma'at, states:

The most important and frequent statements about Ma'at, such as Re lives on Ma'at, or that Ma'at is the daughter of Re, or rites such as the daily offering of Ma'at to Re, or images such as Ma'at in the prow of Re's boat, can have no meaning outside an Egyptian context. Only by stripping Ma'at of its distinctive character can one even claim to find a parallel in Israel. Then, however, the parallel is not to Ma'at but to a scholarly construct.⁴⁸

Fox makes an important point that these explicitly Egyptian motifs are indeed missing in the depiction of Lady Wisdom. Fox also rejects the linkage between these two entities as "flawed" since Ma'at never speaks and no evidence that she "plays" can be adduced.⁴⁹ Fox also makes the strange, and I believe invalid, claim that "nowhere does a[n Israelite] sage discover truths about the moral realm by observing the workings of nature."⁵⁰ He then quickly concludes his article with the statement that "the Israelite sages could not have undertaken a survey of Egyptian texts of all genres and extracted a highly abstract, philosophical idea such as the world order and made that the basis of their own philosophy. The sages of Israel were not Egyptologists."⁵¹ While they may not have had such training, it seems rather presumptuous to think that the ancient sages did not have access to a concept that was pervasive in Egyptian culture and that they were incapable of such philosophical and intellectual processes in creating new texts or constructing new concepts.⁵²

In his recent commentary on Proverbs 1–9, Fox dismisses an authentic connection between Ma'at and Lady Wisdom, stating that

⁴⁸ Michael V. Fox, "World Order and Ma'at: A Crooked Parallel," *JANES* 23 (1995): 37–48, esp. 42.

⁴⁹ Fox, "World Order," 44. Fox is correct in rejecting Keel's arguments that Ma'at is depicted in the iconographic record as a playing child (46). He dismisses inappropriately, however, the evidence from Coffin Text Spell 80. While the line he claims to be a gloss probably is one, he fails to note that Ma'at is mentioned at other points throughout this text in a variety of ways which do resemble Lady Wisdom. For Fox's position to be valid, all of these statements must be glosses, which is not possible given the context of the Spell.

⁵⁰ Fox, "World Order," 48.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² The pervasiveness in Egyptian culture can be seen by the positions of the Egyptologists on this issue and on the basis of the primary literature itself, both in terms of quantity and its consistency over millennia.

Ma'at (both as the concept of truth/justice and as its divine hypostasis) was the foundation principle of Egyptian society and was deeply embedded in Egyptian religion. Unlike some other Egyptian deities (notably Isis), Ma'at never developed an international persona. It is doubtful that ancient sages, Egyptian or Israelite, could have extracted the concept of Ma'at from scattered Egyptian cultic and mortuary texts and grafted it on to an Israelite figure of wisdom.⁵³

While Fox changes “could not” to “doubtful,” he still dismisses the notion that sages (even Egyptian ones this time!) could undertake such a “scholarly” venture. In addition, Ma'at's failure to appear explicitly outside Egypt is actually only an argument from silence. Fox follows Kloppenborg's arguments about Isis and Wisdom in Sirach.⁵⁴ He concludes that “if Wisdom resembles any Egyptian goddess, it is Isis—not so much in her native Egyptian form (which would not be accessible to a foreign audience) as in the universalistic, international persona she acquired in Hellenistic times, when she became the most popular goddess in the Near East and the Aegean.”⁵⁵ Fox's conclusion regarding Ma'at and Isis is not the only option that can explain this issue of the “international persona.”⁵⁶

4. *Lady Wisdom in no way resembles Ma'at*

Helmer Ringgren does not clearly reject the influence of Ma'at, as he affirms a mythological reading of Proverbs 8.⁵⁷ He rather stresses that Lady Wisdom is a “hypostatization of a divine function” thereby avoiding foreign influence in Wisdom's depiction.⁵⁸ R. B. Y. Scott does not address Ma'at as a distinct parallel, but does reject the idea of a child who plays before the deity and concludes that Wisdom is

⁵³ Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9* (AB 18A; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 336.

⁵⁴ John S. Kloppenborg, “Isis and Sophia in the Book of Wisdom,” *HTR* 75 (1982): 57–84.

⁵⁵ Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 336.

⁵⁶ In Coffin Text Spell 1095, Isis is explicitly associated with Ma'at; this is a very early connection if it is not a gloss. It does seem that further associations are not explicit until some point just prior to or during the Hellenistic period; this may explain why only Isis (who takes on Ma'at's characteristics, and not vice versa) shows up in Greek cults and literature.

⁵⁷ Helmer Ringgren, *Word and Wisdom: Studies in the Hypostatization of Divine Qualities and Functions in the Ancient Near East* (Lund: Håkan Ohlssons Boktryckeri, 1947), 104, 132–33.

⁵⁸ Ringgren, *Word and Wisdom*, 149.

only “a poetic personification” rather than a hypostatization or even a distinct being.⁵⁹

Roger Whybray does not accept any connections between Ma’at and Lady Wisdom.⁶⁰ Rather, he concludes that “wisdom in Proverbs is fundamentally a divine attribute which in the process of personification has been endowed with secondary mythological characteristics...” and he follows the suggestion of Ringgren “that it originated from the belief, expressed in Isa. 31.2, that Yahweh is wise.”⁶¹ John Currid does not mention any connection whatsoever to Lady Wisdom in his discussion of Ma’at. Instead, he focuses on the concept of order and the connection to Pharaoh as a challenge to Pharaoh’s power in the plagues from Exodus.⁶² K. A. D. Smelik abruptly, without any evidence to support his claim, concludes his article: “The suggestion that the goddess Ma’at would have been an equivalent of, or model for, the biblical concept of Lady Wisdom, has to be rejected.”⁶³

THE PORTRAYAL AND ASSOCIATIONS OF MA’AT IN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN LITERATURE

The evidence for Ma’at is contained in a variety of genres and for all time periods in ancient Egypt. The oldest ritual text seems to be the Book of Opening the Mouth from ca. 2600 B.C.E.⁶⁴ The earliest corpus of texts is the Pyramid Texts from ca. 2300 B.C.E.⁶⁵ The Coffin Texts are dated between ca. 2100 and ca. 1750 B.C.E.⁶⁶ The *Book of*

⁵⁹ R. B. Y. Scott, “Wisdom in Creation: The ’AMÔN of Proverbs VIII 30,” *VT* 10 (1960): 213–23, here 214, 223.

⁶⁰ Roger N. Whybray, *Proverbs* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 128.

⁶¹ Roger N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9* (SBT; London: SCM Press, 1965), 83.

⁶² John Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 118–20, 205–7.

⁶³ K. A. D. Smelik, “Ma’at,” in *DDD*, 534–35, esp. 535.

⁶⁴ This text describes a ritual designed to cause the deity, originally Osiris, to indwell his statue, so that the statue will “speak” for the deity with an “open mouth.” References to the Book of Opening the Mouth are page numbers in Budge’s edition (he does not provide any clear method of citation for the text).

⁶⁵ Written on the walls of Pyramids from the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties these texts describe the hopeful journey of the deceased king to the afterlife; they make reference to the Book of Opening the Mouth.

⁶⁶ Misnamed, these texts are found both on papyri and on sarcophagi. They are incantation spells designed to assist the deceased in his journey into the afterlife. They clearly develop ideas from the Pyramid Texts and bear a remarkable resemblance to

the Dead appears to have originated at some point between these two, but full versions exist only from ca. 1500 B.C.E. and beyond.⁶⁷ Other texts include ritual hymns of praise to the gods, scribal literature, and numerous inscriptions, mostly from high officials.⁶⁸ Throughout this vast literature, particular phrases and concepts associated with Ma'at are found repeatedly. They can be placed into four categories: Titulary Language, Ritual Language, Ethical Language, and Both Ritual and Ethical Language.

1. *Titulary Language*

The first category of Titulary Language reflects the belief that the gods—especially the high gods Ptah, Re, Aten, Osiris—rule in conjunction with the principle of Ma'at, of order and justice. Also, in the inscriptions, different labels using the term “Ma'at” are applied to the Pharaoh, the representative of the gods on earth, who is, for example, “the Lord of Ma'at.” The phrase “content with Ma'at” seems to function in a similar way, for both kings and high officials. The office of “prophet of Ma'at” seems to reflect the idea that advisors to the king, just as the king himself, can speak on behalf of the goddess and the principles which she represents. This titulary language is surely connected with the fourth category, which I suggest associates ruling both ritually and ethically with the principles of Ma'at (see below).

2. *Ritual Language*

The second category of Ritual Language concerns the presentation of Ma'at to the deity, typically Ptah, Re, or Osiris. First, in this ritual action, the king (later a high official) carries a statue in the form of Ma'at before the statue of the high god and lifts it up. This offering is accompanied by beer and bread. Ma'at is understood as the substance

the famous Greek Magical Papyri from a much later period; the Book of Opening the Mouth is reflected or alluded to in Coffin Text Spells 816, 1099.

⁶⁷ This is an elaborate description of the judgment of the dead and the process of attaining a good afterlife; it is related, in a very complicated way, to the previous three texts.

⁶⁸ The hymns are mostly in praise of Osiris, Re, or Aten and are mostly from high officials or from temple liturgies. The scribal literature is a large category, including the Instructions and Complaints, which were transmitted conservatively by scribes across the centuries.

on which the gods live; they nourish themselves on Ma'at.⁶⁹ Order and justice are the responsibilities of the gods and they can perform them only when they are "full" of Ma'at.

Second, Ma'at has a clear relationship with the sun-god Re. As his daughter, she guides his boat through the sky every day and guides the deceased through the afterlife as well. Re's boat can be depicted with several gods and goddesses, but often can be represented with only the figure of Ma'at or even only by her characteristic feather in the boat.

Third, the individual speaker in the Coffin Texts claims an association with Ma'at which will give him an advantage in the afterlife and the judgment. The individual claims to be Ma'at, just as he also claims to be Thoth, Re, Osiris, and other gods. This "personal" association demonstrates that Ma'at is not restricted to an abstract concept; she is a real goddess, just like other deities. This point is further supported by the fact that she is explicitly addressed with the vocative in Coffin Texts.⁷⁰ While Ma'at does not speak, she clearly is expected to act on behalf of her petitioner.

Fourth, the explicit connection between Ma'at and Thoth, scribe of the gods, combined with the language of scribalism in several texts highlights the association of Ma'at with scribes and with a wisdom tradition. Egyptian sages and scribes clearly saw themselves as officials serving Ma'at. This association is further supported by the amulet of Ma'at worn around the neck by these high officials.

Fifth, language of desire is used concerning Ma'at: Re is to kiss her, she loves Re and those who love him, she is content, and those who love Re also implicitly love Ma'at. It should be noted that nothing is said of her pursuit for lovers, but she clearly does have them and clearly responds to them.

3. *Ethical Language*

The third category of Ethical Language clearly associates doing Ma'at (that which the goddess demands; what is just and consistent with the order of creation) with the appropriate life of the sage and of the king himself. Re was able to bring order to the universe because Ma'at

⁶⁹ On a theological note, the Eucharistic overtones of these "presentation of Ma'at" texts are striking, especially when compared to the language of the Bread of Life discourse in John 6.

⁷⁰ Coffin Text Spell 624, 634, 660, 939.

was present prior to creation; Ma'at herself takes no active role in this process but somehow facilitates the actions of the other gods in their work in creation and in the contemporary world. These texts form the absolute core of wisdom literature from the sages of Egypt. There is no higher good than to "do Ma'at"—to do what is right and just, ritually, ethically, socially, and politically.⁷¹ Ma'at pervades and guides all of life's actions in these texts.

4. *Both Ritual and Ethical Language*

The fourth category of both Ritual and Ethical Language demonstrates again how the concept of Ma'at unites all of life in Egypt. Ma'at is at the core of religious, political, and social values. Because it is the center of ritual activity, it is necessary for navigating the afterlife. Because it is the center of ethics, its performance and internalization in the heart of the individual are weighed at the final judgment against the cosmic standard, which is Ma'at herself, in the balance before the high god. Thus, achieving Ma'at is the goal of life and is the key to eternal blessing in the afterlife. If Ma'at is not observed, then chaos, disorder, and calamity of both a physical and moral nature will result. When Ma'at is reestablished, then order is restored on both a cosmic and a local scale.

CONNECTIONS TO LADY WISDOM IN PROVERBS 1–9, ESPECIALLY 8:22–31

This brief survey of Ma'at in ancient Egyptian literature provides key elements with which to compare the description of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 8. Their relationship is obviously complex. It is clear that there is not a one-to-one relationship between the two.

Several connections, however, can easily be made between them. First, Ma'at is associated with the wisdom and scribal traditions in Egypt just as Lady Wisdom is with the Israelite scribal enterprise.⁷²

⁷¹ While Hebrew has many words with fluid and overlapping semantic ranges to indicate this order of the world, life, and relationships (for example, *shalom*, *tsedekah*, *mishpat*, *emet*, *tov*), the older Egyptian concept of "ma'at" contains them all and unifies them into a single holistic term extending to all areas of life.

⁷² This observation is made on the basis of Proverbs 1–9 as a whole, and not just chapter 8.

Second, Lady Wisdom is both the goal and the one who provides instruction on how to live. Seeking Lady Wisdom in order to actualize her values and commands in everyday life is equivalent to doing Ma'at. Third, just and responsible kingship is dependent on Ma'at and on Wisdom (Prov 8:15). Fourth, both Ma'at and Lady Wisdom are present at creation but do not actually create the universe; instead, they have some unspecified role which enables creation to occur in an orderly manner with a coherent result (Prov 8:22–31).

Of course, certain features are not perfectly parallel. First, the description of Ma'at holding the ankh and the scepter could be paralleled by Lady Wisdom having “riches and honor” (Prov 8:18) and specifically “long life and riches and honor in my hands” (Prov 3:16). Such a claim is possible and not a direct correspondence. Second, Ma'at is deeply involved in the final judgment of the individual, whereas the role of Lady Wisdom is unspecified in this regard. Lady Wisdom may provide the pattern or standard by which human actions are judged (and then only as regards retribution in this life and not an afterlife), but the elaborate and consistent descriptions associated with Ma'at find no parallels in Proverbs 1–9. Third, Ma'at is the only deity to appear also in a dual form, Maaty. It is possible, and I believe probable, that such a connection may account for the otherwise inexplicable use of the plural form חכמות (wisdoms) for חכמה (wisdom) in a few texts in Proverbs and Psalms.⁷³

As noted, however, much dissimilarity also exists. First, Lady Wisdom speaks in the first person and cries out openly in the streets (Prov 8:1, 4), while Ma'at never speaks. Second, Lady Wisdom is not *clearly* YHWH's daughter while, of course, Ma'at is clearly the daughter of Re. The ambiguity of two key words in Prov 8:22–31 complicates understanding the relationship between YHWH and Lady Wisdom.⁷⁴

⁷³ Prov. 1:20; 9:1; 24:7; Ps 49:3. It is significant that the first two passages clearly refer to personified Lady Wisdom, while the third and fourth occur in the context of living the life guided by wisdom which preserves one in times of judgment and retribution in this life. This could possibly derive from the “Hall of Maaty” as the place of judgment.

⁷⁴ The relationship between YHWH and Lady Wisdom could suggest that Lady Wisdom was an independent goddess in ancient Israel. Contemporary arguments for a recovering of the Feminine Divine often incorporate the image of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs and Sophia in Sirach 24 and *Wisdom of Solomon*. The relationship between Lady Wisdom and Ma'at is important, not only on a historical or cultural basis developed from comparative mythology, but also for constructive theology in our current contexts.

The root קנה in verse 22 can mean several things: acquire, create, get, give birth to; and the variety of suggestions for מְנַחֵם in verse 30 allow interpretations of the passage to become extremely idiosyncratic very quickly. It is not clear at all how this second word should be taken, and its translations have included “master workman,” “little child,” “architect,” “guide,” “living link.”⁷⁵ The Egyptian literature surveyed provides a clear statement that Ma'at was created by Re before the rest of creation, but the picture of Ma'at as a playing child is even less certain than is the case for Lady Wisdom as one playing before YHWH (Prov 8:30–31).⁷⁶ Third, the statement that Wisdom “rejoices before him always” in verse 30 finds no parallel in the statements concerning Ma'at. Fourth, the repeated appearance of Ma'at in connection with judgment in the afterlife in Egyptian texts is completely absent in Proverbs 1–9. Proverbs evinces no evidence of belief in an afterlife, let alone indications that any type of judgment will occur in such a setting nor what type of standards will be invoked.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there are a number of similarities which link Lady Wisdom to Ma'at, especially in the larger function of both serving as guides to living according to the order of the universe. There is, however, no direct borrowing of Ma'at without significant revision and adaptation for a Yahwistic setting.⁷⁷ The ambiguity of the vocabulary in Prov 8:22–31 may obscure another possible connection to Ma'at, but it certainly cannot be blamed for a “demythologizing” portrayal of an Egyptian goddess. The best conclusion is that there is, or at least there was, a limited connection between the Egyptian goddess Ma'at and Lady Wisdom, with the latter possibly being enhanced by (yet not completely constructed on) the former. According to Michael Fox, “Lady Wisdom does not speak or behave much like Ma'at; she is therefore probably *not* modeled on her.”⁷⁸ This conclusion is only partially accurate; the further statements that he makes regarding the

⁷⁵ See the list and criticisms by Scott, “Wisdom in Creation,” 213–23.

⁷⁶ As previously noted, Keel's suggestions for iconographic depictions of Ma'at as a playing child are not able to be supported and should be rejected.

⁷⁷ This seems to be one of Fox's points (“World Order,” 42), but the evidence from which he made similar remarks is not valid.

⁷⁸ Fox, “World Order,” 46.

connection with Isis during the later Hellenistic period, the view of the natural order by Israelite sages, and the inability of ancient sages even possibly to construct such a parallel should all be rejected. In addition, his conclusion should be nuanced to reflect a slightly more fluid relationship: while Lady Wisdom does not act or speak completely like Ma'at, she does share a number of characteristics that place both entities solidly in scribal circles concerned with wisdom, everyday life, and creation. Therefore, Ma'at could have been the initial motivation for thinking about an entity like Lady Wisdom without being solely responsible for her subsequent description as articulated by professional Israelite sages. The Israelite understanding of Lady Wisdom has a possible, and I would say *probable*, connection to the goddess Ma'at, but no direct correspondence to Ma'at without some adaptation can be demonstrated on the basis of the known evidence.

APPENDIX

The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts. Translated by R. O. Faulkner. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969.

Pyramid Text 317 (Utt 260): I the orphan have had judgement with the orphaness, the Two Truths [Maat in dual: Maaty] have judged, though a witness was lacking. The Two Truths [Maaty] have commanded that the thrones of Geb shall revert to me, so that I may raise myself to what I have desired.

Pyramid Text 1219a (Utt 519): You [a god, possibly Re] will cause me to sit because of my righteousness [Maat] and I will stand up because of my blessedness.

Pyramid Text 1482b–1483 (Utt 573): Commend me to him who is greatly noble, the beloved of Ptah, the son of Ptah, that he may speak on my behalf and that he may provide supplies for my jar-stands(?) which are on earth, / because I am one of [with] these four gods, Imsety, Hapy, Duamutef, Kebhsenuf, who live by right-doing [Maat], who lean on their staffs and watch over Upper Egypt.

Pyramid Text 1582–1583 (Utt 586): May you [the deceased] shine as Re; repress wrongdoing [Isfet], cause Maat to stand behind Re, shine every day for him who is in the horizon of the sky. / Open the gates which are in the Abyss.

The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts. Translated and edited by R. O. Faulkner. 3 Vols. Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips, 1973, 1977, 1978.

Coffin Text Spell 80 (II, 32–36a): Thus said Atum: Tefenet is my living daughter, and she shall be with her brother Shu; “Living One” is his name, “Righteousness” [Maat] is her name. . . . Nu said to Atum: Kiss your daughter Ma'at, put her at your nose, that your heart may live, for she will not be far from you; Ma'at is your daughter and your son is Shu whose name lives on. Eat of your daughter Ma'at; it is your son Shu who will raise you up. I indeed am one who lives, son of Atum; he fashioned me with his nose, I have gone forth from his nostrils; I put myself on his neck and he kisses me with my Ma'at. [vol. I]

Coffin Text Spell 165 (III, 5–6): [Spell for eating bread from upon the offering-tables of Re, giving oblations in On] O you who are content with what you have done—four times—and who send Ma'at to Re

- daily, the liver of Re is flourishing because of Ma'at, and he partakes of the meal of the Great Goddess. [vol. I]
- Coffin Text Spell 376 (V, 39): The bleared eyes of the Great One fall on you and Ma'at will examine you for judgement. [vol. II]
- Coffin Text Spell 540 (VI, 135–136): [To become the scribe of Hathor] I have received the four reed wands and the reed pens of Ma'at. [136] I received them from her fingers, I moisten(?) them.... It is the great ones, the Lords of their tribunal, who know the names of the wands and pens of Ma'at; I know them by their names. I bring what is good [...]; I cause Ma'at to enter in, I reduce the two Warriors to order, I detest him who will not see wrong [Isfet], whom the crew of Re, the Eldest in sky and earth, make impotent;... I am the scribe of Hathor, the writing materials of Thoth are opened for me, and I am his helper. [vol. II]
- Coffin Text Spell 654 (VI, 275): I have come rejoicing, a scribe of Ma'at. [vol. II]
- Coffin Text Spell 659 (VI, 280): Spell for landing [the bark of Re]. Hail to you, Bull of the West, Lord of fayence in the festivals of the two Ma'ats [Maaty]! [vol. II]
- Coffin Text Spell 660 (VI, 282): I am a king who probes(?), and the two Truth-goddesses [Maaty] have laid their hands on me, being hungry on the day of...in the Sokar-bark of the two Truth-goddesses [Maaty]. [vol. II]
- Coffin Text Spell 939 (VII, 150): O Ma'at, in front of the place of complaint in the tribunal, I am he who was pleasing to the god [one of several deities addressed—Thoth, Ptah, Horus]. [vol. III]
- Coffin Text Spell 1095 (VII, 379): This is Isis who is before him [proper name] as Ma'at, she shows him the paths when crossing the sky, that he may imitate what Re does. [vol. III]

E. A. Wallis Budge. *The Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani*. London: British Museum, 1895; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1967.

Book of the Dead 105: O Weigher on the scales, may *maat* rise to the nose of Re that day! Do not let my head be removed from me!

Book of the Dead 125: I live in *maat*, I feed my heart upon *maat*. I have done that which men commanded, the gods are satisfied thereat. I have appeased God by [doing] his will.... I have done *maat*. O lord of *maat*, I am pure, my breast is washed, my hinder parts are cleansed, my interior [hath been] in the pool of *maat*, without a member in me lacking.