Women's Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible

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"The wisdom of women builds her house." (Proverbs 14:1).

Women's learning and leading has long been the subject of debate in Judaism. While opportunities for women's education have blossomed in the last century, women are still often denied access to the textual education and positions of power offered to men. In these debates, a close read of the Hebrew Bible is often missing. What does the text have to say about women's wisdom?

Our first source comes from the Torah itself, in Exodus. Moses calls on all who are skilful in the community of Israel – literally, 'wise of heart' – to come forward and help construct the Tabernacle. The text emphasises that Moses speaks to the whole community, and repeats several times that this includes both men and women. We then read:

'And all the women who were wise of heart spun with their own hands, and brought what they had spun, in blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and in fine linen.' [Exodus 35:25]

What does it mean to be wise of heart? Some ancient rabbis read this verse as a limitation of women's wisdom. They interpreted the juxtaposition of wisdom and spinning to mean that women's wisdom extends only to the use of a spindle.[1] But a perhaps more interesting definition of wisdom (or 'chochmah' in the original Hebrew) comes from the great medieval commentator, Rashi. Commenting on various words for intelligence and knowledge used elsewhere in Exodus, he explains,

'Wisdom ['chochmah'] is what a person hears from others and learns.'[2]

Is this, then, the wisdom of those wise-of-heart women? Unlike the other types of intelligence that Rashi defines, chochmah is not what one can deduce for oneself, or divine inspiration. The spinning women's wisdom is communal, a result of shared teaching. It is a different portrayal to that of wise men in the Bible, whose wisdom is often seen as intrinsic or God-given.

The book of Proverbs personifies wisdom/chochmah as a woman. She is more precious than rubies; a tree of life for those who hold fast to her. God founded the earth through wisdom, and she dwelt with God. Happy is the man who finds wisdom.

This allegory feeds into traditional ideas of courtship, with men pursuing wisdom, who herself takes a passive role. Nevertheless, there is power in the idea of wisdom as a woman. As Judith Plaskow says when speaking about gendered images for God, 'metaphors matter… [they] give resonance and authority to a community's self-understanding and serve to support and sustain its conception of the world'[3]. Those feminine images that we do have in our tradition can strengthen acceptance of women as teachers and leaders.

In the rabbinic tradition, wisdom or chochmah is identified as the Torah. 'Torah' defies translation. It is more than 'law', and more than the five books of Moses, the contents of the written Torah scroll. The Torah includes the entire corpus of written and oral teachings. And the woman of wisdom spoken of in Proverbs? She is the Torah.

Understanding the Torah to be the woman described in Proverbs can transform not only our conception of gender roles, but also of Judaism as a religion of law. Rather than the stereotype of a dry and punctilious ‘Law of Moses’, the Torah is a living entity betrothed to the Jewish people. Her ways are pleasant, and she dwelt with God before all of creation. In some rabbinic stories, the Torah is God’s beloved daughter, betrothed to Israel. It is through Torah that Jews can approach God.

In the final chapter of Proverbs, traditionally sung by Jews on the eve of every Shabbat, we read of the famous ‘woman of valour’. She provides for her household, is good to her husband, and spins. But her valour is not limited to household skills:

‘Her mouth is full of wisdom, and her tongue with the Torah of kindness.’ [Proverbs 31:26]

So too with those women in Exodus who spun for the Tabernacle. Their wisdom was not limited to spinning, though it sometimes took different forms from the men’s wisdom. The Hebrew Scriptures do not always represent women’s wisdom in the same way as men’s – the patriarchal context of Biblical-era society would make it impossible to do so. Nonetheless, it is in the image of women that the Bible chooses to understand wisdom. Through women, we can learn the true nature of Torah.

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[1] Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 66b

[2] Rashi on Exodus 31:3

[3] Judith Plaskow, Standing Again at Sinai, p125

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