

The 'Strange Woman' of Proverbs

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The Book of Proverbs refers to the *strange woman*. For example, Chapter 5 says:

- [1] *My son, attend unto my wisdom, and bow thine ear to my understanding:*
 - [2] *That thou mayest regard discretion, and that thy lips may keep knowledge.*
 - [3] *For the lips of a strange woman drop as an honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil:*
 - [4] *But her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword.*
- (Proverbs 5:1-4)

Who is the *strange woman* mentioned in Proverbs and [elsewhere](#) in the Old Testament? A search of the web reveals few convincing efforts to answer this question. It seems like this ought to be discussed somewhere online, so we should make the effort to do so here.

It seems clear these verses represent something beyond the literal advice of a father to his son to stay away from prostitutes. That's certainly good advice, but is a topic more suitable for an instruction manual for fathers than for inspired Holy Scripture.

The strange woman here appears to relate to some realm or dimension of ones own mental experience. In broad terms, she seems to correspond to a class of tempting thoughts, and perhaps also to a part of our nature that produces such thoughts.

To understand the strange woman, it will help to refer to Psalm 1, the preface to Psalms and an important interpretative key to the Wisdom Literature. [A psychological interpretation of Psalm 1 may be [found here](#).]

Verses 1-2 of Psalm 1 tell us:

- [1] *Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.*
 - [2] *But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.*
- (Psalms 1:1-2)

The first verse summarizes in a few words the perils of our ordinary waking consciousness. Clearly we should be try to always remain on the right path of thinking and experience, the path of life. Our minds and hearts should be turned towards God. However, as is easily verified, we are continually opposed in this by three kinds of tempting or negative thoughts. Psalm 1 refers to these as (1) counsels of the ungodly, (2) the way of sinners, and (3) the seat of the scornful.

Counsels of the ungodly encompass all manner of vain, useless thoughts that run through our minds: schemes, plans, vague, pointless daydreams, and the like. The way of sinners, in contrast, refers to outright sinful thoughts. And we occupy the seat of the scornful when we engage in hateful, cynical, and inappropriately critical thoughts about others and the world. These are indeed three of the most serious obstacles we face on our spiritual journey.

The strange woman is another member of this rogues gallery. As already noted, there is a potential tendency to interpret this term too literally as a physical prostitute or seductive woman. So narrow an interpretation, however, robs the concept of its full spiritual significance. There is also a danger in adopting too broad an allegorical interpretation. Thus it is potentially going too far to see the strange woman as corresponding to every seductive false doctrine or every form of idolatry. (If such is the meaning, for example, then why assign the figure a specifically female gender?)

It seems more reasonable to assume the author had a particular meaning in mind in applying the analogy of a female harlot. This certainly makes sense from a psychological standpoint. Along with the three forms of negative thinking alluded to in Psalm 1:1, sexual and sensual temptations round out a short list of the mental phenomena that psychologically assault us and against which we must maintain constant vigilance.

Stated simply, the strange woman refers to our *concupiscent* nature, or, we might say, our concupiscent nature when it is disordered. She is the part of us that is too interested in and attached to sensual and, in particular, sexual pleasure; a part of us that not only enjoys such pleasure, but craves it, desires it, and schemes to get it. The strange woman corresponds to what might be called one's inner harlot or, in contemporary slang, one's inner "slut". It's what causes a man to pause just a little too long before turning off the adult channel he accidentally encountered while channel surfing. Or what makes his glance linger momentarily on the Victoria's Secret window at the shopping mall.

As far as women are concerned, I don't know exactly how the strange woman manifests herself, but on general principles I would expect the dynamics are basically not much different than with men.

The strange woman beckons and cajoles. She says, "let's just make this one exception" or "this time won't count as a sin", or "we'll just follow a tempting thought a little ways, then stop before it is a sin", or "let's just do this enough to relax, but no more."

Beyond simply noting the existence of the strange woman, the author of Proverbs considers her motives. He explains that the agenda of the strange woman is specifically to draw us away from the path of life:

[5] *Her feet go down to death; her steps take hold on hell.*

[6] *Lest thou shouldst ponder the path of life, her ways are moveable, that thou canst not know them.*

(Proverbs 5:1-4)

Not only does the strange woman divert us from the path of life, but she does this intentionally. She has ulterior motives. Her purpose is not really, as we might think, to obtain pleasure, but has the precise aim to divert us.

This observation fits with our with our actual experience. While sensual and sexual temptations promise pleasure, in reality they offer but little pleasure followed by longer lasting unpleasantness. One succumbs to sexual temptation or sensual indulgence only to find that, immediately or soon after, one feels bad, flat, depleted, dull, with reduced vitality, confused, and often enmeshed in folly. Thus, by a strictly utilitarian calculus, nothing is gained by following the suggestions of the strange woman. Her promises are deceitful, and they have a darker aim than mere pleasure. The strange woman is a close companion of and front for *the enemy of human nature*, which opposes our salvation and psychological integration.

Further on in Proverbs 5 the strange woman is contrasted with another female character, the *wife of thy youth*. Indeed, perhaps the real question to ask here is not who the strange woman is, but who the wife of thy youth is.

15 *Drink waters out of thine own cistern, and running waters out of thine own well.*
[16] *Let thy fountains be dispersed abroad, and rivers of waters in the streets.*
[17] *Let them be only thine own, and not strangers' with thee.*
[18] *Let thy fountain be blessed: and rejoice with the wife of thy youth.*
[19] *Let her be as the loving hind and pleasant roe; let her breasts satisfy thee at all times; and be thou ravished always with her love.*
(Proverbs 5:1-4)

It is again important not to restrict interpretation here to the literal level (otherwise, how would the “wife of thy youth” carry any meaning to the half of readers who are women?)

To drink waters from thine own cistern means to be mentally guided by the true inspirations which flow from God. This goes along with what Psalm 1 describes as following the path of life and with taking delight in the law or guidance of God. The temptations of the strange woman are likened to water that comes from a different, foreign cistern — one that we should not draw from.

The *wife of thy youth* could be understood in various ways. One interpretation is suggested by the analysis of Genesis 2 by the great exegete, Philo of Alexandria, which many Church Fathers followed. By this view, Eve, or the female aspect of human nature, corresponds to our feeling or sensual nature. She contrasts with Adam, who represents our intellectual nature. The *wife of thy youth*, then, would correspond to our Eve “nature” before the fall — a companion, friend, and helpmate to our intellect. Our feelings and sensory nature — and by extension the body itself — are, if they are pure and properly ordered to support our relationship with God, helpful and a source of genuine enjoyment. Our body, in short, is a gift from God, to be enjoyed and used properly.

The *wife of thy youth* can also be interpreted as Wisdom, or the part of the psyche from which Wisdom springs.

Another interpretation is suggested by modern depth psychology. In Jungian psychology, positive female images — which would include the *wife of thy youth*, correspond to what Jung termed the *anima*. Like many terms in Jungian psychology, it's difficult to define the *anima* precisely, but the term encompasses various aspects of the

psyche which, like a mother or female friend, help, support, nurture, and guide the ego. The *wife of thy youth*, then, would correspond to certain unconscious aspects of the personality which inspire, guide, and help the ego.

In a more general sense, we might say that the *wife of thy youth* corresponds to the virginal innocence of ones youth, lost, but recoverable. She represents an element of our personality that we knew in our youth, that delighted us, took care of us, and satisfied our need for companionship. A child takes delight simply in being alive, in the thrill and joy of existence, and in learning, discovering, and knowing. Concerning people, a child enjoys simply being with another human being; of making another smile or laugh; of engaging another in play or games; in learning or teaching something.

The contrast between the strange woman and the wife of thy youth presents a choice between two kinds pleasures. On the one hand are the gross, dull, and ephemeral sensual pleasures offered by the strange woman. On the other are pure, eternal, and transcendent pleasures offered by the wife of thy youth — things like spiritual joy, wisdom, and virtue. The latter are the fruits of Eden and the jewels that adorn the heavenly city and the crown of victory. Clearly we should prefer these to sensual pleasures. The strange woman offers only inferior pleasures, and leads us away from the path of life, the path by which we may obtain the truer and better pleasures which God in His great love desires for us.

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