

## **Reading Wisdom with Reich: Proverbs 8-9 as Interpreted through the Psychotherapy of Wilhelm Reich**

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### **Abstract**

The psychology of Wilhelm Reich suggests a hermeneutic that can illuminate the somato-psychic concepts of Hokhmah or Holy Wisdom as presented in the Hebrew of Proverbs 8-9. Reich's psychology departs from his mentor Freud in its presentation of a living system that includes "mind," "psyche" and "body." Reich proposed to proceed beyond psychoanalysis to a "biogenesis" that included both individual and societal somatic therapy and education (Reich 1948, 1949). In this sense, Reich's work in "character analysis" provides a suitable lens through which to view Hebrew concepts such as *nephesh*, *hayah* and *ruach*, which cut across Greek language-based psycho-physical boundaries. Reich's theories and practice also provide a suitable parallel to the Hebrew functional idea of "flesh" (*basar*), which differs from the Western formal notion of "body" (a distinction noted by Boman, 1970). In Proverbs 8-9, the function of Hokhmah can be seen to emulate that of the Reich's "orgnotic sixth sense," which organizes an awareness of self or "I-ness" from a multiplicity of sense impressions and "voices." Breakdown in this orgnotic (or energy-based) sense leads to a splitting of the self in various forms of schizophrenic symptoms. Understanding arrives when various aspects of the self are reunited in a healthy approach to love, work and knowledge. The indeterminacy of certain aspects of this interpretation (that is, whether the psychology applies to the individual or the social arena) also suggests a bridge to the Hebrew interpretive tradition of midrash, which allows for a diversity of interpretations that can only be fixed for a certain situation and reader/hearer.

This paper proposes that the psychology of Wilhelm Reich can provide a hermeneutic lens through which to view a number of somato-psychic concepts inherent in the Semitic language epistemology of biblical Hebrew. I then proceed to apply this hermeneutic to the presentation of Holy Wisdom (*ḥākemōt*) in Proverbs 8 and 9.

As Andre LaCocque (1997) pointed out in a paper for this group in 1997 in San Francisco, the Hebrew concept of *nephesh*, usually translated as “soul” or “self,” does not easily yield to interpretations acculturated by post-Platonic ideas, in which separations between “mind,” “body,” “psyche,” and “soul” are constructed. As he noted, from the standpoint of ancient Hebrew, it is not so much that one “has” a *nephesh*, but that one “is” a *nephesh*, when experienced from a particular awareness.

Likewise, Thorlief Boman (1970) has pointed out the phenomenological difference between Greek and Hebrew thought with regard to a number of primary concepts pertinent to the psychological understanding of the Hebrew scriptures. Boman maintains, with justification marshalled from the vocabularies and grammars of the two languages, that they each presume different ways of encountering the world somatically. The Greek language specializes in sight impressions, based on images that are construed to have objectivity, form and immutability. The Hebrew language bases perception primarily on hearing as well as on other somatic sensations such as light, warmth, odour, flavour and proprioception. As he notes:

For the Hebrew, the decisive reality of the world of experience was the word; for the Greek it was the thing (emphasis in original, 206).

For the Hebrew (and one could say, the Semitic language) mind in general, the form of a thing is incidental to its purpose and use. For this reason, Boman argues, no description of anything that approaches a photographic reality appears in the Hebrew scriptures.

Underlying these differences in the two languages' root metaphors and worldviews, Boman finds a difference between an emphasis on that which is static and unchanging in the Greek and that which is dynamic and changing in the Hebrew. Various Hebrew verbs for standing, for instance, do not mean the condition of standing still but would be better translated as "coming to standing." The moment of stillness only punctuates ongoing movement, metaphorically a musical rest interspersed within unceasing rhythm and melody.

Parallel to this, in contrast with post-Platonic Greek (and most Western) philosophical thinking, the Semitic languages maintain a continuum between "inner" and "outer" states, rather than a radical separation. As Boman notes, the separation that European language thinking finds in the notions of being and becoming also do not adhere. Stative verbs in Hebrew express "neither being nor becoming but assert an action of the subject proceeding from within"(33-34). His discussion of the Hebrew verb *hayah* (which conveys effecting or energizing), often mistranslated as a Western "being" verb, is pertinent here (38ff).

Following from the above, the ancient Hebrew constructs the notion of "flesh," underlining the ideas of substance and instrumentality, but not of a "body." Similarly, presumed separations between "spirit" and "breath" do not adhere in the Hebrew ideas of *ruach*. "Spirit" which in both Hebrew and Aramaic (*ruach*, *ruhā*) can also mean breath, wind or atmosphere, is never as "spiritual" as in Western conceptions. Likewise, "flesh" (as in the Hebrew

*bašar*, which derives from the root meaning to relate or tell) is never as wholly material. As Boman summarises the paradox:

For the ancients, the word was more substantial and the matter more spiritual (meaningful) than for us (92).

In this conception, spirit does not fill the empty form of flesh, but rather the divine breath en-fleshes itself. Likewise, flesh can also express instrumentally the qualities of the divine word or *dabhar*. In this sense, the ‘telling’ of our flesh is its action, which is judged good or bad ( in a Semitic sense, ripe or unripe) depending upon whether it fulfils the purpose for which it was intended at the right time.

Just as *ruach* enfleshes itself to provide a vehicle for the divine life energy, a vehicle which can be called *nephesh*, so also the *nephesh* itself can be seen as community of impressions, feelings and voices that make up a communal self. This communal self is only able to name itself as an “I am” in relation to the only “I Am,” the Holy One (*Elohim*) construed as Sacred Unity. When the relationship to the divine breaks down, which the Hebrew word *rāʿ* construes as a break in connection to the divine light/intelligence, then the self, whether viewed as communal or individual, shatters and loses its sense of purpose as the reflection (*tzalem*) of the Holy One (mentioned in Genesis 1:26).

### **Somatic Boundary Crossing in the Work of Wilhelm Reich**

Many of these same considerations, which one could call somato-psychic boundary crossing, inform the psychology of Wilhelm Reich (whose life itself is a study in Holy Wisdom veiling and unveiling her face (for instance, see Ilsa Reich 1969). Reich’s psychology departs from his mentor

Freud in its presentation of a personality theory that includes a somatic nexus of “mind,” “psyche” and “body.” Reich proposed to proceed beyond psychoanalysis to a “biogenesis” that included both individual and societal therapy and education.

In this sense, Reich’s work in “character analysis” (1949) provides a suitable lens through which to view Hebrew concepts such as *nephesh*, *hayah* and *ruach*, which cut across Greek language-based boundaries. Reich’s theories and practice also provide a suitable parallel to the Hebrew functional idea of “flesh” (*bašar*), which differs from the Western formal notion of “body.”

For Reich, breath and the breathing wave were a key energetic bridge between the Western ideas of body and psyche. In his pivotal work *Function of the Orgasm* (1948), Reich wrote that holding the breath not only created disharmony in the individual, but also in society at large, which manifested as a failure to respond to natural “vegetative” impulses (1948):

There is not a single neurotic person who is capable of breathing out deeply and evenly in one breath (p. 333).

We see a single thread stretching from the childhood practice of holding the breath in order not to have to masturbate, to the muscular block of our patients, to the stiff posturing of militarists, and to the destructive artificial techniques of self-control of entire cultural circles (p. 360)

For Reich, respiration was intimately tied up with the “functional antithesis between periphery and center,” that is, the natural impulse of an organism to expand in pleasure and contract in anxiety. He related these two functions to the two poles of the autonomic nervous system (the parasympathetic and sympathetic, 1948, p. 295). He named the nexus of breath and energy that created a healthy or unhealthy sense of self “orgone”

(These ideas are similar to the ancient Hebrew concept of the relationship of *ruach* to *hayah*).

Reich considered the detailed witnessing of small proprioceptive differences essential to his approach with patients. These differences included feelings of tension (called “armoring”) in the muscles and connective tissue arranged in rings around the eyes, throat, chest, solar plexus, genitals and pelvic floor. Reich associated this armoring with a patient’s subconscious attempts to suppress breathing, sensation and feeling.

In other patients, Reich found the reverse of armoring in these areas—an excessive softness (hypotonia) and lack of feeling. In these cases, Reich felt that patients’ awareness of bodily sensations and feelings had become “split” from their sense of identity. In extreme cases, he felt that this splitting of body awareness from identity was the functional definition of schizophrenia.

Parallel to notions of the Hebrew *nepesh*, in which the self can be seen as a “we” or an “I,” as a community or an individual, Reich saw the self as constantly and dynamically involved with creating a sense of identity from the many impressions and feelings that it experiences, within and without. He noted in an extensive case history of a schizophrenic patient in *Character Analysis* (1949):

[The] degree of clarity and oneness [of consciousness] depends, to judge from observations in schizophrenic processes, not so much on the strength or intensity of self perception, as on the more or less complete integration of the innumerable elements of self-perception into one single experience of the SELF [emphasis in the original] (p. 442).

Besides the abilities to see, hear, smell, taste, touch, there existed unmistakably in healthy individuals a sense of organ functions, an organotic sense, as it were, which was completely lacking or was disturbed in

biopathies. The compulsion neurotic has lost this sixth sense completely. The schizophrenic has displaced this sense and has transformed it into certain patterns of his delusional system, such as “forces,” “the devil,” “voices,” “electrical currents,” “worms in the brain or in the intestines,” etc. (p. 454).

What the schizophrenic experiences on the level of body awareness, Reich maintained, is not so different from the experience of the inspired poet or mystic (1949):

The functions which appear in the schizophrenic, if only one learns to read them accurately, are COSMIC FUNCTIONS [emphasis in original]; that is, functions of the cosmic orgone energy in undisguised form....

In schizophrenia, as well as in true religion and in true art and science, the awareness of these deep functions is great and overwhelming. The schizophrenic is distinguished from the great artist, scientist or founder of religions in that his organism is not equipped or is too split up to accept and to carry the experience of this identity of functions inside and outside the organism (p. 442, 448).

Apart from the experience of a great poet or mystic, which he felt was unusual, Reich defined health as the everyday ability of a person to love, work and learn without inhibition or anxiety.

Reich very early considered the societal consequences of his work in relation to the rise of fascism in Europe. Later in life, after he had moved to the United States, he began to see a totalitarian somatic influence exerted by all Western education. Toward the end of his life, Reich believed that the ingrained repression of natural sexual energy was too deep to be changed in most people. The best that one could do was prevent the development of character armor in young children (1983):

If no severe damage has already been inflicted on it in the womb, the newborn infant brings with it all the richness of natural plasticity and development. This infant is not, as so many erroneously believe, an empty sack or a chemical machine into which everybody and anybody can pour his or her special ideas of what a human being ought to be. It brings with it an enormously productive and adaptive energy system which, out of its own resources, will make contact with its environment and begin to shape that environment according to its needs.... LET THE CHILDREN THEMSELVES DECIDE THEIR OWN FUTURE [emphasis in original]. Our task is to protect their natural right to do so (p. 20).

### **Hearing Hochmah with Reichian Ears**

As seen above, Reich's use of "breath," "orgone" and "self," can help illuminate from a Western psychological perspective functional equivalents to the Hebrew *ruach*, *hayah* (in its instrumental form as life energy) and *nephesh*. In both cases, Western models and theories of personality that suppose divisions between mind, body, self and spirit break down.

Applying Reich to a reading of Proverbs 8 and 9, the function of Holy Wisdom can be seen to emulate that of the Reich's "orgonotic sixth sense," which organizes an awareness of self or "I-ness" from a multiplicity of sense impressions and "voices." As Holy Wisdom "builds her house" in Proverbs 9, the Hebrew text can be read in terms of the building of a sense of self at the beginning of creation (following from her primordial presence mentioned in Proverbs 8). Breakdown in this sense of a whole self (read by Reich as the root of schizophrenic symptoms) can be construed as the "ignorance" repeatedly mentioned in Proverbs. "Understanding" arrives when various aspects of the self are reunited in a healthy approach to love, work and knowledge. These three Reichian concepts may all be seen as the



province of Holy Wisdom, who provides practical insight as well as self-integration in the creation story told in Proverbs 8-9.

From the standpoint of other Western psychological models of the self, this integration can be seen to occur on both the individual and societal levels. The Hebrew text, for the reasons mentioned above, does not distinguish them. The process of breakdown in an individual's relationship to the divine parallels that of a community failing to reflect the divine light/intelligence.

In the following two poetic readings or *midrashim* from the Hebrew text of Proverbs 8 and 9, I have attempted to communicate some of the ways in which this story can be heard on both levels, individual and societal, as well with the synchronic context of time in which ancient Hebrew always participates (Douglas-Klotz, 1995, p. 123 and following, 2003, pp. ):

### **Holy Wisdom at the Beginning**

*Prov. 8:22: Yhwh qanani re'shit darko qedem mif'alaw me'az*

*"The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old." (KJV)*

The Life behind life, eternally now in past and present,  
possesses me at the beginning of beginnings:

As the first principle of setting up an ordered existence,  
this Universe Life Force absorbs me  
*cHochmah*, Holy Wisdom, Sacred Sense  
--Breath from Within and Underneath--

into itself.

Cosmic appetite combines with the power of density,  
the desire to compress and condense,  
and I--the first Interior Experience-- join the journey from the very  
start.

This is the first and most ancient mystery:  
how the power of growth can be contained  
and fixed around a center,  
the identity of the self.

This is the axis on which the universe turns.

## Gathering

*Prov. 9:1: chakhemot baneta vetah chatzeva 'ammudeha shiv'a*  
*"Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars:*  
*Prov. 9:2: tavecha tivchah 'af 'arekha shulchanah*  
*"She hath killed her beasts; she hath mingled her wine; she hath also furnished her*  
*table.*  
*Prov. 9:3: shalecha na'aroteha tiqra' 'al-gappei meromei qaret*  
*"She hath sent forth her maidens: she crieth upon the highest places of the city" (KJV)*

### **chakhemot baneta vetah**

From before thought or word,  
 cHochmah throws a boundary  
 around herself, forming a house  
 that becomes understanding:  
 what we know and can't know  
 about a universe of many faces.

### **chatzeva**

Carving, hacking, creating space  
 where there was none, pushing  
 from outside in, she forms  
 the structure that will house  
 the many voices of the self,  
 inside and out,  
 formed by thought,  
 feeling, sensation and breath.

**tavecha tivchah**

To do so, she sacrifices  
what needs to be released,  
allows what was dead to bury itself,  
ripens her ripeness,

**masekha yenah**

compresses the unknowable--  
the unthought pure mind--  
into knowing and intoxication,  
like mixing a fine wine for her guests.

**'af 'arekha shulchanah**

She is furnishing a table for us:  
all growing, spreading, moving  
living beings within the first self.

**shalecha na'aroteha**

She sends out invitations to join  
the feast in the form of  
enchancing, new possibilities,  
the great seduction of "What If?"

**tiqra' 'al-gappei**

Not satisfied with this, she also  
calls, carves, creates more space  
for a protective enclosure

**meromei qaret**

where the well of living guidance  
the wisdom made flesh,

the still, small voice of the soul  
of self, family and community  
can find a home.

In these examples, the usually privileged (and more often presumed) physical, mental, emotional and spiritual categories of experience are bridged by the somatic psychological hermeneutic. The indeterminacy of certain aspects of this interpretation (that is, whether the interpretation applies to the individual or the social arena) arises from the Hebrew interpretive hermeneutic of midrash, which allows for a diversity of interpretations that can only be fixed for a certain situation and reader/hearer. (For a comparison of midrash with post-modern ideas of inquiry, validity and self-study, see my earlier “Midrash and Post-Modern Inquiry: Suggestions Toward a Hermeneutics of Indeterminacy,” 1999 as well as its application to Thomas studies, 2000).

Applying these principles of midrash to biblical hermeneutics, one could view the same text using the psychodynamic theories of Freud, Jung or Reich, depending upon the emphasis of the questions asked of the text. What a Reichian approach to Hebrew bible hermeneutics can perhaps offer most uniquely is a Western model that challenges the above privileged and often valorized somatic and psychological categories with which we view the nature of the self.

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