

## אָמוֹן – Constantly

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In two recent reexaminations of Lady Wisdom's claim *אָמוֹן אֶצְלוֹ יְהוָהּ* in Prov 8:30, both M.V. Fox and A.V. Hurowitz argue on contextual grounds that the hapax *אָמוֹן* is best understood in the sense of being raised or growing up.<sup>1</sup> They concur that the basic intent of the passage is to convey the image of Wisdom as a child growing up in YHWH's care before or during Creation. This image accords well in their view with the larger literary unit (8:22–31), the theme of which is Wisdom's great antiquity, and with the remainder of the verse in which Wisdom recalls that at that time she was – in their view – YHWH's delight daily (*וְיְהוָהּ שֶׁעֲשָׂעִים יוֹם יוֹם*), playing before Him at all times (*מִשְׂחֻקָּתָּ לְפָנָיו בְּכָל־עֵת*).

Fox and Hurowitz differ on the precise linguistic analysis. On the morphological issue, Fox builds on a medieval interpretation and suggests that *אָמוֹן* should be parsed as an infinitive absolute in the Qal,<sup>2</sup> while Hurowitz, following A. Hurvitz,<sup>3</sup> views *אָמוֹן* as a noun of agency belonging to the *qatol* paradigm.<sup>4</sup> Their respective morphological positions lead them in turn to two distinct views of the syntax of the clause. Fox understands *אָמוֹן* to be an adverbial complement to the main verb *וְיְהוָהּ*, according to which the clause means something like “and I was by His side growing up,”<sup>5</sup> while Hurowitz sees *אָמוֹן* as the predicate nominative and renders: “I was a nursling alongside of Him.”<sup>6</sup> Despite these differences, both scholars understand the general intent of the statement in precisely the same way. Lady Wisdom asserts that, in Fox's words, “when God was busy creating the world, she was nearby, growing up like a child in his care.”<sup>7</sup>

In support of this interpretation both scholars adduce the evidence of context. As aptly stressed by Hurowitz: “When confronting a polyvalent word, the ultimate task is to determine which single meaning best suits the context in which it appears.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Fox, M.V.: “*amon* Again.” JBL 115, 1996, 699–702; Hurowitz, V.A.: “Nursling, Advisor, Architect? *אָמוֹן* and the Role of Wisdom in Proverbs 8,22–31.” *Biblica* 80, 1999, 391–400.

<sup>2</sup> Fox, 701, traces this interpretation to R. Yona (Abuwalid Merwan) ibn Janah's grammatical treatise *Sefer Hariqma* (the full reference should read: *Sefer Hariqma*, ed. Wilensky, M., Berlin: Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, 1929; second edition: Jerusalem: Academy for the Hebrew Language, 1964), and the citation should be corrected to: *volume* I, *page* 323, *lines* 16–18).

<sup>3</sup> Hurvitz, A.: “Toward a Precise Definition of the Term *אָמוֹן* in Proverbs 8:30.” In *The Bible in the Light of Its Interpreters: Sarah-Kamim Memorial Volume*, ed. Japhet, S., Jerusalem 1994, 647–650 [Hebrew]. Hurvitz proposes the definition “artisan,” which Fox and Hurowitz reject, rightly in our opinion; see below.

<sup>4</sup> GKC §84<sup>a</sup>k; for full discussion and references see Hurvitz, 649.

<sup>5</sup> Fox, 701–702.

<sup>6</sup> Hurowitz, 395: “I was *אָמוֹן* alongside him,” for his translation “nursling” see 396.

<sup>7</sup> Fox, 702.

<sup>8</sup> Hurowitz, 392.

And indeed, we are indebted to Fox and Hurowitz for ruling out – it is to be hoped, once and for all – various suggestions found in the versions and commentaries that have no logical place in the given literary unit and sacrifice coherence of thought to lexical virtuosity.<sup>9</sup>

The theme of Prov 8:22–31, as Fox and Hurowitz recognize, is Wisdom’s antiquity. However, in order to sharpen our focus on the intent of the passage we should note that Wisdom is here said to have existed for *all but* eternity. Consistent with Israelite thought, it is claimed that Wisdom is of greater antiquity than everything in the cosmos *except for the Creator himself*. In order to express this, Wisdom, who is styled throughout Proverbs as a mature woman, is pictured here as recalling her early years, stating that they took place *before* Creation and reporting that her birth, here poetically depicted as a result of YHWH’s earliest procreative efforts (vss. 22–23),<sup>10</sup> was the very first action ever performed by YHWH – even before He began to create the world.

The uniqueness of Prov 8:22–31 becomes clear when we note that although elsewhere in Proverbs God is said to have made use of Wisdom when embarking upon the work of Creation,<sup>11</sup> the intent of this passage is to stress precisely the opposite. Here Lady Wisdom reports that before and during Creation she was a mere child. Her role in the cosmos was that of a toddler, playing before YHWH but performing no useful task. The earth and humans were her playthings; she was not YHWH’s assistant in fashioning them. The passage portrays Wisdom’s *original* role in the universe, before she grew into the mature woman she eventually became and her talents were put to use by God. Thus no interpretation of v. 30 which attributes to the word אָמֵן the idea that Wisdom played some role in Creation can possibly be allowed.<sup>12</sup>

All this would seem to support the conclusion reached by Fox and Hurowitz that the root אָמֵן is used in the sense of “growing up,” “being under the care of.” And yet this suggestion is not without its difficulties. First of these is the semantic issue of whether the proposed sense can in fact be conveyed by the word in its given form. The Qal stem of אָמֵן has the active sense of rearing a child, tending to a nursling, bringing up a youngster.<sup>13</sup> If we follow Fox’s proposal and take אָמֵן as an adverbial infinitive absolute, the passive voice required is lacking; אָמֵן אֶצְלוֹ אֶתְּלִילֵי would mean “I was by his side raising [children]”; “I was by his side tending [to nurslings].”<sup>14</sup> Similarly if we accept Hurowitz’ view of אָמֵן as a substantive, the only

<sup>9</sup> These include the notion that the word is somehow connected to the Egyptian god *Amon*, as well as the following: artisan, tool, binding together, confidant, the Counselor, little mother; see the commentaries and the literature cited by Fox and Hurowitz, *passim*.

<sup>10</sup> Hurowitz, 394–396.

<sup>11</sup> See 3:19ff.

<sup>12</sup> For this reason we find it difficult to accept Hurvitz’s contention that the interpretation “artisan” is equally appropriate as it connects thematically with the preceding verses (see Hurvitz, 648).

<sup>13</sup> See TDOT 1:294; TLOT 1:135 (where the possibility of a second root, <sup>2</sup>*mn* II, is considered).

<sup>14</sup> Fox, 701, rightly raises this point in objection to ibn Janah’s interpretation of the infinitive absolute (see above, note 2; ibn Janah states explicitly that the infinitive אָמֵן is equivalent here to the passive participle, i.e. אָמֵן) – but it is hard to see how the interpretation itself can be avoided if the sense of “child care” is maintained. Fox attempts to solve this by adducing אָמֵן in Est 2:20, which, he

way to obtain the necessary passive sense is to emend it to אָמוֹן; in light of the use of the Qal stem, the *qatol* noun אָמוֹן cannot be construed as anything but a noun of agency, and the clause would have to be rendered “I was a child-rearer alongside of Him.”<sup>15</sup>

Even if it could be conceded that the substantive אָמוֹן might convey the passive sense of “nursling,” a further problem remains: the gender. Lady Wisdom is feminine throughout the passage; in the parallel colon in the verse she speaks of herself as מְשַׁחֲקָה. She should certainly refer to her toddlerhood as the time that she was an אָמוֹנָה.<sup>16</sup>

Taking the *qatol* form here as an adjective (cf. קָרוֹב, גְּדוֹל etc.)<sup>17</sup> does nothing to alleviate these difficulties. It is not at all certain that an adjective אָמוֹן, even if it were presumed to exist, could convey the passive sense required by the context here, or, if it could, why it would be employed instead of the attested אָמוֹן. Further, an adjective, no less than a noun of agency, would certainly have to be in the feminine (אָמוֹנָה). Nor is this latter difficulty solved by emendation to אָמוֹן; the masculine form is still out of place.<sup>18</sup>

In arguing for the meaning “nursling,” Hurowitz relies heavily on the evidence of the word שַׁעֲשָׁעִים in the parallel stich. In his view, since, in other occurrences of שַׁעֲשָׁע referring to the parent or care-giver taking playful delight in the young child, the verb נָשָׂא “carry” is employed, and the very same verb occurs in passages containing the image of the אָמוֹן “child-rearer,” the “transitive property” can be applied: if שַׁעֲשָׁע “delight” is used in connection with נָשָׂא and נָשָׂא is used in connection with אָמוֹן “nurse, care-giver,” then when שַׁעֲשָׁע appears in conjunction with אָמוֹן the same meaning for the latter may be presumed to have been demonstrated. However, on examination this argument seems less compelling. Hurowitz has clearly succeeded in demonstrating that task of the אָמוֹן vis à vis the child is to carry נָשָׂא him (2 Sam 4:4), either on the shoulder (Isa 49:22; see אֶמְנִיךָ in v. 23a) or in the bosom (Num 11:12). In light of this he is certainly right that the expressions עַל-צַד הָאֵמֶנָה and עַל-צַד הַתְּנַשָּׂאוֹ, in Isa 60:4 and 66:12 respectively, are “synonymous and

feels, “shows that the G infinitive of אָמוֹן can be intransitive and can refer to the child’s part (‘being raised,’ ‘growing up’) as well as the guardian’s.” But this does not seem to be the case: בְּאֵמֶנָה means simply “in care” – which is why Moshe Qimhi proposed explaining אָמוֹן in our verse as בְּאֵמֶוֹן (see the next note).

<sup>15</sup> See note 12 and Fox, 701. Incidentally, to assume the existence of a *nomen agens* אָמוֹן with the meaning “child-raiser” raises the lexical question of what it expresses that is not conveyed by the normal אָמוֹן. Moshe Qimhi (Talmage, F.: *The Commentaries on Proverbs of the Kimhi Family*, Jerusalem 1990, 198) overcomes this difficulty in positing that אָמוֹן, rather than being a noun of agency, has the abstract sense of “child-rearing; upbringing” and arguing that the preposition -כִּי should be mentally supplied – thus rendering: “I was alongside him *in care*.” In this suggestion he was probably influenced by Shmuel HaNagid, who noted the existence of abstract nouns of the *qatol* pattern such as שְׁלוֹם and קְבוּדָה; see Wilensky’s notes on ibn Janah (above, note 2).

<sup>16</sup> See GKC §84<sup>a</sup>k. Modern attempts to solve the problem generally resort to the vague notion that nouns of profession appear in the masculine only.

<sup>17</sup> As did Joseph Qimhi (Talmage, 38); see GKC §84<sup>a</sup>k.

<sup>18</sup> Fox, 701. Awareness of the problem of gender is evident as early as the commentary of Rashi, who paraphrases in the feminine אָמוֹנָה, followed by David Qimhi who glosses אָמוֹנָה (Talmage, 371).

interchangeable.”<sup>19</sup> However, it seems to us that the conclusion to be reached from this evidence is that we are now in a position to define אָמֵן more precisely: rather than “nurse,” “care for,” or “rear [a child],” it would seem that in its primary sense the verb conveys something akin to “carry about [in one’s bosom].”<sup>20</sup> Yet Hurowitz, having demonstrated all of the above, does not take this step; rather, he reverts to rendering אָמֵן in Prov 8:30 simply as “nursling.” And indeed he must, for it is obvious that “a carried-about [child]” is not an admissible rendering: it is an inept parallel to מְשַׁקֵּת and שֶׁשֶׁעִים, and makes no sense when combined with אֶצְלוֹ – not to mention that the morphological issue of אָמֵן as a passive rather than a *nomen agents*<sup>21</sup> and the grammatical issue of אָמֵן (whether noun or adjective) in the masculine, both discussed above, remain unsolved.

The weak link in Hurowitz’s suggestion is his understanding of שֶׁשֶׁעִים in the verse. Relying on the tempting parallelism in Isa 66:12 הִשְׁעֵשְׂעוּ / וְעַל-בְּרָכִים הִשְׁעֵשְׂעוּ and on the synonymous עַל-צֶדֶד הָאֵמֶנָה in Isa 60:4, he has not taken account of the fact that שֶׁשֶׁעִים in Prov 8:30 is not used in the sense of “dandle playfully [on the knee],” a figurative sense in which it appears only once – in Isa 66:12. Rather, as is clear from the parallel מְשַׁקֵּת and the following verse, it is used in its simple sense of “play, amuse,” a meaning it has everywhere else in Scripture.<sup>22</sup> Thus, although אָמֵן and נִשָּׂא are in fact shown to be synonymous and both are indeed associated with שֶׁשֶׁעִים, since שֶׁשֶׁעִים is not used in the same sense in our verse as when it parallels נִשָּׂא, the “transitive association” proposed by Hurowitz is illusory and no conclusive determination concerning the hapax אָמֵן in our verse can be made.

Hurowitz’s statement denying the admissibility of any interpretation “outside of the realm of child raising” is therefore open to question. Indeed, on further consideration, though Lady Wisdom speaks here of the time when she was a child, she is not reflecting on being brought up or cared for at all; she is recalling what *she* did as a toddler, not what others did for her. The image is of a child playing, not being reared.<sup>23</sup> Further, Lady Wisdom is not recalling the years during which she grew up; she is recalling her toddlerhood, during which God toiled at other labors, not at child-rearing, while she sat around playing.

Finally, with regard to the interpretation proposed by Fox and Hurowitz in both its forms, we should like to point out that the root אָמֵן is used in connection with rearing, caring for and carrying about children *only when the action is said to be performed by someone other than the parents*. The אָמֵן takes care of a child other than his own; אָמֵן as “nursling” (noun or adjective) or “being raised” (infinitive absolute), even if its existence could be conceded, could only be used to describe a child receiving foster care, not one being cared for by his own parent. But in Prov

<sup>19</sup> Hurowitz, 397.

<sup>20</sup> See *TLOT*, 1:136.

<sup>21</sup> More specifically, in light of the discussion: why render אָמֵן “carried-about [child]” and not “one who carries about [children]”?

<sup>22</sup> With the possible additional exception of Jer 31:20(19). See Isa 5:7; 11:8, Ps 94:19, 119:24, 70, 77, 92, 143, 174; also (in hitpalpel) Isa 29:9; Ps 119:16, 47.

<sup>23</sup> Fox, apparently sensing this, sees no problem in jumping from “being raised” to “growing up,” but the two are not the same.

8:22–31 Lady Wisdom speaks of herself as YHWH's child. He did not "adopt" her; He sired her. This, in our view, absolutely eliminates this sense of אָמון, and with it the proposals made by Fox and Hurowitz and all their predecessors, from the passage under discussion.

We believe that a more satisfactory solution is possible. From the three-part structure of the verse it would appear that the parallelism provides the key:

D	C	B	A
אָמון	אָצלוֹ		וְאָהִיהַּ
יום יום		שְׁעֵשְׁעִים	וְאָהִיהַּ
בְּכָל־עַתָּה	לפְּנֵיו	מִשְׁחַקָּתָהּ	

The parallelism is of the complementary type, so common in Biblical poetry, in which the number of elements in each colon is the same (in our case, three) but the total number of parallel components is greater (here: four), since the "gaps" left in each colon are filled in by mentally supplying the missing component from the parallel ones.<sup>24</sup> The versions and interpretations are virtually unanimous in their automatic assumption that אָמון in the first colon, is element "B", the predicate nominative of וְאָהִיהַּ ("I was אָמון by his side"). We believe it far more likely that it is adverbial and corresponds to element "D", namely יום יום in the second colon and בְּכָל־עַתָּה in the third. The progression from one colon to the next would be smoother; further, if אָמון is a nominal clause the presence of אָצלוֹ between the two words strains the syntax, whereas if the nominal clause is אָצלוֹ וְאָהִיהַּ and אָמון is adverbial this is not the case.

We thus feel that Fox's syntactical analysis is correct: אָמון is an adverbial modifier of the predicate וְאָהִיהַּ אָצלוֹ. His morphological analysis is correct too: the word is certainly the infinitive absolute of אָמון in the Qal stem. However, since we have rejected his semantic analysis, and indeed ruled out all interpretations of the verse in which אָמון is understood in the sense of child-rearing (and along with them the proposed "growing up"), we must offer an alternative. In doing so we revert to a suggestion tentatively put forth by Otto Plöger in his 1984 Proverbs commentary.<sup>25</sup> According to Plöger (whom we believe to be the only commentator to have taken this route<sup>26</sup>), as the second and third cola end with expressions for time, both conveying the idea of "always," it stands to reason that אָמון should be rendered in this sense as well. As the infinitive absolute of אָמון in its well-attested meaning of "true, faithful, secure, constant,"<sup>27</sup> he suggests, with some hesitation, that it could be rendered "beständig": "constantly; continually". We feel this definition is eminently suited to this use of the root אָמון in several passages.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> See Segal, M.Z.: *Mevo HaMiqra*, Jerusalem: Kiryat-Sepher, 1973, I, 66-67.

<sup>25</sup> Plöger, O.: *Sprüche Salomos (Proverbia)*, BK 17, Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984, 95.

<sup>26</sup> Though Fox (700) attributes this interpretation to Sym, Theod, the Targum and Venetus, as well as to A. Ehrlich, none of these saw אָמון as an adverb and none understood it, as we do following Plöger, as a time element.

<sup>27</sup> TDOT 1:298; esp. TLOT 1:134-138 where this is taken to be the primary sense of the root.

<sup>28</sup> See e.g. 1 Sam 2:35; 2 Sam 7:16; 1 Kgs 11:38; Isa 7:9; 55:3, Ps 78:8, 37; 89:29, 38; 2 Chr 20:20. On

Plöger's hesitation, and his ultimate decision to remain on the safe side and render "Pflegling,"<sup>29</sup> stemmed from the fact that אָמַן in the sense of "constant, permanent" is attested only in the Niphal.<sup>30</sup> What was for Plöger good reason to exercise caution became for Fox grounds to dismiss the suggestion entirely,<sup>31</sup> and it was all but ignored by Hurowitz. We believe that this objection can be overcome once it is recalled that the grammatically "correct" forms of the infinitive absolute in the Niphal stem are relatively rare<sup>32</sup> and that forms properly belonging to the Qal stem serve quite often in their place. We find for example יִסְקַל סְקוּלָה (Exod 19:13; 21:28), יִרְהַר יִרְהָה (Exod 19:13), יִנְקַם נִקְמָה (Exod 21:20), יִשְׂרַף שְׂרֹף (2 Sam 23:7), יִפְשֹׁל פְּשֹׁלוֹ (Isa 40:30), יִשְׂדוּר שְׂדוּרָה (Mic 2:4), יִפְתָּח פְּתוּחָה (Nah 3:13), etc.<sup>33</sup> The infinitive absolute of the Qal stem serves regularly alongside finite verbs in other stems as well, passive as well as active.<sup>34</sup> It would seem that the Qal infinitive absolute is quite versatile, capable of conveying the sense of whichever conjugation is required. It should also be noted that there is not a single example of the Niphal infinitive absolute appearing alongside a verb in the converted imperfect (*wayyiqtol*); indeed, since the Niphal infinitive absolute takes two forms, הַפְעֵל and הַפְעִיל,<sup>35</sup> one knows not whether, in our verse, the "correct" form should have been הַאֲמִן אֲצִלוֹ הַאֲמִן or הַאֲמִן אֲצִלוֹ הַאֲמִן! Both are equally unlikely. All this taken into account, it seems to us that the appearance of the infinitive absolute of the Qal, אָמַן, alongside a verb in the converted imperfect of the Qal, וְאָמַן, to convey a sense of the root אָמַן which is otherwise attested only in the Niphal is unobjectionable.

We believe this interpretation to be more in accord with the parallelism in the verse, which may now be translated:

I was alongside Him constantly,  
I was [engaged in] amusement day by day,  
Playing before Him at all times.

In the first colon Lady Wisdom introduces the general notion that she was, at the time mentioned in preceding verses, alongside God constantly. In the next two cola she goes on to specify what precisely she was doing all that time: playing. In the following verse, she elaborates:<sup>36</sup> Playing with what? "Playing with His world; amusing myself with humankind." With this verse the passage ends.

Isa 7:9 see Weiss, M.: "The Contribution of Literary Theory to Biblical Research – Illustrated by the Problem of She'ar Yashub." In *Studies in Bible*, ed. Japhet, S., Scripta Hierosolymitana 31, Jerusalem 1986, 383–385.

<sup>29</sup> See his translation and notes, 86–87.

<sup>30</sup> See above, note 28.

<sup>31</sup> Fox, 700.

<sup>32</sup> See Zohori, M.: *The Absolute Infinitive and its Uses in the Hebrew Language*, Jerusalem: Carmel, 1990, 49–51, where a total of 25 occurrences are listed.

<sup>33</sup> See Zohori, 39–40, for the remaining occurrences.

<sup>34</sup> Moreover, it would appear that when, as in our verse, the infinitive absolute of a root not cognate to that of the finite verb is used adverbially, the presence of a non-active stem alongside an active one is unattested.

<sup>35</sup> GK 51i, k.

<sup>36</sup> See the commentary of Moshe Qimhi (Talmage, 198).

Our view may become clearer when the structure of the entire pericope is considered. In the opening verses (vss. 22–23) Lady Wisdom declares her antiquity by stating that YHWH created her before he did anything else. In the next four-line stanza (vss. 24–25), she elaborates on this theme, enveloping her words by repeating the verb *וְהוֹלֵלָהּ* in the first and last lines (24a and 25b) and enumerating the component parts of the universe, stating that she was born before each of them came into existence.

The third and fourth stanzas (vss. 26–27 and 28–31<sup>37</sup>) are similar in structure and content. In the protasis of each section Wisdom enumerates the activities with which YHWH was occupied during Creation, following which, in the apodosis, she describes what she was doing at the same time. In the briefer third stanza, the apodosis consists only of the two-word statement *אָנִי שָׁמַּיְמָ* “I was there” in v. 27; in the longer, fourth stanza, of which our verse is a part, the apodosis contains two entire verses (30–31). Here Wisdom elaborates upon the simple statement she made in the third stanza, spelling out what specifically she was doing “there.” She does so gradually, stating first, in our verse, that she was amusing herself in YHWH’s presence while he worked, and finally climaxing the retrospect by describing precisely how she amused herself, naming the actual objects which served as her playthings: the newly-created world and its inhabitants.

The entire poem thus divides into two main sections, the first and second stanzas expressing the notion that Wisdom was brought into existence *before* Creation, the third and fourth stanzas stating that she was present, and describing how she kept herself occupied, *throughout* Creation. Expressions for time – various ways of saying “before” in the first two stanzas and “during” in the last two – pervade the entire pericope. The overall theme is none other than Wisdom’s claim to have been there *all along*. This provides the broadest contextual warrant for the interpretation of *אָמוֹן*, namely, “constantly,” which we have attempted to outline.

#### *Abstract:*

The debate over the meaning of *אָמוֹן* in the phrase *אָמוֹן אֲצִלֵּי אֱלֹהִים* of Prov 8:30 dates back to the Middle Ages. Scholars have suggested that Lady Wisdom was alongside YHWH as an artisan, an architect, an advisor, a confidant, the Counselor, a little mother, a nurse, a nursing, and even a tool. We argue on contextual and linguistic grounds that *אָמוֹן* should be understood as “constantly.”

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<sup>37</sup> Alternatively, if the protasis of the fourth stanza is said to begin in 27b, the third stanza would consist of 26–27a and the fourth of 27b–31; this issue has no bearing on our argument.