

Introduction

Two weeks ago we met Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 1.20-33. We found her all over the city, inviting young simpletons and mockers to heed her counsel that leads to knowledge and the fear of the Lord. As you may recall, the advances of Lady Wisdom were spurned. In response, she disappeared, went silent and reveled in the simpletons and mockers getting their just desserts. In Proverbs 8.1-9.12, Lady Wisdom is back on the town, once again making herself known to everyone. She speaks of the enduring value of heeding her call and following in her way. Proverbs 1 was an initial introduction to Wisdom, but here we get to know her at a deeper level. She unveils the genuine substance of her calling, exposes her very being, and entices us with the rich promises she makes to those who get to know her intimately. As we hear Lady Wisdom's invitation, Proverbs hopes that we succumb to her seduction and are compelled to make Lady Wisdom our lifelong companion.

Proverbs 8.1-9.12

Our study of Proverbs 1-9 is intentionally non-linear. As the arrangement of our study suggests, there are four integrated components that comprise the theological and rhetorical intent of these opening chapters of Proverbs: The Prelude (1.1-7), Wisdom's Welcome (1.20-33, 8.1-9.12), Parental Wisdom (1.8-19 and sections of 2-4) and Lady Folly's Invitation (9.13-18 and large sections of 5-7). We begin with Lady Wisdom's welcome because she is the theological heart of Proverbs 1-9. She is the One the hearer is to fall in love with and pursue with all her heart. Proverbs 8.1-9.12 is the climax of the first nine chapters. All of the other sections in Proverbs 1-9 support the call of Lady Wisdom and set the hearer on a journey of proper discernment of the proverbs collected in chapters 10-31 and, just as importantly, wise navigation through life in the world.

Proverbs 8.1-3

Proverbs 8 opens with the narrator re-introducing Lady Wisdom to the hearer. The opening question is rhetorical: "Isn't it Wisdom who cries out? Doesn't Understanding raise her voice? (8.1). The words "wisdom" and "understanding" are not simply nouns, but personifications. We have not yet heard "understanding" personified, but

we will see as the passage unfolds that the focus is on Lady Wisdom. Understanding and other characters we encounter are companions that comprise dimensions of Wisdom herself. As in Proverbs 1, Wisdom has once again gone public. She cries out "on the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads...beside the gates...at the entrance of the portals" (8.2-3). What she cries out is what

Temper Longman III calls an "autobiography" (*Proverbs*, 197) that opens with a preamble and carries us through an extensive "get to know me" session.

Proverbs 8.4-11

Verses 4-11 are Lady Wisdom's warm-up to her formal autobiography in 8.12-31. In this preamble, Lady Wisdom captivates her hearers so they will want to get to know her better. The tense shifts to the first person, and Lady Wisdom calls out to "people" (8.4a) - the "sons of Adam" (8.4b) - by which she means everyone. As in Proverbs 1, Wisdom is not exclusive or hidden. Her cry rings throughout the entire community and is available to all who are willing to listen. In v. 5, she addresses the "simple" and "fools" who are open to Wisdom (unlike the cynical mockers),

calling them to "prudence" and "understanding." She implores them to "listen up!" (8.6a) to the noble (8.6a), upright (8.6b), truthful (8.7) and righteous (8.8) words that emerge when she opens her lips. The use of ethical/moral language here foreshadows the content of the collections of proverbs that follow in 10-31. As noted in the introduction to our study, pursuing Wisdom ultimately comes to expression as ethics, or wise and virtuous living, which is the domain of Proverbs 10-31. As Wisdom emphasizes the positive values of her words, she affirms that nothing "wicked" (8.7b), "twisted" (8.8b) or "perverted" (8.8b) will come from her mouth.

Those who get Lady Wisdom have understanding and knowledge and will be able to recognize that her words are straightforward (8.9a) and upright (8.9b). Note that the logic of this verse is intentionally circular: Those who have Wisdom will be able to confirm the truth of Wisdom. Put another way, it is impossible to verify the truth of Wisdom from any position outside of knowing and understanding Wisdom. This insights ties into the broader truth that all theology is ultimately intrasystematic. This means that you must stand somewhere inside of a particular realm of understanding of God to truly "get it." This is why most - if not all - external proofs of Christian faith (or

THE WISE KING

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Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, or any other religion or philosophy) either fail miserably or are at best unsatisfactory. God comprehends God, and Wisdom comprehends Wisdom, which is the interpretive framework Proverbs provides for finding understanding within its collections of proverbs.

The final two verses make a strong rhetorical move to secure the attention of the hearers. Wisdom highlights the value of pursuing and finding companionship with Her by indicating that desiring Her is more valuable than several enduring cultural forms of riches: silver (8.10a), the best gold (8.10b) and jewels (8.11a). Having implored her hearers to listen, Wisdom moves into her autobiography.

Proverbs 8.12-21

vv. 12-31 are structured along the lines of other contemporary autobiographies in the Ancient Near East. As Wisdom opens her autobiography, she announces herself ("I, Wisdom" (8.12)), clearly continuing the personification of Wisdom in this section of Proverbs. If we follow the parallel structure characteristic of Proverbs, in v. 12 Wisdom highlights a few companions who travel with her: Prudence, Knowledge and Discretion. The word "dwell" in 8.12a imagines the abiding presence of the Lord with Israel and the word "attain" in 8.12b means finding something that is being sought after. The import is that Wisdom is on the move as the presence of the Lord is with Israel during the wilderness wandering and along the way finds these companions that, in the end, are all part of Wisdom. In v. 13, Wisdom echoes 1.7 ("The fear of the Lord...") but gives the force of the phrase an ethical emphasis: "is to hate evil" (8.13a). The moral pathway that leads to evil is paved with pride, arrogance and perverted speech (8.13bc), which opposes the way Wisdom speaks (8.8). Given the opening words of Wisdom's autobiography and the verses that follow, 8.13 seems to detract from the focus of the presentation. However, we learn something here of Wisdom by negation whereas in what follows we move by affirmation.

Wisdom continues her expose, indicating that she has good advice, sound wisdom, insight and of all things, might (8.14). Just as the Lord God has "wisdom and might," so here Wisdom has might as one of her key attributes. All of these aspects of Wisdom (8.12-14) inspire righteousness among authorities in the community (8.15-16), drawing a direct connection between Wisdom-inspired ethics and good leadership. Wisdom reciprocates devotion by making herself available to those who diligently seek her (8.17). Those who truly seek Wisdom not only have authority, but also enjoy the company of a few of her other companions: Riches, Glory, Enduring Wealth and Righteousness (8.18). The picture Wisdom paints of herself in these verses look like a portrait of King Solo-

mon, who is mentioned in the superscription (1.1).

Wisdom summarizes this section of her autobiography, affirming again that everything that springs forth from Wisdom ("fruit," "harvest") is better than refined gold or silver (8.19, echoing 8.10). Whereas Evil walks the pathways of pride and arrogance (8.13b), Wisdom walks the pathways of righteousness and justice (8.20). But those who truly desire Wisdom will inherit Wisdom's wealth (8.21), which is both personal (having to do with morality, ethics and character) and actual (literal "filled treasuries"). In this first section of Wisdom's autobiography, she introduces us to her companions, which are her central attributes. In the course of her self-revelation, we quickly discover that Wisdom is a gift that desires to bless humanity. Those who respond to Wisdom's invitation to get to know her and pursue her diligently, share her companions, and as a result find authority and wealth - and not simply in a metaphorical sense. Proverbs suggests that a life shaped by Wisdom (like King Solomon in an idealized characterization) will contain all of the moral attributes that should lead a person to leadership within the community and, as a result, wealth. Wisdom's autobiography continues in the next section, shifting our perspective on her being and character to new (and quite incredible) heights.

Proverbs 8.22-31

Traditional Ancient Near Eastern autobiographies move from self-introduction to a list of accomplishments, which characterizes the shift from 8.12-21 to 8.22-31. While Wisdom's self-introduction kept us grounded in dwelling and moving along pathways toward the communal moral attributes of justice and righteousness and toward power and wealth, her accomplishments immediately thrust us into a completely different plane. Wisdom declares that she was the very first thing created by the Lord (8.22). To drive the importance of her divine status, power, presence and perspective home, she spends the next nine verses detailing a picture of her fellowship with the Lord and her witness to and participation in Creation.

Wisdom was "poured forth" from the Lord (8.23a) before there was a before. In fact, before the "beginning of the ground" (8.23b), before there were "depths" and "springs abounding with water" (8.24), before there were "mountains" and "hills" (8.25), and before God made "earth and fields" and "the world's first lumps of clay" (8.26). Wisdom is making it clear to this point that before God separated out the watery chaos into dry land and water (Genesis 1.9) Wisdom was brought forth by God. Here Proverbs stretches the boundaries of language to emphasize that we are reading and interpreting a realm that is beyond our grasp.

To emphasize her priority in Creation and her standing with God, Wisdom goes on to describe the unfolding of Creation and her role in the process. She was

with God before the heavens were established (8.27), moving the timeline back with a reference to Genesis 1.6. She was beside the Creator, like a “master craftsman” or “artist,” (8.30) when the Lord created the sky (8.28a, Genesis 1.8), “established the fountains of the deep” (8.28b, likely a reference to Genesis 1.7), formed the boundaries of the waters, and established land (8.29, Genesis 1.9). As a “master craftsman,” Wisdom indicates that she is not standing by while the Lord does all of the work. She is integrally involved in the process with God and, as a result, is infused into the structures of the cosmos. God creates with Wisdom in both a figurative and actual sense. The persons of God and Wisdom (in some kind of hypostatic union akin to the Trinitarian persons) operate together in the process of bringing chaos into order, formless matter into spaces for the rest of God’s Creation.

Having extolled her direct role in Creation, Wisdom boasts that she was daily the Lord’s delight (8.30b) and that she rejoiced before the Lord (8.30c). As the Lord did (Genesis 2.2), Wisdom rested after Creation and admired the results of their work. She “rejoiced in his inhabited world” (8.31a) and “delighted in humanity (8.31b). Wisdom “fears the Lord” by rejoicing in God and Creation and by delighting in human beings. She participated in Creation, but still condescends to God much in the same way that in a Trinitarian understanding of God’s being the Son and the Spirit condescend to the Father even though they are equal in being and standing.

Wisdom’s accomplishments are impressive! She stands alongside God in being and is the primary architect of Creation. As noted, this means that Wisdom’s call to humanity is in essence God’s call to humanity. And this call resounds from the moment of Creation and resonates throughout Creation. There is no place we can go to truly evade the presence and activity of Wisdom in the cosmos. When we marvel at Creation and praise God, Wisdom is there with us. In our wonder at Creation, we occupy space in time where we have the opportunity to encounter not only Wisdom, but all of her companions, and enjoy the benefits that come from pursuing and attaining Wisdom. It is important to note that the prologue to the Gospel of John (1.1-18), which features the character of the Logos (“the Word,” roughly translated) draws directly on Proverbs 8. From John’s vantage point beyond the Resurrection, there is a fusion between Wisdom and Jesus in the very being of God “in the beginning.” John helps us to see that in Proverbs 8, Wisdom is the very logic or thought pattern of Creation and that Jesus is akin to Wisdom crying out on the streets, calling out for people to heed her word and to fulfill righteousness and justice. Like Jesus, Wisdom in Proverbs is far more than a personified idea. She is at the very heart of God’s being and character and the rationale for calling God, the Wise King.

Proverbs 8.32-36

Having expounded her character (8.12-21) and her cosmic accomplishments (8.22-31), Lady Wisdom appeals to her “children” (8.32, “sons”) to “hear” (8.32, 33, 34, possibly echoing Deuteronomy 6) and “find” (echoing 8.12b) her. Listening to Wisdom, pursuing her for a closer listen wherever she is heard (“daily at my gates,” “beside my doors” (8.34)), and truly understanding what she is saying is the pathway to being “blessed” (8.32, 34), “being wise” (8.33), “finding life” (8.35) and “obtaining favor from the Lord” (8.36). Through her appeal in 1.20-33 and here in her autobiography, Wisdom hopes that she has compelled her hearers, and us, to receive her companionship and walk with her on her pathways in righteousness and justice. But if this positive portrayal of Wisdom is not enough, she closes her autobiography with a warning that if someone misses out on Wisdom their soul is destroyed, and if they encounter wisdom and, as the fool, hate her, then they court death. The options are stark, and we all know people who choose both paths.

Proverbs 9.1-6

Now that Wisdom has unveiled herself and compelled her hearers to pursue her, she issues a lavish invitation. She has built a large, perfect house (9.1) and set her tables with a sumptuous feast (9.2). Once everything is ready, she sends out her maidservants into the city and also cries out from the highest point (9.3) to welcome the “simpleminded” who “lack heart” (9.4) to “come eat” and “drink” (9.5). Wisdom’s house at the highest point of the city is likely either the Temple in Jerusalem or at the least a temple where it was believed deities dwelled in this era. The import is that Wisdom makes a home where God dwells. To seek and worship the Lord is the same thing as pursuing Wisdom. The “simpleminded,” again, are neither wise nor fools. The simpleminded “lack heart” because they remain on the fence (or remain ignorant) regarding Lady Wisdom. Here, Wisdom’s cry from the seven-pillared house is her final, hopeful appeal for her hearers to “abandon simpleness and live” and “walk on the path of understanding” (9.6). These verses are the climax of Lady Wisdom’s appeal to humanity and her hopeful call that rivals the call of Another we will meet in Part 4 of our study. The question is, who will come and enjoy the Wisdom’s feast?

Proverbs 9.7-12

These enigmatic verses appear to interrupt what would otherwise be a clear transition between 9.1-6 and 9.13-18, which clearly contrast one another. Wisdom continues to speak (“me” in 9.11) and draws a stark contrast between a wise person and a mocker (or a fool). Wisdom counsels

that mockers and wicked people are so hard-hearted that they will abuse, injure and hate a wise person who tries to set them straight (9.7-8a). However, wise people gladly receive correction (8b). In fact, Wisdom affirms that when truly wise and righteous people are taught, they gladly receive instruction (9.9) because they are seeking and confident about finding wisdom. The search for Wisdom brings about ever deepening understanding and an ever more refined comprehension of Wisdom.

As we noted previously, the quest for Wisdom is circular, intrasystematic and ultimately inexhaustible because the search for Wisdom is ultimately the search for God. So, 9.10 echoes the thematic verse of Proverbs, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One(s) is understanding." Revisiting the central theological thread that sustains Proverbs leads Wisdom to affirm that following her leads to long life (9.11) and, again, that the pursuit of wisdom simply builds upon itself throughout the course of life. However, the mocker doesn't get Wisdom and all of her benefits in her quest. So, she bears the weight of her quest

alone (9.12). The journey of the mocker is reminiscent of how Thomas Hobbes imagined human existence outside some sort of comprehensive governing structure: "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" (*Leviathan* (1651)). Pursuing Wisdom brings fellowship with God and creates a moral community of "philosophers," those who love Wisdom. Proverbs 9.7-12 demonstrates that the pathway of Wisdom stands in stark contrast to the "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" pathway of the mocker, or the fool. Standing between two contrasting visions, as we will soon see in the course of our study, these enigmatic verses bring into high relief the consequences of who we will pursue.

Next Week

As Lady Wisdom is introduced in Proverbs 1-9, her counterpart, Lady Folly, is also introduced. However, before we let her take center stage and offer her counter-narrative to Wisdom we will hear from the Parent who is the other major character of these opening chapters of Proverbs.