

## Introduction

In the first two weeks of this study, Proverbs welcomed us (1.1-7) and introduced us to Lady Wisdom. While she is not mentioned until 1.20 and we do not see her again until 8.1-9.12, she is the most important figure we meet in the introduction to Proverbs (chapters 1-9). Prior to our encounter with Lady Wisdom, a father and mother come on the scene to give counsel to their child (1.8). We will explore the wisdom these parents impart to their child (and to the hearer) in this week's lesson.

A father addressing his son is not unusual across wisdom literature in the Ancient Near East. As Tremper Longman III notes, only one Egyptian writing, the Satire of the Trades, includes a mother who gives instruction to her child (Proverbs, 105). Proverbs is, therefore, in rare company when the mother in 1.8 chimes in with Lady Wisdom to call the child to pursue wisdom and flee folly. The child addressed by these parents is literally "son," but using the translation "child" is appropriate as instruction to male and female children in a household would be commonplace, and remains so. The guidance these parents give to their child (or "children" (4.1)) is interwoven with Lady Wisdom's welcome and Lady Folly's invitation to make up Proverbs 1-9.

The parental wisdom sections of Proverbs follow a consistent pattern:

1. The parent(s) call the child ("my child")
2. The parent(s) admonish the child ("listen," "do not," "If..,")
3. The parent(s) persuade the child to flee folly and pursue wisdom.

Anticipating this structure helps us to better comprehend the admonition these parents give to their child and, by extension, to us.

As we dig into these parental wisdom passages in Proverbs we approach these Scriptures understanding that the text does not call children to listen to their parents without question. As Longman III rightly notes: "The parents in the book of Proverbs are not real people but an ideal couple. They are wise parents, and not everyone's parents today are wise in the sense that Proverbs describes wisdom"

(Proverbs, 109). We have a tendency to operate purely within the literal sense of Scripture, forgetting that (especially in Proverbs) we are dealing with a narrator whose voice is shaping how we will approach the text. To set us on the proper course, Proverbs idealizes Lady Wisdom, as we noted last week, and here idealizes the parents. Lady Folly will also be idealized, just in a negative sense,

next week. "Proverbs asks us without reservation to listen to these parents and to our own parents as they also reflect divine wisdom, and we will do so as we proceed" (Proverbs, 109).

### Proverbs 1.8-19

This section opens with the narrator's call to "listen," once again echoing the Shema of Deuteronomy 6.4 (1.8). As noted above, the word translated "my son" in the NIV and JPS (1.8) is better rendered "my child" since parental instruction would not be limited to male children - either then or now. The father and mother are mentioned in parallel in 1.8 and they call the child to hear and obey the father's "instruction" and the mother's "Torah" (1.8). Torah here is a generic term meaning "teaching or instruction" but, as we will see, much of the parental wisdom offered resonates

immediately with the Ten Commandments. So reading "Torah" as "Law" is not necessarily far-fetched. Parental wisdom is envisioned as a beautiful adornment by Proverbs - a "graceful garland" for the head and a necklace - that radiates the external wealth and inner beauty of someone who chooses wisdom (1.9).

The parents' opening encouragement turns to warning in 1.10. The word rendered "my child" will serve as a formal marker throughout the introduction to Proverbs of the beginning of a new section of parental instruction. The parents imagine a rogue gang of "sinners" (1.10) who entice the child to join them in a plot to murder and plunder an innocent passerby (10-14). As part of their invitation, they imagine themselves as agents of Death (Sheol) and what they "find" is not wisdom (as encouraged in 8.35), but stolen treasure (1.13). In their final appeal, the parents imagine these "sinners" compelling the child to join their gang on the basis of a shared purse (1.14), which is ironic since they plunder the innocent and would likely steal from (and possibly even kill) the young simpleton. The situation imagined is likely an extreme representation from the Ancient Near East, but the same exaggerated example works as effectively in our own time. This gang

# THE WISE KING

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PROVERBS  
JOB  
ECCLESIASTES

Parental Wisdom  
Proverbs 1.8-19; 2-4

violates God's Commandments at the least in regard to murder and theft, clearly demonstrating that they eschew wisdom and reap folly.

1.15 reiterates the parents' call to stay away from these "sinners." The words "walk," "way," and "path" are all moral/ethical terms (1.15). "Walk" refers to the way people live life in the world. A person's "way" or "path" is the direction of their life because of their "walk." These terms will appear throughout Proverbs 1-9 and when we see or hear them our thinking should shift into an ethical framework. That is, what the narrator has in mind is proper moral action (or the avoidance of an imprudent way of living). The parents encourage the child to completely avoid the gang by not emulating their character or their activities. Not only are the "sinners" bad news, but the parents point out that they are on a path to self-destruction. As we saw, the "sinners" set out to entrap innocent passersby. What they soon discover; however, is that their plots fold in on themselves as they are ensnared by their very own schemes, and even their thievery is bringing their lives to a close.

### **Proverbs 2.1-22**

In this section, the parent speaks to his child in a conditional framework: If the child listens to and obeys the parent, fervently seeking wisdom, understanding and insight (2.1-4); then the child will fulfill the theme of Proverbs by knowing the fear of the Lord, finding knowledge of God and receiving the gift of wisdom (2.5-6a). With God's wisdom, knowledge and understanding comes God's protection for the upright, the morally blameless, the faithful and the just (2.6b-8). In addition, those who are wise will have an in-depth, personal understanding of "righteousness and justice and equity" (2.9). Prudence and understanding will protect the child, saving her from evil, foolish people who turn away from wisdom (2.11-15). The child will also be saved from the enticement of the "loose woman," who is Lady Folly that we will get to know better next week. Here, Lady Folly forsakes her husband, forgetting God's covenant, and calls those she entices away from the "path" of life and onto the "way" of death. Out of reverence for God and fear of Lady Folly and her agents, the parents call the child (and the hearer) to live ("way," "path") with goodness and justice. As a result, the Lord will deliver them to the Promised Land while forcefully removing "the wicked" (2.22).

### **Proverbs 3.1-10**

Proverbs 3 opens with the anticipated call, "my child." The parent offers four warnings: (1) Do not forget his "Torah" and to remember his "commandments" (3.1); (2) Do not forget to demonstrate covenant loyalty and faithfulness to

the Lord and others in the community (3.3); (3) Trust and openly acknowledge dependence upon the Lord (3.5); and (4) Give honor to God for God's Providence through generous giving (3.9). These four demands build upon one another. Parental wisdom should direct us to reflect God's faithfulness toward us to our neighbors. When we show God's covenant love and faithfulness to others, we acknowledge our dependence on the Lord (as opposed to ourselves) and the position of thanksgiving we find ourselves in moves us to glorify God (and not ourselves). The promises implicit in these four parental warnings are wholeness of life (shalom), favor in the community, a healthy and good (moral) life, and abundant wealth. The Hebrew words for "covenant loyalty" (hesed), "faithfulness" (emet), and "wholeness" (shalom) are all attributes of God. As we demonstrate these characteristics in our lives, we model God's very being and character and reflect The Wise King. In 3.3, it is noteworthy that the parent calls the child embody covenant loyalty and faithfulness externally ("bind them around your neck") and internally ("write them on the tablet of your heart"). Living holistically (shalom) requires deep integrity between our psyche and our ethics.

### **Proverbs 3.11-20**

Lady Wisdom resurfaces in the parental admonition to accept the disciplined instruction of the Lord (3.11-12). Those who receive the Lord's discipline and instruction find wisdom and understanding (3.13). Recalling images from Proverbs 8.1-9.12, wisdom and understanding are again personified. The parent echoes the affirmation that Wisdom is the most valuable thing in the cosmos (3.14-15). Wisdom grants people longevity, wealth, ethical and holistic living, knowledge and blessedness (3.16-18). 3.19-20 close out this section by reaffirming Wisdom's role in both creating and sustaining the cosmos (3.19). As a key agent in God's Creation, we encounter God's Wisdom in the cosmos. One of the ways we experience God's wisdom is in the rain cycle, where water from the seas ("depths") returns as "clouds drop down the dew" (3.20). In this admonition, the parent hopes the child will see that God's care for humanity is expressed in Creation. Seeing God's providential work in the cosmos attunes the child to Wisdom expressed in the structures of the cosmos. Perceiving God's Wisdom is a matter of instruction and reproof that leads the child down the path to comprehension and understanding.

### **Proverbs 3.21-35**

In this section, parental admonition to maintain wisdom and prudence opens out to general moral instruction. Thus 3.21-35 breaks from the established pattern, moving beyond the call to pursue wisdom to expressing wis-

dom and prudence. 3.22 echoes the idea that wisdom has internal and external implications in forming a whole self. The word "soul" (3.22) speaks to the core of human becoming and being (nephesh), while the "adornment for your neck" again speaks to the outward beauty that comes from being wise. If a person is wise inside and out, they will be stable and secure. They will live ethically and without fear because they have absolute trust in God's care. Speaking into this integrity, the parent reminds to the child to be generous (3.27-28) and live peaceably and charitably with others (3.29-32). This section closes with a contrast between the wise and the wicked. The wise (non-violent, righteous, humble) "inherit honor" from the Lord, while the wicked (violent, perverse, scorners) are stubborn, disgraced fools (3.35).

### **Proverbs 4.1-9**

The parental address shifts to the plural in 4.1 ("children") and a mother figure resurfaces (4.3) but is a silent partner in imparting instruction. The call of 4.1-5 is to heed "a father's instruction" just as the narrator obeyed his own father's call to "get wisdom; get insight" (4.5). Wisdom is personified once more in 4.6-9 in a litany of promises attend obtaining and continuing to pursue wisdom: protection (4.6), continued insight (4.7), glory and honor (4.8) and adoration (4.9). Pursing Wisdom is put forth by the parent as the best clear option in life.

### **Proverbs 4.10-19**

Returning to singular address ("my child"), the parental call to listen and obey continues with promises of long life (4.10), ethical living (4.11) and ease of life (4.12). In 4.14-17, these promises are contrasted with the results of an unethical existence (wickedness/evil). The picture of an evil ethic is one of a restless hunger for personal violence and communal destruction. 4.18-19 summarizes these two paths, drawing a clear contrast between the clear brightness of righteousness and the impenetrable darkness of wickedness. From a moral perspective, the righteous person is at peace and has the ability to perceive ever-unfolding righteousness. However, the wicked person is restless and stumbles around in the dark, unable to discern any other path than wickedness in the unending darkness. The contrast paints clearly the options between wisdom and foolishness. Only a true fool would choose wickedness.

### **Proverbs 4.20-27**

These parental admonitions close with a final call to the child to listen and obey (4.20). The parent implores the child to keep what has been taught regarding the impor-

tance of pursuing wisdom intimately close (4.21) because that pursuit brings life and healing (4.22). Ethically, the parent reminds the child to be clear-hearted (4.23) so that her speech will not be "crooked" or "devious" (4.24) and her vision will be clear (4.25), able to see the path of righteousness before her (4.26-27) and keep to it unswervingly. In sum, the parent urges the child to call upon all of her faculties - physical and intellectual - to remember the call to pursue wisdom so that she remains on the path of righteousness throughout the course of life.

### **Closing**

Parental Wisdom echoes Lady Wisdom's call to "young simpletons" (the child/children and the hearer) to fervently seek and find wisdom and to avoid folly at all costs. The parents warn the child, but also highlight the benefits and genuine value of God's wisdom. In our final session on Proverbs 1-9 we will hear from the last character we encounter in the introduction: Lady Folly.