

Introduction

After being courted by Lady Wisdom and counseled by Parental Wisdom to pursue her, we turn our attention to Lady Folly. As anticipated, Lady Folly runs counter to the character and promises of Lady Wisdom. In several passages in Proverbs 1-9 she seeks to seduce young simpletons (and the hearer). The introduction to Proverbs closes with Lady Folly's invitation, leaving us with a question as the collection of Proverbs 10-31 begins: Who will be your companion on life's journey?

The portrait of Lady Folly is best painted beginning in chapters 9 and 7 where she is described in direct contrast to Lady Wisdom. In chapter 9 she stands alone, while in chapter 7 Lady Folly is described as a component of another section of parental wisdom. Lady Folly "hides" in two additional sections of parental wisdom in chapters 5 and 6, masquerading as a "strange woman" who entices young simpletons from the way of wisdom. We will handle these sections out of order to capture Lady Folly in fully relief.

Proverbs 9.13-18

Immediately following Lady Wisdom's generous and glorious invitation, Proverbs 9 pivots to introduce "Lady Folly" (9.13). She is "foolishness" (9.13) personified in all of her attributes. While Wisdom calls and cries out, Folly "roars" (9.13). She is "undisciplined" (9.13) and "has no idea about anything" (9.13). Unlike Wisdom who brings knowledge, understanding and insight, Folly is vacuously ignorant. So, we can anticipate anything she says will be absolutely unwise.

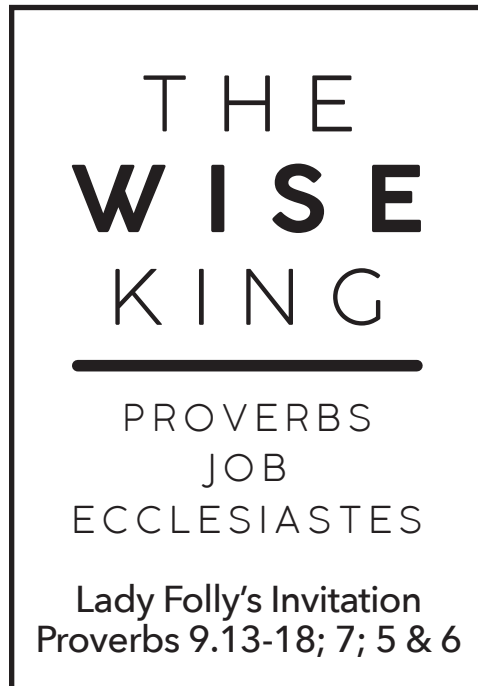
Proverbs 9.14 pictures Folly hanging out in the doorway of her house and seated on the throne in the high places of the city. In 9.1, we get a glimpse of Wisdom's grand abode whose main feature is seven hewn pillars. By contrast, Folly has an "entryway" (9.14). The import is that Folly's house is nowhere near as grand as Lady Wisdom's. In fact, it could even be on a back road in the city as opposed to in the palace district. We are told that when Folly is not hanging out in her doorway, she is seated on high places, where we see Wisdom also dwells (9.3). It is clear from the depiction of Lady Folly in Proverbs that "high places" takes on different layers of meaning than in Wisdom's case.

The first image is the "high places" where temples and idols to foreign deities were constructed. When Lady Folly is not lounging in the doorway of her house lurking to entice passersby, as we will see in 9.15-16, she is the queen of foreign deities, which flies in the face of the first commandment. The second image is that of royalty. Lady Folly is seated on the throne in "high places" in the city. Clearly what is pictured here is not flattering, but the most unfaithful, usurious, and decadent form of queenly royalty imaginable. In its most grotesque referent, she is pictured here as Ahab's wife, Jezebel, who combined the worst of political authority, ostentatiousness and pagan worship in Israel's memory. So, whereas Wisdom fosters a kingly reign characteristic of King Solomon in his height (8.18), Folly is Queen Jezebel. Whether we envision her in her doorway, among the temples and idols, or even on the throne, in the eyes of Proverbs Lady Folly is the opposite of Lady Wisdom.

Folly "calls" as Lady Wisdom does to those who are not only "passing by;" that is, going about their daily business, but are also acting ethically, perhaps even pursuing Wisdom. Her call is similar to that of Wisdom, "You

who are simple, turn in here!" (9.4). And, like Wisdom, she invites them to a feast in her home (9.1-2). However, while Wisdom offers a luxurious meal, Folly presents "stolen water" (9.17) and "secret bread" (9.18), which is more than likely a metaphor for prostitution (see 6.25-26). The young simpletons who are enticed by Lady Folly have no idea that "ghosts are there with (other) guests from the depths of Sheol" (9.18). Whereas Lady Wisdom invites young simpletons to wholeness (*shalom*) and righteousness, Lady Folly welcomes her consorts into the hospitality of Death itself.

Lady Folly's expose and invitation are intentionally repulsive. As Proverbs continues to unveil Lady Folly the picture only grows more bleak. As noted, this depiction of Lady Folly presents itself at the end of the introduction to Proverbs as an alternate option to the invitation of Lady Wisdom. When seen in full contrast, Lady Folly really offers no viable alternative. To choose Lady Folly is to embrace the height of foolishness and death as opposed to righteousness and life. Interestingly, the Apostle Paul will paint similar options in his letters to young struggling Christian communities: Either embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ that leads to redemption and life, or turn back



to your former ways, which lead to death. Proverbs establishes a theological pattern that emerges from Judaism and extends to Christian faith.

Proverbs 7.1-27

Proverbs 7 follows the form outlined in last week's study of parental wisdom. The "child" is addressed and encouraged to heed the parent's call to abide by his words and engage in a close familial/friendship relationship with Lady Wisdom. In 7.5, the hopeful result is that Wisdom and Insight will keep the child from a woman who, while not addressed as "Lady Folly" (9.13), is by description precisely the same person.

The child is warned against a "strange woman" (7.5), a "foreigner" with "flattering speech" (7.5). The word "foreigner" is rightly translated "harlot" or "prostitute" here due to the way Lady Folly will be characterized and because in the ancient world many prostitutes were foreigners. We know from Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman religions of the era that temple prostitutes were regularly consulted as part of fertility rituals as part of non-Israelite religions.

What follows is an observation of Lady Folly at work. The narrator sees a young simpleton out for an evening stroll in town who turns off the main thoroughfare (the ethical terms path and way) and onto Lady Folly Way (7.6-9). Lady Folly, who is dressed like a harlot and conceals her true intentions, calls out to him (7.10). Like Lady Folly in 9.13 this woman "roars" and is "rebellious" (7.11). While she encounters the young simpleton on Lady Folly Way (likely in her doorway as in Proverbs 9) and propositions him there, Lady Folly is pictured as "lying in wait" (9.12) in the street, in the squares and at every corner. As we recall, Lady Wisdom was present all over the city, but she "called out" openly and offered blessings. She was not deceptive or lying in wait to ambush people.

In 7.13, Lady Folly attacks the young simpleton and with directness offers her proposal. Having fulfilled her religious obligations (7.14), she flatters him by saying she pursued and found him (7.15). Without hesitation, she invites the youth to join her for a night of lovemaking (7.18). The description of her couch (7.16) and her bed (7.17) are visually elegant and intentionally sensual. The moral tension of the scene is heightened when Lady Folly informs the simpleton that her husband is not home because he is traveling a long way, is well funded, and will not be back for a long while. Given the moral contours of Proverbs, it is not an accident that the words used to describe her husband's journey are ethical in nature: walk and way. The import is that the husband is walking in the right path in his endeavors and that Lady Folly is enticing

the simpleton to join her in an adulterous affair while he is away. The seventh and tenth commandments loom large in the background of Lady Folly's invitation.

In the same way that Lady Folly invites her victims to a feast of death (9.18), the young simpleton in the narration "follows after her immediately" (7.22), giving in to her seduction. The hunting metaphors that follow in 22b-23 depict that the hunter has taken its prey captive in this scenario, and giving in to Lady Folly's invitation has "cost him his life." The result of this encounter intentionally stands in direct contrast to the persuasion of Lady Wisdom and the careful benefits she gives to those who love her.

In light of these first two sections, the character of Lady Folly is immediately clear. Parental wisdom offers a general warning to the child to not commit adultery. This primary level of moral wisdom is an appropriate reading of Proverbs 7 (and 5-6 as well). However, the immediate connections between the woman depicted in Proverbs 9 and 7 demands we move beyond mere ethical instruction and associate the "loose woman" of 7.5ff. with Lady Folly. As we work back through Proverbs 1-9, this picture of Lady Folly as an aggressively seductive prostitute will be heightened to create a strong moral contrast with Lady Wisdom, making the decision of the hearer (ideally) very easy as we move to discern Proverbs 10-31.

Proverbs 5.1-23

The first word of Proverbs 5 places us once again in the context of parental wisdom ("my child"). As before, the parent counsels the child to hold onto "wisdom," "understanding," "prudence," and "knowledge" (5.1-2). The child is warned against a "strange woman" or "foreigner" whose lips drip honey and whose speech is as smooth as oil (5.3, recalling 7.5). This woman seems attractive, but after being with her ("in the end" (5.4)) people discover that she is lethal (5.4) as she marches the path to Sheol or Death (5.5). As should be obvious by now, the collective images of 5.3-5 depict a prostitute and paint a familiar picture of Lady Folly. As she walks, which is once again more of a moral than directional claim, Lady Folly does not go straight, but wanders and, as we heard earlier, is completely ignorant as to her circumstances (5.6). As in Proverbs 7 the parent takes the child through an exposition of Lady Folly's character that is designed to guard and protect, ultimately keeping the child heading in the proper direction toward wisdom.

"My children" are addressed in the next section with a parental call to listen and obey "the words of my mouth" (5.7). These children are cautioned to "stay away from" Lady Folly, and, recalling Proverbs 9, to not go anywhere near the door of her house (5.8). Those who fall to her

temptation and are taken into her bed will experience a loss of honor, poor treatment by others, poverty, anguish in death and, speaking generically, being “at the point of total ruin in the public assembly” (5.7-14). By contrast, the children are encouraged to find themselves in a proper, intimate relationship with Lady Wisdom (5.15-6.5).

All of the images in this next sub-section draw strongly from Song of Songs and have explicit erotic overtones that might make us a bit uncomfortable on a Sunday morning. Cisterns and wells are metaphors for female genitalia (5.15, Song of Songs 4.15). The images of springs, streams and fountains refer to male ejaculation and the pleasure that comes with “rejoicing in the wife of your youth,” which is Lady Wisdom (5.16-18, Song of Songs 4.10-15). Instead of being entrapped by the wiles of the adulterous Lady Folly (7.19), the parent encourages the child to wed Lady Wisdom and to honor and be fulfilled in marriage (5.19-20) (Longman, *Proverbs*, 161).

This section of Proverbs, which draws us into the heart of the intimacy the parent imagines for his children with Lady Wisdom, closes with a warning about the Lord’s watchfulness (5.21). The Lord observes the way we live (“way” and “path”) and watches time and again as people fall in love with Lady Folly because they lack discipline and become ensnared in sin (5.22-23). These fools “go astray” (5.23), are “bound by cords” (5.22), and “die” (5.23). One again, the text admonishes the child, and the hearer, to pursue Wisdom and its benefits, and avoid Folly and its detriments.

Proverbs 6.1-35

Lady Folly gets one, final cameo in Proverbs 1-9 in the course of direct moral instruction to the child. The parent counsels the child on staying out of debt (6.1-5), avoiding laziness (6.6-11), not being conniving (6.12-15), and seven other ethical ills “that the Lord hates” and are an “abomination” (6.16-19). Then, in 6.20 we find ourselves back in the form of parental wisdom and in the linguistic world of Lady Folly.

The parents, which includes the mother once again, offer generic guidance (“lead,” “watch over,” “lamp,” “light”) to the child to hear and live out (“walk,” “way”) their “commandment” (6.21-23). Their specific counsel echoes previous warnings against falling prey to Lady Folly’s wiles. The parents’ commandment is designed to protect the child against this “evil, smooth tongued and adulterous” woman (6.24). She lures the child with her beauty and her seductive eyelashes, and the parents intimate that he would be better off paying the cost of his daily bread to a prostitute than consort with this married woman (6.25-

26). Whereas the prostitute takes a portion of his wealth and departs, the child’s life is at stake in this encounter. Metaphors depicting the inevitable harm caused by fire indicate the negative implications of getting caught up in a tryst with an adulterous woman (6.27-29). It is at this point where the lines blur between poetic language that points to Lady Folly and direct moral instruction that echoes the 7th and 10th Commandments against adultery and covetousness. In the end, enticing someone into an adulterous affair is not simply metaphorical, it is the compelling work Lady Folly carries out in the world. The parents, then, warn against “desperate housewives” and Lady Folly simultaneously because in this case (and myriad others) one always involves the other.

In a final warning, the parents compare heeding Lady Folly’s call to thieves who steal in the marketplace because they are poor and hungry (6.30). Such thievery appears almost noble because of its end of satisfying hunger, or more directly, satiating a natural desire. The rhetorical question could be asked, “What harm will come to someone whose desires are enflamed by a passionate woman who, as it turns out, is married?” They, too, are simply satiating natural desires, right? In each case, the judgment is more severe than we either hope or imagine. The thief is fined and loses all of her possessions to pay her debt, and the one drawn into the adulterous affair likewise “destroys his life” (6.32). He can look forward to “shame,” “disgrace,” and a furious husband bent on carrying out the death sentence issued against adultery in Leviticus 20.10 (6.33-34).

It is no accident that Proverbs moves from this depiction of a relentless, jealous husband bent on revenge in light of learning of an adulterous affair to the story in 7.1ff. of Lady Folly seducing a young simpleton in plain sight. The sexual exploits of Lady Folly seemingly know no end and effectively derail the lives of those who lose their way in their pursuit of wisdom.

Lady Folly in Full Relief

Proverbs 9.13-18, 7, 5, 6 and 2.16-19 paint an extremely clear picture of the woman who contrasts Lady Wisdom throughout the introduction to Proverbs. Whereas Lady Wisdom comes with an entourage of worthwhile companions (Understanding, Insight, Knowledge, Prudence, Discretion, Riches, Honor, etc.) and promises righteousness, justice, stability and wealth, Lady Folly operates alone in the shadows, snares young simpletons into transgression, disconnects them from their traditions and their communities, and delivers them in the end, distraught and empty, to Death. The rhetorical appeal of Proverbs 1-9 should be clear in the severity of the contrast between these two women. The child and the hearer should, of

course, pursue Wisdom with all of her heart throughout the course of her life. In fact, as noted above, the relationship with Wisdom should be as intimate as marriage in its personal and social dimensions. In fact, Proverbs' rhetorical positioning of Lady Folly as a figure that generates fear and brings judgment from the Lord is intended to drive us into the waiting arms of Wisdom. The decision of the child to embrace and pursue Wisdom places her (and the hearer) in the proper position as we move into the collections of Proverbs in 10-31.

Summary: Proverbs 1-9

These introductory chapters of Proverbs do several things to prepare us to properly receive the collections of proverbs that follow in 10-31.

First, they properly depict wisdom as a journey of desire. Given the Ancient Near Eastern/Greco-Roman cultures in which Proverbs was woven together the dynamics of Proverbs 1-9 are not surprising. A father (along with his wife, in some moments) counsels his son how to properly navigate competing enticements from two, wily women. Lady Wisdom calls the son into a relationship characterized by righteousness, justice, moral virtue, wealth, social authority and long life. She stands strong as she holds court across the city. She speaks boldly and loudly so that her message is clear and her intentions are obvious. Lady Folly woos the son from the high places, on street corners, down back roads, and from her doorway. She offers all manner of forbidden pleasures from decadent food, luxurious wares and promiscuous sexual encounters. She is the culmination of all that is counter to wisdom - foolishness personified. By the end of the introduction, these women have made their appeal, and from the perspective of genuine wisdom the choice is clear. However, each woman persuades powerfully and it does remain to be seen whether the son will find himself with Lady Wisdom (as imagined in Proverbs 31) or whether he will crawl into bed with Lady Folly, which is clearly not the desire of Proverbs.

While the framing of Proverbs is set within a particular father-son social and cultural dynamic during a particular era in human history, the text is not bound exclusively by these terms. If we take Proverbs at face value and in the most literal sense it seems Wisdom is only available to men. From the perspective of the ancient world, this may have been the case as the public value of men far exceeded that of women. As noted previously, the fact that the mother's voice is included at all in Proverbs 1-9 is socially and cultural revolutionary. As Proverbs is heard in a world where social power is more equally shared between men and women we have social models that enable the structures of Proverbs 1-9 to be turned upside-down. Our con-

temporary cultural narratives routinely imagine men wooing and enticing women. In fact, the sexually aggressive male is a far more prevalent trope than the aggressive woman. In the #MeToo era, the long-standing cultural assumption of women as powerful seductresses in the style of Jezebel taking advantage of weak-willed men is fading quickly. Contemporary readings of Proverbs can certainly flip the narrative so that "my child" is a daughter (as I have signaled in my commentary by the use of feminine pronouns from time to time) and the parents counsel her to find companionship with Mr. Wisdom with all of his benefits, and to flee Mr. Folly who seeks to lure her to dark places that lead to destruction. Because of the flexibility of the social relationships within Proverbs relative to contemporary sexual roles in our culture, Proverbs speaks as powerfully to women as to men without requiring incredible leaps of psycho-sexual translation for understanding.

So, for men and women, Proverbs depicts the pursuit of Wisdom as a journey of desire as the heart of "the child" longs to find proper companionship. The passionate appeals of Wisdom and Folly tug on the heart. And while Wisdom is clearly the best companion for the child, Folly is alluring and enticing and as we know from our own experience sometimes draws even the "wisest" people off the path. As we move into 10-31 the desire to pursue the path of Wisdom is the positive threadline that draws us deeper into the truly good life through these collected proverbs.

Second, Proverbs 1-9 establishes an interpretive strategy that helps us to discern meaning in the collections of proverbs that follow. While Proverbs 10-31 are arranged into collections of sayings with a variety of sources, they read as if fortune cookies are being drawn from a bowl and read aloud. What criteria do we have available to evaluate these often disconnected, poetic aphorisms? We can unpack the symbolic language to arrive at the best translations possible, but in some cases Proverbs leaves us scratching our heads about how to apply these ancient tidbits of wisdom.

As Proverbs 8 affirms, the one who is in close relationship with God's Wisdom is given the proper lenses through which to clearly comprehend Proverbs 10-31. Wisdom, it turns out, begets more wisdom through the matrix of these collected proverbs. Those who lack wisdom (or are still early on in relationship with the Lord's Wisdom) may be confounded by much of the collected wisdom in Proverbs 10-31. In fact, the fool will at times laugh in the face of Proverbs because they seem to confound her particular approach to reasoning. The person who is dedicated to pursuing Wisdom alongside others in a robust conversation about what this journey looks like is primed and ready for a discourse about Wisdom in Proverbs. Those

who do not share this perspective, speak a foreign language in the midst of any conversation about Wisdom and, according to Proverbs 1-9, lack understanding, insight and knowledge relative to Wisdom.

One word of caution: Given this approach to interpreting Proverbs, someone who loves and pursues Wisdom and has done so for a while may believe that they have a better insight into Proverbs than others. They certainly may, and for that they should Praise God! However, instead of basking in their sapiential superiority they should, with profound humility for the understanding that they have received as a gift from the Lord, help those who are earlier on the journey with Wisdom. Interpreting Proverbs with a haughty spirit could quickly devolve into an "I know better than everyone else" hermeneutical fiasco. There are some proverbs that are very clear, and others that require deep wisdom to unravel. We should bear with one another in mercy, grace and the mutual quest for wise understanding at every point in our discussion of Proverbs 10-31, other conversations about the Scriptures more generally, and, really, in every dimension of our lives together as God's people.

Finally, Proverbs 1-9 reminds us that theology is always prior to and provides a framework for ethics. When Proverbs 8 declares that Wisdom came on the scene "before there was a before" and served as a "master builder" alongside God in the work of Creation, the text gives us a clear picture that God and Wisdom worked together. However, Wisdom is always clear that God is prior to Wisdom. Apart from God, Wisdom has no being and in ethical expression is meaningless. This means that as we work through Proverbs, these often ethically-laden claims cannot stand on their own. As noted in the initial introduction to our study, proverbs are not abstract principles free of theological, social, historical, economic or psychological context. While we will consider proverbs in isolation from one another in the course of our exposition of 10-31, each exist as a result of God's Wisdom, which is why those who preserved them in this collection put them here. So, when we hear a proverb, it doesn't wait for us to give it meaning. God meets us through the proverb in an encounter of revelation as to the nature and character of Wisdom that ultimately directs us to prudent, righteous, just, and insight-driven faith and existence.

As we leave the introduction to Proverbs and engage the collection themed together through the lens of the classic virtues and vices, keeping these things in mind will help to keep our quest for Wisdom on course.