

“Wisdom”

Proverbs 2:1-11, 8:10-13; Psalm 111:10; 1

Corinthians 3:16-23

There is God’s Wisdom and the World’s Foolishness. Which do you choose?



This week, we begin a new series on Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs. There is other wisdom literature in the Old Testament but Proverbs is the best known. The study of wisdom has long been the work of Jews, Christians, and even the pagans. But the Jews and Christians understood that the “fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” God taking on human flesh and suffering seems like foolishness to the world, but it is the saving work of God. It is God’s wisdom that must be the fount from which we learn true wisdom. That is what the book of Proverbs is about – the collected wisdom of God’s people learned from their life with God.

The four cardinal virtues of Aristotle are the earliest collection of foundational moral habits in ancient Greek and Christian thought and practice. Initially developed by Aristotle, they are an attempt to grasp what most characterizes a person able to live a truly good life. These four -- wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance -- are called “cardinal” virtues, from the ancient word for “hinge,” for they are the pivots upon all the other virtues turn.

Though much developed and pondered by Christian theologians, the four cardinal virtues come from philosophy, so there is nothing distinctly Christian about them. Indeed, we all know that Christians do not have a monopoly on virtuous behavior. Nonetheless, the enduring universality of the cardinal virtues reflect, I think, the fact that we are all made in God’s image and bear God’s mark, making even these cardinal virtues something like bridges to God’s truth and the work of his Holy Spirit in us and in the world.

Wisdom/prudence

Wisdom, or to put a finer point on it, prudence, underlies all the rest. Wisdom is the only “knowing” virtue; the others being about “doing.” Prudence is practical wisdom, it is knowing the right goal/end and the right means to accomplish it. “Prudence is the virtue that disposes us to see rightly, the way things are in the world around us, and to employ that truthful vision to act rightly. It enables us to size up a situation accurately, to determine the best course of action, and to embark upon it.”¹

Karen Swallow Prior pulls together a brief summary on prudence/wisdom in her outstanding book, *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*:

Virtue requires judgment, and judgment requires prudence. Prudence is wisdom in practice. It is the habit of discerning the “true good in every circumstance” and “the right means of achieving it.” In other words, it is “applied morality.” A person possesses the virtue of prudence when “the disposition to reason well about what courses of action and emotion will best bring about our own and others’ well-being” becomes an acquired habit. Perhaps Cicero puts it most clearly and succinctly in saying, “Prudence is the knowledge of things to be sought, and those to be shunned.”

Prudence is considered the mother of the other three cardinal virtues. While temperance, fortitude, and justice are moral virtues, virtues related to doing, prudence is an intellectual virtue, a virtue related to knowing. Prudence is “at the heart of the moral character, for it shapes and directs the whole of our moral lives, and is indispensable to our becoming morally excellent human persons.” Prudence measures the other virtues and determines what “makes an action good.” It is described as

¹ Mattison III, William C. *Introducing Moral Theology* (p. 98). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

the “charioteer of the virtues,” the basis and the measure of all other virtues, helping us to apply general principles to particular situations in ways that avoid evil and accomplish good.²

Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly

How can we know what are the right goals and the right means of achieving them? Christians have always recognized that our ability to reason is insufficient, for it is clouded by sin. If we are going to know better what is right, we’d best start with God and his way. The book of Proverbs puts it this way: we have two choices. We can either seek out Lady Wisdom (God’s way) or Lady Folly (our own way). The first third of Proverbs is an extended presentation of the value of wisdom and the danger of folly. In an extended metaphor, a young man is wooed by two women, Wisdom and Folly. Which will it be? Who, or what, will we follow? Who is our god? Will our god be money or time or career or family or flag or the “divine within” or spirituality? Or will our god be the one true God, revealed fully in Jesus?

This choice is the most important choice any of us ever makes in our lives. Scripture always casts the choice in stark terms – the way of the wise or the way of the foolish, the narrow path or the broad, for God or against God. We can’t have it both ways. It is this choice that God lays out before us in the first part of Proverbs, for unless we embrace God as the foundation of our life from which all things follow, there isn’t much point in reading the book of Proverbs. Without God, Proverbs becomes nothing more than yet another self-help book – and who needs another one of those.

By beginning Proverbs with the choice between Wisdom and Folly, God reshapes the specific advice that follows. If we choose Folly, the way of the world, then all the specific advice in the proverbs becomes nothing more than helpful tips that might get you further in life, depending on your goals.

But if we choose Wisdom, the way of God, then all the proverbs become infused with God-awareness and God-purpose. And it is with this awareness and purpose that we can confidently go about developing the virtue of prudence, coming to see the world through God-shaped glasses and learning to act accordingly. And in all this, we know that the Spirit of Christ works in us, strengthening and encouraging us on the path of prudence.

WISDOM

(FROM THE DICTIONARY OF BIBLICAL IMAGERY)

While the word wisdom strikes moderns as an abstraction, there is evidence that it was a living and palpable reality for the ancient imagination. Biblical wisdom is definable as skill for living, but by the time biblical wisemen have transformed it into images, it is more concrete than conceptual.

Old Testament Images of Wisdom. On the strength of some magnificent pictures in Proverbs 1–9, the most familiar picture of wisdom is probably that of the personified woman Wisdom. She is a commanding presence who summons people boldly and loudly in the most public places of a city—the street, the market, on top of the walls, and at the city gates (Prov 1:20–21). She is an alluring woman who builds a house and invites people to a lavish banquet of food and wine (Prov 9:1–12). As an extension of this evocative feminine imagery, the “son” to whom the speaker in the book of Proverbs repeatedly addresses his instruction is urged to have a love affair with wisdom: “do not forsake her ... love her ... prize her highly ... embrace her” (Prov 4:6–9, RSV).

Equally impressive is the imagery of the ancient and even divine origin by which wisdom is portrayed. The magnificent poem on wisdom in Job 28 highlights the motif. The poem unfolds in three parts: people’s ability to find virtually everything that the earth contains (Job 28:1–11); contrastingly, the human inability to find the place of wisdom (Job 28:12–22); and, again in contrast, the ability of God to know the place of wisdom, with the logical result that the fear of God is wisdom (Job 28:23–28). The encomium in praise of wisdom in Proverbs 8 reinforces the divine origin of wisdom by picturing it as a companion of God at the very creation of the world (Job 28:22–28).

² Swallow Prior, Karen. *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*. Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

In terms of sheer quantity of imagery, the dominant motif is value terms such as jewelry and wealth associated with wisdom. Sometimes the superior value of wisdom is directly asserted: “the gain from it is better than gain from silver and its profit better than gold” (Prov 3:14 RSV); “she is more precious than jewels” (Prov 3:15 RSV); “my fruit is better than gold, even fine gold, and my yield than choice silver” (Prov 8:19 RSV). Elsewhere the value of wisdom is pictured metaphorically as jewelry: it is an “adornment for your neck” (Prov 3:22 RSV), “a fair garland for your head, and pendants for your neck” (Prov 1:9 RSV), “a beautiful crown” (Prov 4:9 RSV) and “a precious jewel” (Prov 20:15 RSV).

Another pattern combines the motifs of success and reward to convey a sense of the present benefits of wisdom in a person’s life. We might note here a contrast to the imagery that is characteristically associated with folly in the wisdom literature of the Bible, which pictures folly in terms of its destructive end or destiny: folly causes a person to be lost (Prov 5:23), to end in death (Prov 14:12; 16:25), to go like an ox to its slaughter (Prov 7:22), to end up as a guest in the depths of Sheol (Prov 9:18), to be caught in a trap (Eccles 7:26), to end up with a thorn infested field (Prov 24:31) or a leaking roof (Eccles 10:18). These melancholy pictures of a self-destructive end are a foil to the robustly positive rewards of wisdom-rewards like “abundant welfare” (Prov 3:2 RSV), “vats ... bursting with wine” (Prov 3:10 RSV) and “riches and honor” (Prov 3:16 RSV). Stated as a formula, “wisdom helps one to succeed” (Eccles 10:10 RSV). Whereas the path of folly is a downward slide toward destruction, the progress of wisdom is toward something better and better, as encapsulated in the proverb that “the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day” (Prov 4:18 RSV).

Another leading motif is the contrast between wisdom and folly. The motif of the two ways, for example, is an archetype in wisdom literature (see PATH). Nearly three dozen proverbs in the book of Proverbs are comparative proverbs that contrast wise and foolish behavior. Within an implied context of conflict with its opposite, wisdom’s role is to guard (Prov 2:11), deliver (Prov 2:12), save (Prov 2:16) and protect (Eccles 7:12) a person from folly and its destructiveness.

Another motif associated with wisdom is the need to search for it and obtain it. We need to distinguish here between a pessimistic tradition within the Hebrew wisdom literature and an optimistic tradition. The narrator in Ecclesiastes pictures the futility of searching for wisdom by purely human means. When he makes the attempt, he finds only vexation and sorrow (Eccl 1:12–18), and he discovers the elusiveness of wisdom, so that “however much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out” (Eccl 8:16–17 RSV). But the book of Proverbs, which locates the beginning point of wisdom as fearing the Lord (Prov 1:7), is optimistic about the quest for wisdom, promising that those who search long enough will “find the knowledge of God” (Prov 2:1–5 RSV).

An additional feature of the imagery associated with wisdom is that the imagery roots wisdom thoroughly in the everyday, practical world of actual life. In the book of Ecclesiastes, wisdom and its rewards are located in the world of eating, drinking, toil, marriage, authority structures, log splitting, planting and investment. The book of Proverbs covers even more areas of life, from farming to household management to the professions to finances to sex to a toothache. Again, therefore, we can see the resistance of the biblical imagination to reducing wisdom to an abstraction.

Christ as Wisdom. The imagery of wisdom plays an important role in the NT’s depiction of Jesus. The primary motif developed is that of God’s wisdom personified, beginning with Proverbs 8, where Lady Wisdom calls out and speaks of herself as the one who was created by God at the beginning of his work (Prov 8:22), as his master worker, present at God’s side at the creation of the world (Prov 8:30–31). This motif passes through later Jewish wisdom literature, particularly the Wisdom of Solomon and the Book of Sirach, before it finds its way into the NT. These apocryphal books develop the motif with the imagery of wisdom present at God’s side, active in creation and taking up residence in Israel (closely associated with the law given at Sinai).

Jesus associates himself with divine wisdom in several passages in the Synoptic Gospels, and the theme is developed in the Fourth Gospel and epistles. When Jesus declares that “something greater than Solomon is here” (Mt 12:42; Lk 11:31), he is claiming to possess wisdom greater than Solomon’s. But the image of Jesus as

a wise man is transcended when he says “wisdom is vindicated by her deeds,” in apparent reference to himself (Mt 11:16–19; Lk 7:31–35). When Jesus identifies himself, along with the prophets and “apostles,” as one of wisdom’s envoys sent to Israel and met with hostile reception (Lk 11:49–51; Mt 23:34–36; cf. Prov 9:3–6; Wis 7:27), he is closely identifying himself with the very wisdom of God. A similar image of wisdom is evoked in Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem (Mt 23:37–39; Lk 13:34–35). And in Jesus’ beckoning to the weary and heavy laden to come and take his yoke upon them (Mt 11:25–30), the imagery of wisdom lies close to the surface. The book of Sirach closes with wisdom beckoning the “uneducated” to “draw near to me ... acquire wisdom.... Put your neck under her yoke and let your souls receive instruction” (Sir 51:23–27 NRSV). Jesus, in comparison with the burdens of the law codified in the “traditions of men,” offers a yoke that is “easy” and a burden that is “light.” Heavenly wisdom is imaged as coming from above in Jesus’ thanksgiving to God: “All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Mt 11:27; Lk 10:22 RSV). In the apocryphal book of Wisdom the wise man “professes to have knowledge of God and calls himself a child of the Lord ... and boasts that God is his father” (Wis 2:13–16 NRSV). The context suggests an identification with divine wisdom, entrusted with the secret things of God and the task of revealing them (Prov 8:14–36; Wis 2:13, 16; 4:10–15).

In the prologue of the Gospel of John, Jesus is identified as the Word, the logos, that was “with God ... was God ... was in the beginning with God” and was active in creation (Jn 1:1–3 NRSV). For those attuned to the imagery of wisdom, the evocation could not be more forthright, and the well-known scene of wisdom choosing Israel from among all of the nations as her dwelling place is replayed as “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14 NRSV). In Sirach 24 wisdom, who “came forth from the mouth of the Most High” and sought a resting place among the nations, is commanded, “Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance” (Sir 24:3, 8 NRSV). Wisdom obeys and takes up her dwelling in the “holy tent” and is “established in Zion” (Sir 24:10–12). But Jesus, the wisdom of God incarnate, is not known or recognized by “the world” or by “his own people” (Jn 1:10–11 NRSV).

Jesus as wisdom appears again in Paul, in an image spawned by Israel’s wisdom tradition. When Paul writes that Christ is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col 1:15 NRSV), he is clothing Christ with the imagery of a preexistent Adam and of wisdom. In Sirach 24:3–4 wisdom is said to have “come forth from the mouth of the Most High” and “dwelt in the highest heavens” (NRSV), and in Wisdom of Solomon 7:25, wisdom is the “pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty ... a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness” (NRSV). This imagery is picked up even more eloquently in Hebrews 1:2–3, where Christ is the one “through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word” (NRSV). The motif of wisdom and its associated imagery was employed by Israel’s sages and poets to search out the nature of the inner life of God and his powerful and eternal word. In the NT the story and imagery of wisdom is discovered as a garment ready made for the figure of Jesus.³

³ Leland Ryken et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 955-957.