

Proverbs 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Proverbs chapter 8. Does not wisdom call? Does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand, beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portal she cries aloud, To you, O men, I call, and my cry is to the children of man. O simple ones, learn prudence! O fools, learn sense! Here, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right, for my mouth will utter truth.

Wickedness is an abomination to my lips. All the words of my mouth are righteous. There is nothing twisted or crooked in them. They are all straight to him who understands, and right to those who find knowledge.

Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold. For wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.

I, wisdom, dwell with prudence, and I find knowledge and discretion. The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil, and perverted speech I hate.

I have counsel and sound wisdom. I have insight. I have strength. By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just. By me princes rule, and nobles all who govern justly.

[1 : 2 4] I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me. Riches and honour are with me, enduring wealth and righteousness. My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold, and my yield than choice silver. I walk in the way of righteousness, in the paths of justice, granting an inheritance to those who love me, and filling their treasuries.

The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first before the beginning of the earth.

When there were no depths, I was brought forth. When there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped. Before the hills, I was brought forth. Before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world.

When he established the heavens, I was there. When he drew a circle on the face of the deep. When he made firm the skies above. When he established the fountains of the deep.

When he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command. When he marked out the foundations of the earth. Then I was beside him, like a master workman, and I was daily his delight.

[2 : 4 3] Rejoicing before him always. Rejoicing in his inhabited world. And delighting in the children of man. And now, O sons, listen to me. Blessed are those who keep my ways.

Hear instruction and be wise. And do not neglect it. Blessed is the one who listens to me. Watching daily at my gates. Waiting beside my doors.

For whoever finds me, finds life. And obtains favour from the Lord. But he who fails to find me, injures himself. All who hate me, love death.

Proverbs chapter 7 presented us with the forbidden woman. And her appeal to the gullible young man in the street. The young man's choice of a woman is a prominent theme throughout the opening nine chapters of the book of Proverbs.

It functions as a theme that frames the entirety of the book. Chapter 8 presents us with another woman making her appeal to the son. Lady Wisdom. Her appeal here recalls her initial appeal of chapter 1 verses 20 to 21.

[3 : 45] Wisdom cries aloud in the street. In the market she raises her voice. At the head of the noisy street she cries out. At the entrance of the city gates she speaks. Bruce Waltke argues, despite their contrasting styles, that we should read this chapter with the preceding chapter as a diptych.

Two panels that need to be read alongside each other. Wisdom's appeal is contrasted with that of the adulterous woman in chapter 7. Waltke writes, The unchaste wife moves covertly at dusk and speaks falsely.

Wisdom moves publicly and speaks direct and authoritative truth. Unlike the smooth, seductive but deceptive speech of the strange woman, wisdom's is straight, right and true, not twisted or crooked.

The foreign wife leads her victims to slavery, impoverishment and death. Wisdom's speech leads her followers to kingship, wealth and life. The foreign wife inhabits the earthly and mundane.

Wisdom soars in heaven above space and time. Both rub shoulders in the city and appeal for the love of the uncommitted gullible youth, the unchaste wife erotically, wisdom spiritually.

[4 : 55] The house of the unfaithful wife is a death trap. The mansion of wisdom is the abundant life. A critical decision to love wisdom before entering the city is urgent to nerve the putty-like simpleton against the foreign woman.

To gain his love, wisdom extols her virtues and her rewards. In the juxtaposition of the appeal of the forbidden woman and of lady wisdom, the hearer is encouraged to allow the comparison of wisdom to a woman addressing a young man in search of love to inform the understanding both of the nature of the quest for wisdom and the nature of the quest for love.

The quest for wisdom has the character of a pursuit of the heart. Wisdom requires the devotion of one's desires and affections to her, not merely brain power. Where the heart is not set upon lady wisdom, the smartest mind will give itself to tangled webs of rationalisations and lies.

Likewise, the quest for wisdom requires an appropriate attitude to matters of love. When the young man goes out in search of love, he is, whether he recognises it or not, pursuing either the woman folly or lady wisdom.

There are few more important matters than the question of the person to whom you will give your heart, and this is a question that the young man will unavoidably face as he seeks to leave his father and mother and be joined to a wife.

[6 : 14] If he chooses the wrong woman, he will be caught in her folly. One of the tragedies of King Solomon was that, despite his surpassing wisdom, his heart was turned away by his wives, as we see in 1 Kings 11, verses 1-4.

There we learn that his wives turned away his heart. His love for his many wives led him to serve other gods, and his heart was not true to the Lord. On the other hand, if a man marries a wise wife, she can be the making of him, confirming him in the path of wisdom herself, whose character she displays.

The wise wife is the man's great counsellor, the one who will encourage and give him companionship on the path of righteousness. Wisdom's address, with which this chapter opens, is given in a raised voice, at the heights by the way, maybe on the top of the walls.

It's at the crossroads, beside the gates, and at the entrance of the doors. Wisdom speaks to those who are on the way, especially at the places where directions are chosen, and where people enter in or go out.

These are sites of decision and transition. Her address is to the simple and to the fools. The simple are those who are untaught, gullible, naive, or unformed.

[7 : 24] The fools are those who are culpably ignorant, who are not merely immature, but those who have adopted, to some degree or other, the path of folly. The simple are spoken to as those who need to be taught prudence.

The fools as those who need to receive instructive correction. In verses 6 to 11, Wisdom presents her hearers with reasons why they should listen to her. Her hearers should be attentive, because her speech is a source of what is right, good, beautiful, and true, and she abhors and rejects all evil.

None of her words are twisted or deceptive. Everyone with understanding will find her to be a sure guide. In this description, the hearer learns Wisdom's character, and the fact that her words can be trusted and relied upon.

The rewards of heeding her are immense. The value of her instruction exceeds that of the costliest metals and jewels. She is incomparable in her worth, and a man should value her above everything else in his heart.

It is worth noting at this point that descriptions given of Lady Wisdom at such points get taken up later in chapter 31 and referred to the excellent wife. For instance, in verse 10 of that chapter, An excellent wife who can find, she is far more precious than jewels.

[8 : 36] In verses 12 to 14, she enumerates her qualities and gifts. She is intimately associated with knowledge and discretion. Knowledge is a grasp of reality and its operations.

Discretion is shrewdness in deliberation and in the forging of plans. This is a quality that can be expressed in righteous and wicked ways. At various points in the book, the wicked are said to have this particular quality.

Earlier in the book, we were told that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Here, the fear of the Lord is connected with the hatred of evil. The antithesis of such hatred of evil is revealed in the second half of verse 13.

Pride, arrogance, the way of evil, and perverted speech. The fear of the Lord is characterized by humility, but also by an abhorrence of what is contrary to his character.

Those who are proud and arrogant will always find folly most palatable. It flatters them and it confirms them in their ways. The fool always wants to be confirmed in his own way. He has little interest in the difficult task of seeking out the right way.

[9 : 39] Wisdom communicates counsel, effective strategy, perception and insight, and strength. The person with wisdom is greatly strengthened by her. Kings reign by her because effective rule and power requires insight, the reception of counsel, knowing how to act so as to have the desired results.

The wise king may accomplish more with wisdom by his side than a foolish king with vast armies. Wisdom also grants judges and lawgivers insight into what is right in situations that are obscure and veiled to others.

The wise man can bring wise words to bear upon a situation in ways that pierce the gloom and throw once veiled matters into a clear light. We might here think of Solomon's judgment concerning the two prostitutes in the dispute over the child.

If the son wishes to be powerful, effective and just, he must pursue wisdom. If the young man is called to love wisdom, wisdom assures him that if he seeks her, she will be found by him and that his love will be reciprocated.

The statements here should remind us of those in chapter 3 verses 13 to 18. Blessed is the one who finds wisdom and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver, and her profit better than gold.

[10 : 54] She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand, in her left hand are riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.

She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her. Those who hold her fast are called blessed. Wisdom's lovers are rewarded with her remarkable gifts and bounty. Wisdom is desirable in herself, but also desirable on account of the rich blessings that she offers.

Her treasures are with her, enjoyed by those who cleave to her, but lost by those who abandon her. Those who pursue wealth without wisdom will often seek it through wickedness or violence, like the young man who joins the gang in chapter 1.

Such persons will often only enjoy wealth for a short season until in their folly they surrender it. The righteous man who seeks wisdom above all else can enjoy enduring wealth as a consequence of his quest.

Even though this is not what he was most focused on achieving, wisdom grants such a blessing to her lovers. In the description of wisdom back in chapter 3, the description of her value and of the riches that she offers is followed by the following statement in verses 19 to 20.

[12 : 05] Here, in chapter 8, wisdom moves to discussing her part in the original creation, her primordial character.

If the Lord created by wisdom, it makes sense that all effective action in the world must occur according to her. Here we are told that the Lord brought forth wisdom at the outset of his creation, the very first act of his founding of the world.

She was established in her rule, even before the earth came into being, when all was still formless and void. As the Lord fashioned the creation, wisdom was right beside him, constantly alongside him and delighting in his work.

The meaning of verse 30 is debated by scholars. Many translations and scholars argue that wisdom is presented as a master workman. Others, like Leo Perdue, argue that it is not a reference to wisdom as a master craftsman or artisan, but wisdom as a little child that rejoices and dances before the Lord.

Wisdom is personified as a sort of child brought forth by the Lord that plays exuberantly throughout his creation. Michael Fox, in a particular version of this understanding, argues that it should be understood as saying, I was with him growing up, wisdom being described as like a daughter of the Lord.

[13 : 25] Welke argues for wisdom being constantly or faithfully before the Lord. Others have argued that wisdom here is spoken of as the instrument of the Lord. I find Fox's interpretation, I was with him growing up, to be the most compelling.

The Lord delights in this daughter-like wisdom, and wisdom rejoices before him. The portrayal of wisdom here emphasizes the youth, the playfulness, and the vivacity of wisdom.

Fox writes, Reading this mythos in naturalistic terms, It means that the delight of intellect suffuses all that wisdom embraces, the artisan's pleasure in his or her craft, the counsellor's satisfaction in working through a dilemma, the author's elation in the success of effort, and the scholar's exhilaration in partaking of the law and learning of tradition, in exploring the unknown, and in growing in knowledge.

Perhaps the joy of learning is what the author primarily has in mind, since he is directing his words in the first instance to young men who need encouragement in their pursuit of learning. Wisdom, for the book of Proverbs, is delightful.

It itself is a principle of delight. The Lord delights in wisdom, and those who pursue wisdom will find her to be a source of great joy. Wisdom has a particular relationship with humanity.

- [14 : 39] Of all of the creatures of the Lord, it is humanity in particular that can enter into a relationship with wisdom. This theme is developed in later wisdom literature. For instance, in the Book of Wisdom or the Wisdom of Solomon, written in the first century BC, in chapter 8, verses 2 and following, we read, Wisdom has been my love.

I courted her when I was young and wanted to make her my bride. I fell in love with her beauty. She glorifies her noble origin by living with God, the Lord of all, who loves her.

She is familiar with God's mysteries and helps determine his course of action. Is it good to have riches in this life? Nothing can make you richer than wisdom, who makes everything function.

Is knowledge a useful thing to have? Nothing is better than wisdom, who has given shape to everything that exists. Do you love justice? All the virtues are the result of wisdom's work.

Justice and courage, self-control and understanding. Life can offer us nothing more valuable than these. Do you want to have wide experience? Wisdom knows the lessons of history and can anticipate the future.

- [15 : 44] She knows how to interpret what people say and how to solve problems. She knows the miracles that God will perform and how the movements of history will develop. So I decided to take Wisdom home to live with me because I knew that she would give me good advice and encourage me in times of trouble and grief.

The writer continues this theme in verses 17 to 18. And so I thought it over. To be wedded to Wisdom is to live forever. To love her is to be perfectly happy. To do her work is to be rich beyond measure.

To share her company is to have sound judgment. To converse with her is to be honoured. Then I was determined to take Wisdom as my bride. The sort of figure that Wisdom represents has been a matter of considerable debate over the history of the church.

Is Wisdom an actual entity or just some sort of personification? If it is an actual entity, is it personal or quasi-personal? Is it a divine entity or being? Is it a personification of an attribute of God?

Is it one of the persons of the Trinity? If it is a personification, what reality justifies this personification? Historically, many have associated the figure of Wisdom with the second person of the Trinity, the Son, and with the principle of the Logos.

- [16 : 57] The identification of Wisdom in this passage with Christ was a very commonly held position among the patristic writers, and Proverbs chapter 8 played an important role in debates about the deity of Christ.

Not all patristic writers identified Wisdom with the Son, however. For instance, Irenaeus in book 4, chapter 20 of *Against Heresies* identifies Wisdom with the Spirit. Imagery has its own logic and grammar, and gendered imagery is a good example of this.

It can be tempting for modern readers to believe that we can take an a la carte approach to biblical imagery. However, imagery is chosen very carefully. It has certain connotations. In scripture, male and female consistently stand for different things.

Men and women are fundamentally different in their symbolic potential. Fox asks the right sort of questions when he considers what would be last if Wisdom here was a man. What if Wisdom was the Lord's firstborn Son, calling mankind to listen to him?

Fox immediately notes two things that would be last. He writes, The first loss would be the tint of Eros in the mutual attraction of Wisdom and Humanity in chapters 8 and 9.

[18 : 04] The alternative male figure, he writes, would lack an Eros-like attraction to match the draw of Lady Folly, whose slat and call emulates the explicitly sexual pull of the strange woman.

He goes on, A deeper difference would be that this personage would inevitably acquire a different kind of authority, one not quite suitable for describing the way Wisdom works in the world.

A male with Lady Wisdom's qualities would be too much like a monarch. A firstborn son of God would be like his deputy, like the Davidic king in Zion, who rules the kings and the judges of the earth through his God-given might, and who not only teaches justice, but actively executes it.

Lady Wisdom is not a king figure. She is powerful, and she is the principle of just dominion, but she does not herself exercise rulership. Instead, others rule by her.

Her influence is verbal, working through persuasion and appeal to affection, not through exercise of office and power. Her power and appeal come from the just workings of the universe and the good sense of individual minds, rather than from the constraints and compulsions of political institutions.

[19 : 12] As we go through the Book of Proverbs, we see Wisdom presented as a wise wife, as one who is a grand hostess, as a lover who appeals to young men, as someone who builds her house and provides for people.

The Book of Proverbs is about the relationship between the royal son and Wisdom. It's framed in terms of the quest for a good wife. The book juxtaposes the way of folly, the foolish woman that leads to destruction, with Lady Wisdom and the noble wife, who should both be desired and sought.

The book ends with the portrait of the noble wife, Lady Wisdom as a sort of royal consort. The prince's relationship with Wisdom is presented as erotic in character. It's comparable to the relationship between a man and his wife.

The figure of Wisdom, or Sophia, has inspired a great deal of theological speculation. I do not believe that it is appropriate to think of Sophia or Wisdom as a divine person, nor do I think that we should identify this figure with the son.

Nevertheless, I think that the figure of Wisdom represents a personification of something real, perhaps best thought of as the operations of the Holy Spirit within the world. The Holy Spirit gives life and breath to all things.

[20 : 22] The exuberance, the vitality, the delight, and the dynamics of life are all established by the imminent working of the Spirit that animates the whole creation. Those who are anointed by the Spirit have wisdom and live with the grain of the creation.

Christ is the Logos, the Word, the one who gives structure and order to the creation. He is also the Royal Son who receives the Spirit without measure. The Holy Spirit is his Spirit, the one who indwells and animates.

The Holy Spirit is not wisdom. However, wisdom is, I believe, one way of speaking about the imminent work of the Holy Spirit within the creation. In the verses that conclude this chapter, wisdom drives home her message, reminding her hearers of the blessedness of those who walk in her ways.

She charges her hearers to heed her and not to neglect her words. They must be devoted to her on a daily basis. Every day they must wait at her gates and by her doors.

Perhaps we are to associate this with the feast of wisdom in the following chapter. She declares, whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from the Lord. The significance of this verse becomes more apparent when we read chapter 18, verse 22.

[21 : 33] He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favour from the Lord. The wise son is to seek for wisdom as his wife and to seek for a wife a wise woman.

If he fails to do so, it will be himself above all others that he is harming. In her devastating final sentence, wisdom declares that all who hate her love death.

They may not think it. They may think that they love freedom and autonomy. But when the time comes, it will be revealed that what they were really pursuing all that time was death and their own destruction.

As we saw in chapter 1, when that destruction comes upon them, wisdom will mock at them. A question to consider, where else in the scripture might we see the figure of wisdom or other figures related to her?

Are there any other figures related to her?