

Proverbs 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 10 March 2021

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[0 : 00] Proverbs chapter 9 Whoever corrects the scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reprove a wicked man incurs injury.

Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you. Reprove a wise man, and he will love you. Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser. Teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. For by me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life.

If you are wise, you are wise for yourself. If you scoff, you alone will bear it. The woman folly is loud. She is seductive, and knows nothing.

She sits at the door of her house. She takes a seat on the highest places of the town, calling to those who pass by, who are going straight on their way. Whoever is simple, let him turn in here.

[1 : 25] And to him who lacks sense, she says, Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant. But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.

Proverbs chapter 9 concludes the prologue of the book of Proverbs. Especially towards the latter half of the prologue, the juxtaposition of the foolish woman and lady wisdom is pronounced.

This was the case in the preceding two chapters, where there was a diptych with the forbidden woman accosting the young man at the dusk on the street, in chapter 7, and lady wisdom in chapter 8.

Chapter 9 draws the juxtaposition between these figures to its height, presenting us with a diptych of lady wisdom, and the now personified woman folly. In such a diptych, two adjacent passages of scripture need to be read alongside each other, as they present two related things that can be mapped onto each other in a manner that accentuates the similarities and the differences.

An example of a diptych in biblical narrative would be Genesis chapter 18 and 19. These are two passages concerned with hospitality. Both begin with a similar yet contrasting encounter, an offer of hospitality.

[2 : 36] One of the accounts ends with a barren wife being made fruitful, and the other with a wife being turned into a pillar of salt. Reading the two accounts separately, you can see a lot, but if you read the two accounts together, you can see a lot more.

In this chapter, there is another diptych with two offers of hospitality. These are closely paralleled invitations in verses 1-6 and 13-18. These also frame some instruction in the intervening verses.

Bruce Waltke observes the tight structure that both wisdom and folly's invitations share. These move from the preparation of a meal, which can be broken down into the designation of the figure, their activity and attributes, the call and the location, to the invitation, to the gullible, to the brainless, and an offer of symbolic foods, to the conclusion of either life or death.

The image behind all of this is, as Michael Fox notes, life as a banquet or feast. Connecting wisdom and folly with the offer of food might also bring the hero's mind back to the Garden of Eden and the forbidden fruit.

A feast forms a bond of communion between the host, the guest, and their companions at the table, and such a meal would be part of the formalisation of a covenant. Eating is a source of sustenance and life, but eating bad food can have very damaging effects.

[3 : 56] As a metaphor, eating is often closely associated with sexual relations. The fact that we have two women offering invitations to their meals in this chapter suggests an offer of intimacy which, even if not sexual, implies something of the closeness and the union that we would associate with that.

The image of a woman building her house by wisdom is found at a couple of points in the later chapters of Proverbs. In Proverbs chapter 14 verse 1, The wisest of women builds her house, but folly with her own hands tears it down.

Proverbs chapter 24 verses 3 to 4, By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established. By knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches.

Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount with a similar image of building a house by wisdom, contrasting the wise man who built his house upon the rock and the man building it upon the sand. The house here is not so much the physical edifice as the household.

The wise woman in Proverbs is a woman who oversees and establishes her household as a site of social influence and industry. The modern household is typically relegated to the margins of society.

[5 : 07] It's a realm of shared consumption and retreat, of leisure and recharging for a small family whose members spend the significant majority of their days outside of it and of its orbit.

The household described here is quite different, however. It would be more like a small business, a centre of community life and activity, a place of hospitality and conviviality, a realm for an extended family and their life together, and much else besides.

The wise woman would be like the queen and the creator of this realm, and Lady Wisdom is here the great mistress of her household, and the great hostess. Her house has seven pillars, it is spacious and grand, and the number perhaps recalls Wisdom's part in the original creation, with its seven days.

Whether this is the case or not, the number suggests completeness and perfection. She prepares a great and bounteous banquet for her guests, slaughtering, or perhaps overseeing the slaughter of cattle, mixing wine, presumably with honey, herbs and spices, and preparing a great table.

She sends out her servant girls to summon guests to her feast. They are servant girls rather than male servants, or servants of both sexes, in order to associate them more strongly with Wisdom herself.

[6 : 20] We should also consider the way in which actual women are associated with Wisdom and folly, and in the young man's choice of a wife, he may ultimately be pursuing either the invitation of Wisdom or of folly.

They call out from the highest part of the town. Perhaps the walls of the town are intended here. Alternatively, we might think of a hill at the heart of a town, where a religious site might be situated.

Wisdom's invitation is extended to the simple and to those lacking sense. These are people who are untaught and unformed, who need instruction and have to commit themselves to a particular path.

They are not yet fools in need of correction, but nor are they on the path of Wisdom. Wisdom summons them to turn to her in her house and to commune with her. Receiving the invitation requires a turning aside from their current path and entering into communion.

They must leave their simple ways and walk in the way of insight instead. The meal offered is bread and mixed wine. This is one of several occasions in the Old Testament where bread and wine come together, and we should not be reluctant to connect this to the meal to which our Lord invites us as his followers.

[7 : 28] The invitation is generally and freely offered to all, as in Isaiah chapter 55 verses 1 to 2. Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and he who has no money, come, buy and eat.

Come, buy wine and milk, without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

Verses 7 to 12 intervene between the invitation of Lady Wisdom and of the woman folly. In these verses we have a contrast between the teachability of the wise man and the unteachability of the scoffer and the wicked man.

The scoffer inures himself against instruction. He responds to any instruction or rebuke with mockery. The mockery insulates him against correction. It is a way of deflecting anything that would challenge him in his path.

Like the scoffer, the wicked man strikes out at the person who would try to correct him. He is not willing to hear. The more that you rebuke a scoffer, the more that he will hate you. Indeed, the effort to try and teach such a person or to rebuke him can be counterproductive.

[8 : 40] It hardens and confirms him in his way as he reacts against you. Often it's best to disengage from people who are acting in folly because you'll just make their situation worse. They won't listen to you.

They won't receive any correction. By the starkest contrast, the wise man loves reproof. He is one who receives reproof gladly. Any correction enables him to commit himself even more fully to the way of wisdom.

The wise man grows through correction and instruction. While some wicked people might devote their skills to avoiding the task of learning wisdom, the wise man devotes his wisdom to the learning of more wisdom.

At the centre of this section is the great thesis statement, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. Such a fear of the Lord corresponds to the knowledge of the holiness of God.

The fear of the Lord involves a reverence and awe before the Lord and also a corresponding humility and teachableness on the part of the worshipper. The consequence of such a posture, which is the way by which someone can find wisdom, is the multiplication of someone's days and the adding of years to their life.

[9 : 50] Even if the fool lives for as long as the wise man, he wastes his time. He squanders his days and his life in ignorance. The life of the wise man, by contrast, is enriched and grows through his wisdom.

His days and years are characterised by accumulation. In verse 13, we reach the characterisation of the woman folly. To this point, we've had the concrete foolish woman, the forbidden woman who appeals to the gullible young man in the street, in chapter 7.

But here, behind the concrete forbidden woman, is the woman folly. She personifies the appeal of foolishness. Reading this as a diptych with the invitation of wisdom helps us to notice significant features of the characterisation of folly.

She has built no house for herself, she has prepared no great feast, she is boisterous, unruly and brazen, and her appeal is through an ignorant seduction. She has no servants to send out, she has to do all the appealing herself.

She loudly cries out from a seat by her door, and from a raised seat on the high places of the town. She is similar to wisdom in some respects, but also quite different, and her invitation is of the same type.

[11 : 02] Whoever is simple, let him turn in here, and addressing those who lack sense. She is calling to the same people as wisdom is calling to. They are competing for the attention of these people.

Wisdom offered bread and wine, but folly offers stolen water and bread eaten in secret. She does not have the slaughtered cattle, the beautiful laid table, she does not have the mixed wine of Lady Wisdom, and so all she can offer is simple fare.

However, the appeal is the forbidden character. The water is stolen, and the bread is eaten in secret. Her food would not be anywhere near as appealing were it not so illicit.

Precisely because the things that she offers are illegitimate, they are sweet and pleasant. It is precisely because they are forbidden that they are so desirable. Such is the perversity of rebellion.

However, the simple person who turns aside at her invitation does not realize the folly of his choice. The contrast between wisdom and folly is ultimately the contrast between life and death.

[12 : 05] Wisdom adds years to people's lives, but folly brings them down to death. Even if they live, they are bound by her. Her offer of freedom and pleasure ultimately turns out to be hollow.

True pleasure and freedom is found only in the way of wisdom. A question to consider. How does this closing passage of the prologue help to sum up the prologue's themes?