

Wisdom

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The Beginning of Wisdom

Scripture

Proverbs 1:1–7 Wisdom consists of a range of virtues, from skill and prudence to righteousness and reverence.

Proverbs 8:22–31 As God’s precious daughter, wisdom takes delight in God’s creation.

Proverbs 30:19–18 Wonder is foundational to wisdom.

Prayer

God of grace, grant us wisdom as we seek wisdom. Our lives are filled with dilemmas, crises, and distractions that pull us in so many different directions. Give us discernment, O God, to find the path you have set before us, the path of righteousness, the path of wisdom, the path of life. Show us the way to navigate our lives so we may serve you, each other, and your creation with joy. Guide us in the living of these days. In the name of Christ, the one who remains ahead of us yet ever beside us, we ask this. Amen.

Introduction

With only a click or two away, information can be had for almost every conceivable interest and need. If you Google “meaning of life,” you’ll find an exhaustive description of nearly every philosophical movement and religion evidenced in human history. You will also discover that the phrase is the title of a Monty Python movie. “We are drowning in information,” laments eminent biologist Edward O. Wilson, “while starving for wisdom.”¹

What is wisdom, if it is not information? Survey ancient philosophers and modern psychologists, and you will find no consensus.² Yet somehow we know wisdom when we see it,

1. Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 294.

2. For an excellent survey, see Stephen S. Hall, *Wisdom: From Philosophy to Neuroscience* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

especially when we see it in people. It is easy to identify people we know, past and present, whom we consider eminently wise. Wisdom is more than knowledge; it involves making sound judgments and doing the right thing. As is often said, knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit, but wisdom knows not to put it in a fruit salad. Wisdom is more than “know-how.” Whereas knowledge or intelligence indicates how something is done, wisdom points to what should be done. Wisdom grapples with questions of justice and fairness. At the same time, the exercise of wisdom, some would claim, promotes success and prosperity. In wisdom, the human self is acutely aware, both self-aware and aware of others as subjects in their own right. Perhaps most fundamentally, wisdom is about making sense of life and acting accordingly. Wisdom helps identify what is truly important. Wisdom is the art of living fully.

This study joins wisdom’s journey in the Bible, particularly through the books considered “Wisdom Literature”: Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew Bible, as well as Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon in the so-called Apocrypha. In addition, we will look at three New Testament texts that have much to say about wisdom: John, 1 Corinthians, and James. On this tour, you will discover how multi-faceted wisdom is in the Bible. Wisdom wears many faces.

Fear Seeking Understanding: Proverbs 1:1–7

From beginning to end, Proverbs is a book of wisdom (Hebrew *hokmah*), specifically a book filled with myriad admonitions and aphorisms, instructions and sayings, all collected and codified by the ancient sages, “the wise” (see Proverbs 24:23). This collection of collections has as its introduction the first seven verses. The first verse attributes it all to Solomon. This is no accident. Solomon’s reputation as a wise king is well-known in biblical lore. According to 1 Kings, soon after Solomon became king, God enjoins Solomon at the great religious site at Gibeon, “Ask what I should give you,” to which Solomon replies: “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?” (3:9).

This pleased God, and so the young king was granted “a wise and discerning mind” (v. 12). Demonstrating his divinely endowed wisdom, Solomon decisively settles, to great acclaim, the difficult case of two prostitutes claiming the same baby: “All Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered; and they stood in awe

of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to execute justice” (vv. 16–28). Later we find this summary statement:

God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. . . . [H]is fame spread throughout all the surrounding nations. He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. . . . People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom. (4:29–34)

The Queen of Sheba would be counted among Solomon’s loyal fans (10:1–13). “Three thousand proverbs,” according to biblical tradition, did Solomon compose. The book of Proverbs has not even a third of that many. Regardless of whether the first verse of Proverbs is historically accurate, it was only natural to attribute such a collection of sayings to ancient Israel’s quintessentially wise king (of note, the last two collections of Proverbs are attributed to foreigners: Agur in Proverbs 30:1 and King Lemuel’s mother in 31:1).

What follows the superscription or title are six verses that provide a sort of course objective or purpose statement to the book as a whole. Here we find a mini-catalogue of values and virtues: shrewdness, prudence, discretion, skill, instruction, insight, and wisdom. Certain virtues ensure that goals are successfully reached, that life is well navigated. In addition, verse 3 lists three distinctly moral virtues: righteousness, justice, and equity. Together they establish a sense of fairness and right relation in community and with God. These particular virtues contribute a distinctly ethical dimension to this motley collage. Following this verse, the introduction highlights the importance of teaching youth, of inculcating these values for the young. Thus it is no surprise that much of the material that follows this introduction is cast as a parent’s address to a child (see 1:8; 2:1; 3:1, 11; 4:1; 5:1, 7; 6:1; 7:1). Wisdom begins in the home, with children learning from their parents. But wisdom is not just for the young: “Let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill” (v. 5). Proverbs is for young and old alike. Even the wisest have something to gain from reading the book.

The last verse provides the religious framework for the introduction. Sometimes called the motto of Proverbs, verse 7 situates “wisdom” in the context of holy reverence: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (see also 9:10; Psalm 111:10). Such godly “fear” is not meant to paralyze. Quite the opposite: it is meant to move one forward into gaining wisdom from God. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning” of a journey, of one’s growth in wisdom. This kind of “fear” is humility mixed with awe over the God who works wonders and imparts wisdom (see 3:5–7). Call it “fear seeking understanding.” The inclusion of this “motto” ensures that wisdom is nothing without reverence, that wisdom is more gift than possession, and it is priceless (see 3:13–18).

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Wisdom’s Joy to the World: Proverbs 8:22–31

Wisdom’s journey is not just about godly fear, however. Proverbs 8 contains one of the most exquisitely crafted poems in all Scripture, a singularly evocative passage that has captivated readers for centuries, from ancient sages and church fathers (and heretics) to feminists and ecologists. The poem is a testimony from wisdom herself. Wisdom speaks! Personified as a woman, wisdom makes her first appearance in Proverbs 1:20–33. There, she warns her audience of the perils in store for those who reject her. In chapter 8, wisdom adopts a very different tone: she articulates her benefits to those who embrace her, from knowledge to right governance (8:12–16), even wealth (v. 21).

Our passage marks the pinnacle of wisdom’s discourse, and through it she establishes her preeminent place in creation’s genesis. Indeed, her account is not so much about creation as about the one who describes it. “It’s all about me!” declares creation’s “I”-witness. The poem is her grand soliloquy, and it bears a distinctly rhetorical purpose: Wisdom lifts her voice to woo her audience, to persuade the reader of her inestimable worth and authority. Moreover, at the end of her testimony wisdom depicts herself as a child frolicking with God and the world (vv. 30–31). (The NRSV translates v. 30: “I was beside him, like a master worker.” But see the footnote for an alternative reading of the last phrase: “little child.” The Hebrew word here is unclear.) By claiming an intimate, lively association

with both the creator and creation, wisdom hopes to capture the imagination and, in so doing, claim once and for all the reader's allegiance to the God of wisdom.

The poem begins with wisdom placing herself at the beginning of God's creative acts (vv. 22–23). Wisdom is “created” by God prior to creation, she testifies, thus asserting her preeminent status over all creation. More specifically, she is conceived in v. 22, gestated in v. 23, birthed in vv. 24–25, present before creation in v. 27, and actively “playing” in vv. 30–31. The world's creation is told strictly from the standpoint of wisdom's “genetic” primacy. She proclaims herself to be before all things. While her origin is sharply distinguished from the origins of the cosmos, wisdom nevertheless shares an intimate bond with the “inhabited world” (v. 31).

The world is her playhouse. Wisdom's play holds both the creator and creation in the common bond of delight. She is God's delight, and she delights in creation. Wisdom is “de-light” of the world that enlightens the world.

The world was made for wisdom, for her flourishing and delight, and it is her joy that embraces the world.

The world was made for wisdom, for her flourishing and delight, and it is her joy that embraces the world. By her own testimony, wisdom revels in a world that is made secure and enthralling by God, a world of wonder. One could say that God has “child-proofed” the world for the sake of wisdom and her play. As God's partner in play, she is “beside” the creator of all while beside herself in joy to the world.

The Wonder of It All: Proverbs 30:18–19

Speaking of wonder: this artfully crafted saying is both a testimony and a puzzle. The proverb invites the reader to ponder four distinct “ways” of motion among animals, things, and human beings. How are they possible, these baffling means of movement? What do they share in common: soaring eagles, slithering snakes, floating ships, and love-making couples?³ (The early rabbis contended that each “way” left no trace, although this is by no means guaranteed in the last example!) Each example by itself arrests the attention, but together they conjure a world of wonderment. This

This proverb's appeal derives from its power to elicit bewildered curiosity.

3. The last item is best translated “and the way of a man with a woman.”

proverb's appeal derives from its power to elicit bewildered curiosity. To presume that a tidy solution lies behind these four disparate images would run counter to the sage's own confession of befuddled awe. These "four things," the sage testifies, retain an element of mystery regardless of how much is known about them, no matter how well each "way" can be explained. Such is the sage's testimony: there's nothing quite like ships, snakes, and sex (not to mention soaring raptors) to provoke a sense of wonder!

Such wonder awakens the desire to understand. Marveling at the "way of the eagle in the sky" and that of "the snake on a rock" awakens the desire to know more about eagles and snakes, about their nature and habits, their means of movement. The images may also prompt one to imagine what it is like to glide, nearly motionless, upon updrafts of warm air, scanning the landscape with near telescopic vision, or to slither so gracefully upon the smooth, warm surface of a rock (despite one's fear of snakes). To marvel at ships plying the sea provokes a sense of awe at the ingenuity of human technology; it awakens the desire to know how ships work as well as to imagine the thrill of life on the high seas. Then there are the myriad ways of sexual intimacy. . . . The point is that this evocative proverb awakens the desire to know as it transports readers into the realm of awe and mystery. Such is the way of wonder, and wonder—the wonder of God and of the world—is the beginning of wisdom.

Spiritual Practice

Recall someone in your life, living or deceased, who has shared his or her wisdom with you. Reflect on how this person's wisdom has impacted your life. Say a prayer to God in thanksgiving for this person's life and wisdom. Think of ways you can share your wisdom to others.

Questions for Reflection

What does the “fear of the LORD” mean to you? Has this study of Proverbs changed the way you think about such “fear”?

How would you define “wisdom”? What is the difference between wisdom and knowledge?

Why do you think wisdom is personified as a child in Proverbs 8:22–31? Do you see a connection between personified wisdom and Jesus Christ (see, e.g., Colossians 1:15–20)?