

TITLE:

Compare the rival attractions of Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly in Proverbs 9.

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1 *The setting of the chapter*

Proverbs ch.9 stands as the culmination and climax of the book's introduction. Many of the themes used in it are drawn from the previous chapters. In particular, the contrast of wisdom and folly is introduced in ch1 in a manner reminiscent of the central section of ch.9, suggesting that we are intended to understand them in relation to each other. This theme is continued throughout the introduction as the father (whether a literal father or an instructor) admonishes his son to seek the first and shun the latter.

And the personification of wisdom as a woman, so vital to the theme of our passage, also begins in ch1. Although the exact nature of this personification varies, it is an important theme in ch1.22-33, and ch8.1-36. At the same time, the contrasting theme of the *adulteress*, with whom the woman Folly has clear affinities, has been developing alongside, so that their juxtaposition in ch9 is not unexpected.

Although we may reject some of the more speculative theories about the cultural or mythological sources for these chapters, we ought to take note of R N Whybray's conclusion that:

The questions of the origin and purpose of the figure of wisdom cannot properly be discussed apart from a study of Prov. 1-9 as a whole.¹

2 *Introduction to the important themes*

- The theme of *wisdom* itself, central to Proverbs, is one reflected throughout middle-eastern literature, wisdom writings being extant particularly from Mesopotamia and Egypt. However, the particular meaning conveyed by the Hebrew *hokmah*, wisdom, differs

significantly from its Egyptian and Mesopotamian ‘equivalents’². Firstly it has, throughout its biblical use, a fundamentally religious significance (ch1.7, 9.10) underlying its practical and social application, which is absent outside Israel. Secondly it has a clear moral sense, contrasted not merely with ignorance or ineptness but with willful rebellion against God and his ways (ch1.31-33, 9.7,12). The word picture of ch.9, therefore, is to be understood through the theocentric and morally accountable framework by which we interpret all Hebrew Scripture.

- The precise relationship between wisdom as a woman in the passages already cited, the adulteress of chs.2, 5, 6 & 7 (and of course her foil, the ‘wife of your youth’, ch5.18), and the woman Folly, is open to interpretation. But relationship there undoubtedly is. The portrayal of the adulterous woman partly has its roots in the international wisdom *genre*, as a social/moral warning against illicit sexual relationships.

The Egyptian *Instruction of Ptah-hotep* advises:

If thou desirest to make friendship last in a home to which thou hast access...beware of approaching the women... A mere trifle, the likeness of a dream – and one attains death through knowing her.³

And the *Instructions of Ani*, similarly, warn:

Be on thy guard against a woman from abroad, who is not known in her (own) town. Do not stare at her when she passes by. Do not know her carnally: a deep water, whose windings one knows not, a woman who is far way from her husband. ‘I am sleek,’ she says to thee every day.⁴

The similarity of these enticing words to those of the prostitute/adulteress in ch.7.14-23, and to those of the woman Folly in ch.9.16-17, demands a directly moral and sexual interpretation. But this need not deny additional shades of meaning at a metaphorical level. Whether the chapter was written in Solomon's times or later, Israel's national life was threatened by pagan practices, and particularly by the cult-prostitution associated with the worship of Astarte⁵. The prophets often referred to spiritual impurity as adultery or harlotry, perhaps for this very reason.

Because the Canaanite and other Near Eastern religions involved cult prostitution, the sage could issue both warnings at once.⁶

- The nature of wisdom's personification needs careful thought in order to draw the correct boundaries for the metaphor in ch.9. Kenneth Kitchen points out that

such personification of qualities, attributes and objects formed part of the common intellectual heritage of the Ancient Orient, of the Bible lands themselves, from as early as the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC.⁷

He cites the deification of 'authoritative utterance' and 'understanding' by the Egyptians, of 'hearing' and 'intelligence' by the Mesopotamians, and of 'sincerity', 'law' and 'justice' by the Hurrians and Hittites.

Whybray, in discussing this, points out that Lady Wisdom shows features, such as her attractiveness to young men, which are

quite unrelated to the character of wisdom itself and which...bear a remarkable resemblance to foreign mythology.⁸

But though some writers have toyed with the idea that she originated as an imported foreign deity, he prefers to conclude that

Wisdom in Proverbs is fundamentally a divine attribute which in the process of personification has been endowed with secondary mythological characteristics.⁹

Such an approach at least has the strength of reminding us that, in talking of Lady Wisdom, we are essentially talking about God himself in one of his attributes, thus enabling us to see the LORD himself as the alternative both to sexual temptation and false religion.

Some writers go on to suggest that Lady Wisdom was devised as the antithesis to the 'cult prostitute' of ch.7, or at least to Dame Folly herself. Though Kidner rightly points out¹⁰ that there is no clear reference in the text to cult prostitution, it must be admitted that finding a *sitz im liegen*, as it were, for Lady Wisdom is more problematical than it is for Dame Folly. It seems very unlikely that any virtuous women in ancient Israel held public banquets for the instruction of simple young men.

But once we allow the kind of 'custom made' allegorical features which such a development process would suggest, we can be flexible enough to equate her to some extent with God himself (rather than considering her a hypostasis of God). And this would account for Lennart Boström's observation that

wisdom is the one who invites man into relationship with herself throughout the poem ... Only once in ch1.20-33 is God mentioned and then indirectly by means of an established idiom. Wisdom is endowed with her own authority to address and challenge man. God and wisdom are portrayed as nearly identical.¹¹

If Lady Wisdom is viewed as, in part, the antithesis of adulterous religion, one might also follow McKane in seeing in her an allusion to true religion:

If the cultic interpretation is taken seriously, the cult which is hinted at can only be the Jerusalem cult.¹²

This would provide a necessary bridge between an abstract ‘wisdom’ religion of morality and intellect, and the covenant faith of the rest of Scripture.

Whatever the validity or otherwise of these interpretations, we should not overlook the power of the descriptions themselves as a teaching tool. The purpose of the numerous figures of speech and graphic expressions in Proverbs 1-9, and especially our chapter, is

to draw the strongest possible contrast between the results of seeking wisdom and those of pursuing a life of folly.¹³

3 *The attractions of Lady Wisdom*

Having, then, discussed these preliminary matters, we are now in a better position to address the text itself, and consider our rival subjects in their own right. It is not unfair to describe Wisdom as ‘matronly’. There is a seriousness and even sternness about her, which might seem unattractive

because it makes us fear her when we compare our own simplicity and lack of judgement (v.4).

She approaches her enterprise with monumental deliberation. Even before she prepares her banquet she starts by building her house – and it is no temporary structure. Though the main intention of the seven pillars is to show its patrician spaciousness, there is no reason to exclude in the house an allusion to the divine number seven¹⁴, especially if we have in mind Lady Wisdom as an attribute of the LORD himself.

Careful preparation and richness are the keywords for the banquet as well (v.2):

...the reference to the rare luxury of meat is apt. Wisdom provides a princely feast and the wine is mixed with honey and spices.¹⁵

So Wisdom's banquet is both truly rich, and of solid quality. These qualities more than offset, at least to the one who considers things, the rather forbidding aspect of her character. Were the banquet merely wholesome, it might be tasteless. Were it merely rich, it might be indigestible. But since both foresight and resources have clearly been equally brought to bear in its preparation, it has the attraction that quality and truth inevitably bring.

The quality of her invitation also has a solid attractiveness. Her concern is the presentation of the banquet, not cheap marketing. She sends her maids as messengers to invite the guests, and their proclamation is open and public (rather than simply loud and intrusive, as Folly's seems to be in v.14). She wishes to advertise the message, not herself.

Like Folly, she invites the simple and those who lack judgement (v5), but not in order to leave them in their simplicity, but to have them leave it. The banquet is not merely to satisfy a passing appetite, but to bring about a permanent transformation. She calls to those who are not only simple, but dissatisfied with their simplicity, both bestowing and demanding the discipline of change.

At the heart of her invitation is the offer of life. This is a powerful attraction, because no one else even *claims* the ability to convey life, and nothing is more important than life. Only someone who hates himself would refuse such an offer.

Less obvious, but fundamental to her attraction, is the *motivation* for her preparation and invitation. She invites the simple, knowing they are simple, but not being simple herself (unlike Folly¹⁶). Her motive can be none other than grace – *hesed*:

This mysterious order in the world not only addresses man; it also loves him ... Here man throws himself with delight on a meaning which rushes towards him; he uncovers a mystery which was already on its way to him in order to give itself to him.¹⁷

4 *The attractions of Dame Folly*

In this very symmetrical chapter, Dame Folly is contrasted to Lady Wisdom in almost every particular. Whilst Wisdom is quietly and unobtrusively preparing her banquet, Folly is ‘loud; she is undisciplined and a simpleton.’ (v13).

She has the slipperiness of the quitter and the inveterate improviser.¹⁸

But by this we must understand that she is loud in a brazen, meretricious way. She draws attention to her charms in a way that Wisdom neither would nor could, and of course her attractiveness is instant, and transient.

Unlike wisdom she is her own publicity agent, advertising herself as she sits in her doorway. Unlike Wisdom, she is not making preparation inside because she has no preparation to make. She herself is the banquet – there is nothing solid behind her beauty, but in one sense she does not pretend there is. She holds out the prospect of instant pleasure.

Like Wisdom her offer is made to the simple, as if in parody – the implication is that folly is fun. Like both false pleasure and false religion, the most powerful part of her attraction is that she demands no change, only the indulgence of our shortcomings.

There is clear sexual allusion here – perhaps even the water of v17 hints at 5.15ff.¹⁹. She reveals in these verses that whatever pleasures lie within her house, she has had no honest part in their procurement. And paradoxically (though depressingly familiar in our daily lives), the fact that her banquet is stolen actually makes it more attractive. The metaphor works at several levels here. At one level, the Proverbs' frequent emphasis on the integrity of the household²⁰ is restated here as a warning on the superficial attraction of sexual sin. We are reminded that wisdom has social implications: our folly destroys our household as well as ourselves.

Then again perhaps, as we have previously examined, there is a reference to the seductiveness of false religion, religion that ignores the LORD and indeed steals from him his due glory.

But thirdly, and most generally, all the fruits of sin are shown to be as seductive, but as transient, as the pleasure offered by the easy woman familiar to any city dweller.

The final contrast between the two women's attractions is what Dame Folly does *not* advertise. Whereas Wisdom is keen to offer life to her hearers, Folly keeps silent about the end in store for those who succumb to her.

The death is physical as in the parallel passages (ch.2.18,5.5,7.27); the guests are morally dead, but that is not the contention here.²¹

So her offer is fundamentally unfair. She is apparently offering a reasonable alternative to the rather serious instructional dinner of Lady Wisdom, but its attractiveness is based on a fundamental – and crucial – misrepresentation.

5 *Application*

The pictures of the two rival feasts are separated by a section which shows that, in effect, the principal difference between them is those who respond to them. Though it has been argued that vv.7-12 have been interposed from elsewhere ('at a convenient point', 'by mistake'!) they in fact, by returning us to consider wisdom and folly in the abstract, show that a general meaning is intended by the parable. But they also challenge the reader who has worked through these first nine chapters to consider his own position,

the real feast being food for thought and, of course, for making ones decision about the Two Ways.²²

No doubt every young adult has been tempted to stray into the way of sexual immorality. Very few of those who have committed themselves to that way would have read this far. But for those who have seen and avoided, or escaped from, this obvious path to destruction, these verses show that the same two choices exist in general life. Everyone will be drawn in both directions in life; on the one hand towards the transient attractions of godlessness, and on the other towards the things of God which, in their heart of hearts, they know to be worthier and ultimately more rewarding.

This section shows that a choice must be made, and that the choice will both depend on, and form, the character. One is bound to end up in one of the two houses, and not only that, but to end up sharing the same nature as either Lady Wisdom or Dame Folly. Not only, then, is the reader asked to seek wisdom as an external characteristic (in fact a divine characteristic). He is asked to look inward to see the same characteristic within himself (as endowed by God), and to respond to that which comes from outside. This feast is prompted by love, and so requires love in return. The wisdom of God reaches out to save us from our folly, and we have the choice of responding wisely, rather than foolishly.

Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you

Love her, and she will watch over you. (Proverbs ch4.6)

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(2500 words)

References

- ¹ Whybray, 1965, p.13
- ² Walton, 1989, p.178f.
- ³ Pritchard, 1950, p.413
- ⁴ *ibid.*, p.421
- ⁵ 'It is surely correct to say that this remarkable allegorisation was developed by the teachers as a contrast to and a defence against customs...from the cult of the goddess of love, the goddess Astarte.' von Rad, 1972, p.167. This may not be the whole truth, but is true nonetheless.
- ⁶ La Sor, Hubbard *et al.*, 1996, p.461
- ⁷ Kitchen, 1960, p.5
- ⁸ Whybray, *op. cit.*, p.82
- ⁹ *ibid.*, p.83
- ¹⁰ Kidner, 1985, p.42
- ¹¹ Boström, 1990, p.142
- ¹² McKane, 1970, p.364
- ¹³ La Sor, *loc. cit.*
- ¹⁴ Whybray, *op. cit.*, p.91: 'Mythological interpretations are made obsolete by the discovery of Phoenician houses of the late third millennium'.
- ¹⁵ McKane, *op. cit.*, p.363
- ¹⁶ v.13 'without knowledge' (NIV) = *pethayyuth*, a simpleton.
- ¹⁷ von Rad, *op. cit.*, pp.166, 169
- ¹⁸ Kidner, *op. cit.*, p.21
- ¹⁹ Toy, 1904, p.190
- ²⁰ Clements, 1992, p.126ff.
- ²¹ Toy, *loc. cit.*
- ²² *loc. cit.*

