

## Proverbs 8: Wisdom Calls

June 21 2020

The scripture passage for today's lesson, Proverbs chapter 8, can be (and has been) titled "In Praise of Wisdom." That's also the title of the lesson on our book. This poem has Wisdom, personified, calling out for the hearers to follow the principles set forth, which will bring "riches" finer than gold. The most likely date for this particular section of Proverbs is quite likely after the exile. That supposed dating is based in part on the cohesive style of this whole chapter. Notice the contrast to Chapter 10, "The Proverbs of Solomon," which are a series of unconnected, separate, discrete proverbs. The other aspect that suggests a later composition is the highly developed personification of Wisdom, an indication of Hellenistic (Greek) influence.

Another thing to keep in mind as we read the scriptures is that we are reading an English translation, not the original Hebrew (Old Testament) or Greek (New Testament). English is distinct from many language in not assigning a grammatical "gender" to nouns. I'm not a language expert, but in many languages inanimate nouns have a property called "gender" that has nothing at all to do with sex. It's just a feature of the word. This is true in Latin and Greek. I'm not so sure about Hebrew. When I was in school, I studied Russian. In Russian, the word for "tablecloth" is feminine. So, if you happen to mention the tablecloth using a pronoun, the proper pronoun is "her" or "she". Even men's names, in diminutive form, such as "Sasha" or "Vanya," are feminine, and treated as feminine in grammar, with no implication for the understanding of the person's biological identity. It's just a feature of the language.

We don't have this in English. Traditionally if something is biologically "she" we use "she", or if male, "he", and if inanimate, "it". In English, an individual person of undetermined or unspecified sex gives us a grammatical problem, because, being a person, you can't use "it". Traditionally, "he" was used for such cases. Modern academics and theorists have tried to revolt against this tradition and, in at least to my mind, have made a bigger mess than what they found.

The reason I raise this point is that in Greek, wisdom is the Greek noun "sophia". It is a feminine noun, which means that, grammatically, it (that is, wisdom - notice I'm writing in English) is "she". When the Greek is translated, to

give the most accurate translation, “she” is used, and that’s because the Greeks (and Hebrews) took what was an abstract noun with female gender and “personified” it, that is, treated Wisdom as being a person, and since the word’s gender is feminine, a female person. Of course, the Greeks liked that word so much, that it also served as the still-popular name Sophia.

We do personify inanimate nouns in English too, but it’s more unusual. For example, we usually think of a ship as “she”. Even when the ship name is not particularly feminine. My ship was the *USS John King*. But the ship was still “she,” when referred to using a pronoun. Indeed, ships are often thought of as having a character beyond their inanimate components: attributes that seem to reflect a spirit within them, that has no logical or rational basis, other than the lives of the sailors who sailed them. Other personified abstractions like “Lady Liberty” and “Uncle Sam” are also common. The Hebrews, too, often used personification. Like the Greeks, they did so for wisdom. That reaches its greatest development in Chapters 8 and 9.

We saw this personification of Wisdom first in Chapter 1 (the Introduction to Proverbs), Verse 20: “Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice.” A note in the *Interpreter’s Bible* (vol. 4) says “The Hebrew form *hokhmoth*, found here and in 9:1; 14:1; 24:7; Ps. 49:4 (Heb.), is probably not a feminine plural but an abstract singular, corresponding to the Phoenician form of the word.” So, in Hebrew the form isn’t feminine here, but we still use “she” in translating Wisdom personified into English because “she” would be used in the Greek (which is the language of early Christianity and the Greek Septuagint) and as something speaking, in English, could not be “it”. (This was of course before we had speaking cars, cell-phones, etc.) Other forms for Wisdom in the Hebrew of Proverbs are likely feminine.

I guess the point of this perhaps too-long discussion is to emphasize that the ancients writing these words were not seeing things from our modern-day English perspective, and we need to be very careful not to read into their words a doctrine of a female consort to a male God, as is done by some in our day, as well as some in antiquity. We should not be worshiping a goddess, or a person of God, named “Sophia.” I might not have gotten into this matter but for the lesson book seemingly making an issue out of the feminine gender of “Wisdom.”

Verses 1-21 are an exhortation to follow wisdom. In verse 4 and following, Wisdom cries aloud, **“To you, O men, I call, and my cry is to the sons of men. ...”** What is written here is not so much wisdom itself, though, but about the “Value” of Wisdom. Hence the title given to the lesson and the Chapter itself. It is as if one asked, “OK, so what’s the payoff? Why should I pay attention to this ‘wisdom’ that you are going to expound on?” Wisdom personified gives her answer (simplified and paraphrased): “My wisdom is better than silver, better than choice gold, jewels, and all that you might desire.” So, what good is this wisdom that is better than gold? In verses 20 and 21, “I walk in the way of righteousness, in the paths of justice, endowing with wealth those who love me and filling their treasuries.”

So, if the payoff is better than jewels and gold etcetera, what exactly is it? Well, something endowing with wealth and filling your treasury. “Yeah, lady,” says the materialist, of ancient days or of today. “And what can I buy with that?” This is where we run into a roadblock in Proverbs, and some other places in the Old Testament. If we are unwilling to recognize that there are some things that are more precious than money can buy, we simply cannot be convinced that Wisdom is worthwhile. She calls to us in vain. Without God’s help, such a person simply can’t be reached through words or logic or reasoning.

Now, that is a step beyond the Deuteronomic idea that God blesses the righteous with material wealth and blessings, and curses the unrighteous with poverty, war and death. The idea is conveyed that righteousness and wisdom fills one’s life with blessings that are better than what the material world can provide. There is truth in that. Consider how “happy” the rich and the powerful celebrities, politicians, and other famous personalities actually seem to be. You can’t read the paper or the online news without seeing these people attacking each other. Sure, they look good posturing in luxurious settings or on red carpets in set-piece media propaganda. But when you look deeper, so many of them seem insecure, never satisfied, often bitter over perceived slights, and nervous over what others may say. That does not look like blessedness.

Jesus has more to say about this. But he turns the whole discussion upside-down. He approaches the same issue from a radically different perspective: (Matthew 5: 3-12)

**“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

**“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.**

**“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.**

**“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.**

**“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.**

**“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.**

**“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.**

**“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”**

Instead of talking about wisdom abstractly, Jesus says that these people, even those poor and downtrodden and persecuted, people who are living lives of practical wisdom, are blessed. They can receive these blessings because of the wisdom by which they live their lives despite, even because, they do NOT have the silver, the fine gold, the jewels, and the other signs of wealth and prosperity. They can receive these blessings because they understand what it means to be without. They can accept their dependence on God, and no longer feel like they have to make everything happen on their own. They are able to receive blessings that the rich and powerful cannot.

The next section of Proverbs Chapter 8, verses 22 to 31, describes Wisdom (personified) as being God’s first creation (even before Genesis 1). Wisdom is with God as he creates the heavens and the Earth, and all that is in it. Notice how verses 23 to 31 parallel Genesis 1. As our lesson writer notes, it is remarkably similar to the introduction to the Gospel of John:

**“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What came into being in him was life. And the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”** (John 1:1-5)

John identifies “the Word” as being Jesus Christ. As believers in “The Trinity” we understand this difficult concept by considering God to be three “persons,” the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (or, more traditionally, the Holy

Ghost). So where does this “Sophia” come in, this Wisdom, that is also supposed (by Proverbs 8) to be there at the creation too? So, does that make God a Quadrinity? When we ask such questions, we show the limitations of ourselves as human beings. We are but creatures of the Creation, bounded by our marvelous but limited minds. We are limited to using the imperfect tools of language to communicate and express truths that are too deep for us. It took the Church about 300 years, to the Council of Nicaea, to accept the doctrine of the trinity, that God is in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. The Nicene Creed was the result of this conference. It’s a difficult concept. This was the best we could do as humans, as Christians, at expressing a truth that is bigger than we can understand. Yes, Wisdom was left out. Or, does this personified Wisdom somehow equate to the Holy Ghost, another aspect of God that is difficult to pin down in concrete terms? The Comforter that Jesus promises his Disciples? We really can’t say. Our best course is to sing the Doxology, accepting that there remain things beyond our grasp. “We see in a glass but dimly.”

Verses 32 to 36 is a conclusion or summary, again, recommending the ways of wisdom, and warning of the dangers without. Chapter 9 is a further poem about personified Wisdom, inviting those who are receptive in to her house, as to a banquet. It is reminiscent of Jesus’s proverb of the great banquet. That’s coming up for next week, June 28. (I believe the plan is to have a Church service that day again! I don’t know whether we will be allowed to meet for Bible Study. I’m going to plan to send out something like this supplement for next week. After that, we’ll see.)

Our prayer from the lesson book: *“Holy One, you call us to listen and to learn. Challenge us to deepen our faith, to grow in understanding, and to gain the wealth of spirit that is true wisdom. Amen.”*