

The Spirit in Creation

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the forerunner of his prodigies of long ago;*
²³ *From of old I was poured forth,
at the first, before the earth.*
²⁴ *When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no fountains or springs of water;*
²⁵ *Before the mountains were settled into place,
before the hills, I was brought forth;*
²⁶ *While as yet the earth and the fields were not made,
nor the first clods of the world.*
²⁷ *“When he established the heavens I was there,
when he marked out the vault over the face of the deep;*
²⁸ *When he made firm the skies above,
when he fixed fast the foundations of the earth;*
²⁹ *When he set for the sea its limit,
so that the waters should not transgress his command;*
³⁰ *Then was I beside him as his craftsman,
and I was his delight day by day,
Playing before him all the while,*
³¹ *playing on the surface of his earth;
and I found delight in the sons of men.*
³² *“So now, O children, listen to me;*
³³ *instruction and wisdom do not reject!*
*Happy the man who obeys me,
and happy those who keep my ways,*
³⁴ *Happy the man watching daily at my gates,
waiting at my doorposts;*
³⁵ *For he who finds me finds life,
and wins favor from the LORD;*
³⁶ *But he who misses me harms himself;
all who hate me love death.”* (Proverbs 8:22–36)

Context – An Overview of the Book of Proverbs

(adapted from the Reading Guide by Rev. Donald Senior in “Catholic Study Bible”)

I would typically provide some insight to the upcoming Gospel, but this passage of The *Book of Proverbs* is captivating and so I thought perhaps we might look at the first reading for the upcoming Trinity Sunday.

Composition. *Proverbs* is an compendium of collections of sayings and instructions. Many of the sayings and perhaps some instructions were composed during the era of the kings of Judah and Israel. (late eleventh to the early sixth centuries BCE). Most scholars believe the book reached final compilation and written form in the period immediately after the Exile in Babylon – when chapters 10-31 were “pulled together – and chapters 1–9 were added as the introduction. There is a verse (25:1) that suggests the materials could be traced to King Solomon and the scribes of the royal court: “*These also are proverbs of Solomon. The servants of Hezekiah, king of Judah, transmitted them.*” This perhaps refers to the task of compiling what seems to have its roots in the traditions of the tribes of Israel. The origin of the material, however, need not be imagined in an either/or scenario. Folk wisdom could have well be taken up and re-

expressed by royal scribes. In any case *Proverbs* wins over readers with its compelling portrait of wisdom and inviting them to see life afresh, “wisely,” through its wit, originality, and shrewd observation.

Purpose. The primary purpose of the book is to teach wisdom and to young and old alike: “*That people may know wisdom and discipline, may understand intelligent sayings; May receive instruction in wise conduct, in what is right, just and fair; That resourcefulness may be imparted to the naive, knowledge and discretion to the young. The wise by hearing them will advance in learning, the intelligent will gain sound guidance.*” (1:2-4) What is being taught is not theoretical knowledge but practical expertise. Jewelers who cut precious stones were wise; kings who made their dominion peaceful and prosperous were wise. One could be wise in daily life, too, in knowing how have a prosperous household while living a long and healthy life without trouble in God’s universe. Ultimately wisdom, or “*sound guidance*” (1:5), aims at the formation of Godly character.

Wisdom. In the ancient Near East (ANE), people assumed that wisdom belonged to the gods, who were wise by reason of their divinity; human beings needed to have wisdom granted them by the gods. Many of the “beginning of the world” accounts found in surrounding ANE cultures depict creation in two stages. In the first stage, human beings lived an animal-like existence, without clothes, writing, or kingship (seen as proper governance). Over time, the gods came to realize that such a low grade of existence made the human race inadequate as their servants, so they endowed the race with “wisdom,” which consisted of culture (e.g., kingship) and crafts (e.g., knowledge of farming, ability to weave). Such wisdom elevated the race to a “human” level and made them effective servants of the gods. Furthermore, divine wisdom was mediated to human beings through earthly institutions—the king, scribes (who produced wise writings), and heads of families (fathers, sometimes mothers). These traditional mediators appear in *Proverbs* – in fact, the book is credited to King Solomon. Throughout the book kings are mentioned as pillars of society (e.g., 16:12–15); writings are a source of wisdom (1:1–7); the father instructing his son is the major paradigm of teaching. *Proverbs* differs, however, from other wisdom books in concentrating on wisdom itself, treating it as a virtually independent entity and personifying it as an attractive woman. Other books urge readers to perform wise acts, but *Proverbs* urges them to seek wisdom itself and portrays wisdom as a woman seeking human beings as disciples and companions.

Audience. The original audience of the instructions and sayings seems to have been male. The father addresses his son, marriage is finding a wife, success often is serving the king or farming effectively. The book itself, however, expands the traditional audience of youths (1:4) to include older, more experienced, people (1:5). It broadens the father-son language by mentioning the mother, and incorporates sayings on human experience generally. The father teaching his son becomes a model for anyone teaching a way of life to another person.

Structure. The Book of *Proverbs* has nine sections:

Title and Introduction (1:1–7)

Instructions of Parents and of Woman Wisdom (1:8–9:18)

First Collection of King Solomon Sayings (10:1–22:16)

Sayings of the Wise (22:17–24:22)

Further Sayings of the Wise (24:23–34)

Second Collection of King Solomon Sayings, Collected Under King Hezekiah (25:1–29:27)

Sayings of Agur and Others (30:1–33)

Sayings of King Lemuel (31:1–9)

Poem on the Woman of Worth (31:10–31)

Chapters 1–9 introduce the book, drawing attention to wisdom itself and its inherent value rather than exhorting to particular wise actions. The chapters personify wisdom as a woman and draw an extended analogy between finding a wife, or founding and maintaining a house(hold), and finding wisdom. The

collections following chap. 9 consist largely of independent, two-line sayings, yielding their often indirect or paradoxical meaning only to readers willing to ponder them. To reflect on the sayings is perhaps what chapters 1–9 mean by living with Wisdom and dwelling in her house.

Part II is judged by many scholars to contain ten instructions (1:8–19; chap. 2; 3:1–12, 21–35; 4:1–9, 10–19, 20–27; chap. 5; 6:20–35; chap. 7), three wisdom poems (1:20–33; chap. 8; 9:1–6 + 11, 13–18), and two interludes (3:13–20; 6:1–19).

Place in Our Tradition. The Book of Proverbs can make an important contribution to Christians and Jews today.

- First, it places the pursuit of wisdom over the performance of individual wise acts. To seek wisdom above all things is a fundamental option and a way of life.
- Second, it portrays the quest as filled with obstacles. There are men and women who offer a substitute for the real thing; discernment is required.
- Third, the book teaches that acquiring wisdom is both a human task and a divine gift. One can make oneself ready to receive by discipline, but one cannot take so divine a gift.
- Fourth, wisdom is in the world but it is not obvious to people entirely caught up with daily activities. The instructions and the aphorisms of the book can free the mind to see new things. Christians will see in personified Wisdom aspects of Jesus Christ, who they believe is divine wisdom sent to give human beings true and full life.
- Yet there is a universal dimension to Proverbs, for in its attention to human experience it creates a link to all people of good will.

The genres and themes of *Proverbs* continued on in Sirach, *Wisdom of Solomon*, and the later Pirke Abot (The Sayings of the Fathers), a treatise in the Mishnah, which became the object of commentary in Abot de Rabbi Nathan. The New Testament saw Jesus as a wisdom teacher and employed the tradition of personified wisdom of chaps. 2 and 8 to express his incarnation. The *Letter of James* is an instruction resembling those in Proverbs. Wisdom traditions influenced the *Gospels of Matthew* and *Luke* through a common source (see, e.g., Mt 11:25–27 and Lk 10:21–22, which seem to derive their father-son language, at least in part, from the parental language of Proverbs). The *Gospel of John* regards Jesus as incarnate wisdom descended from on high to offer human beings life and truth and make disciples of them, a view largely reflected in Proverbs 1–9. In later Judaism, Hebrew ethical wills, in which parents hand on to their children their wisdom, borrowed from the genre of instruction.

Commentary

Many commentaries refer to 8:22–31 as a celebration of Wisdom even in the primordial. It is as though the scribes are saying, “Look, we are only celebrating in our day, what the Lord has provided for us since the dawn of creation.” This shift of focus is marked by the change from “I” (vv. 12, 17) to *the LORD* (vv. 22–31). The section begins with “*the LORD*” and ends with *b^e nê ’ādām* (“*I found delight in the sons of men*”), the climax and aim of God’s creative works.

This section, unified thematically by wisdom’s connection with God’s creative works, falls into two equal stanzas. The first pertains to her origin before creation (vv. 22–26); the second, to her presence and celebration during the creation (vv. 27–31). These two halves are linked by a thematic chiasm:

- A, wisdom’s origins (vv. 22–23);
- B, the negative state of the creation (vv. 24–26);
- B’, positive presentation of the creation (vv. 27–29);
- A’, wisdom’s celebration of humanity’s origins (vv. 30–31).

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nor the first clods of the world.*

The first stanza establishes that wisdom’s has precedence in rank and dignity over the rest of the creation. Wisdom’s precedence is both qualitative (i.e., begotten, not created) and temporal (i.e., existing “before” any other creature). As a result she is competent to counsel and authoritative when she speaks. The stanza’s first strophe represents Wisdom’s begetting in the primordial past (vv. 22–23), and its second strophe represents her begetting before the sea (v. 24), land (vv. 25–26), and implicitly sky (v. 27).

Begotten, Not Created. The language of “begetting,” “created,” and the like has, historically, been the source of great controversies. Beginning at least as early as the apologist Justin Martyr (A.D. 125), Christians, almost without exception, identified Sophia/Wisdom in Proverbs 8 with Jesus Christ. This almost universal interpretation of the passage embroiled the church in controversy about the precise nature of the relationship between God and Christ. From the time of Origen (ca. A.D. 180) patristic exegesis interpreted Wisdom’s birth in Proverbs 8:25 as Christ’s continual coming into existence. Not all agreed with such understanding. Led by the Alexandrian deacon Arius, a group called the Arians held that there was a time when the Son “was not” and thus the Son was created as God’s most exalted creature. They concluded this using Prov. 8:22, “the LORD begot/created me,” as their primary text. In contrast, orthodox Christians held that Christ was of the same substance as the Father, the true Son of God, and not a creature. Orthodoxy interpreted Prov. 8:22 by explaining that the ever-existing Son was “created” when he became incarnate. According to his second strategy, the “creation of Wisdom was actually the creation of Wisdom’s image in creatures as they were brought into being.”

Before all else. The expression “*the first born*” (*rē’šît*) can also be translated as “in the beginning” which has appeal to the Christian ear given the Prologue of the Gospel of John. Verses 22-25 point to Wisdom (*Sophia*) as perhaps the agent or creative force of all creation. The creation is first described a “what there was not” – depths, fountains, mountains, hills, and fields

Many have noted the movement from the subterranean depth (v. 24a) to the springs leading to the surface (v. 24b) to the visible mountains rooted in the depths (v. 25a) to the hills (v. 25b) to the land and its fields (v. 26) to the sky and its horizon (v. 27). Sea, land, and sky depict the entire universe of the living. All of this is described with reference to human habitation: from the oceans, which is most remote (v. 24), to mountains, which is less remote (v. 25), and climactically to land, where human beings dwell (v. 26). The latter is progressively intensified from “land” to “open fields” to “arable soil.”

An Order from Chaos

- ²⁷ *“When he established the heavens I was there,
when he marked out the vault over the face of the deep;*
²⁸ *When he made firm the skies above,
when he fixed fast the foundations of the earth;*
²⁹ *When he set for the sea its limit,
so that the waters should not transgress his command;*
³⁰ *Then was I beside him as his craftsman,
and I was his delight day by day,*

*Playing before him all the while,
³¹ playing on the surface of his earth;
 and I found delight in the sons of men.*

Contextually, in contrast to vv. 22-26, which presented the panorama of the LORD's creative actions in a movement from below to above, vv. 27–29 present them in the reverse direction, moving from the heavens (v. 27a) and its horizon (v. 27b) to the sky and clouds (v. 28a) downward to the fountains of the deep (v. 28b) and the seashores (v. 29b) and finally to the foundations of the earth (v. 29b). Thematically, Wisdom represents the LORD as firmly establishing the cosmic entities that both sustain and threaten human existence. In both section (vv. 24–27 and 27–29), however, the earth as the realm of human life is the aim of the presentation. All the metaphors for creation in vv. 27–29 signify that each of the cosmic entities on which human life depends are so firmly fixed within the created order that they cannot overreach themselves or be transgressed by another. Were it otherwise, the cosmos would crumble into chaos. Humanity's physical existence depends on a firmly structured universe. The LORD's fixed created order serves as a model of his fixed moral boundaries for human beings to prevent society from collapsing into anarchy.

Wisdom's Role. The previous verses' "*I was there*" gives way to a more intimate description: "*I was beside...*" underscoring Wisdom's pre-existence to the creation and her close proximity to the Creator at the time.

*³⁰ Then was I beside him as his craftsman,
 and I was his delight day by day,
 Playing before him all the while,
³¹ playing on the surface of his earth;
 and I found delight in the sons of men.*

Wisdom is again referred to it her creative capacity as "*craftsman*" – but is a trade that is anything but laborious, but rather joyful, leading to delight.

Notes

Prov 8:22 *The LORD begot me*: the Hebrew *qānānî* is variously translated as "brought forth," "begot," and "created." The meaning of brought me forth (*qānānî*) has been hotly debated since the Arian heresy. Three interpretations merit consideration. Some scholars contend that *qānâ* means "to acquire or possess," for good reasons.

- This is its meaning in the other occurrences in Proverb and more specifically in connection with acquiring wisdom/knowledge/truth (1:5; 4:5, 7 [2x]; 16:16 [2x]; 17:16; 18:15; 23:23) or of acquiring sense (15:32; 19:8), and once in a commercial sense (20:14).
- It is the normal use of *qānâ* in the rest of the Old Testament.
- Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion, beginning a translational tradition that was continued by the Vulgate so interpreted it.
- This interpretation best harmonizes with the statement in Job 28:27 that God discovered wisdom, not that he created it.

The second interpretation, however, "to create," has wider acceptance

- This is a better meaning of *qnh* than "possess" in at least Deut. 32:6 and Ps. 139:13, and probably so in Gen. 4:1; 14:19, 22.
- It better suits the other verbs in Prov. 8:22–26 that speak of Wisdom as coming into existence.

- The LXX, Targumin, and Syriac rendered *qnh* “create.”
- Its derivative *qinyān* in Ps. 104:24 most probably means “creatures,” for its parallel is *ma‘aśeyka* (“your works”). More precisely, however, *qnh* probably means “to beget,” “to bring forth,” in Prov. 8:22. Procreation is not the same as creation.
- In Gen. 4:1 *qānā* has a biological sense, “be parent of.” A birth context, and so a similar sense, is also found in Deut. 32:6, where God is compared to a begetting Father, and in Ps. 139:13 (cf. Exod. 15:16; Ps. 74:2).¹⁰³

Sources

Waltke, Bruce K. The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 1–15. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004. Print. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament.