

The City Square and the Home: Wisdom's World

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The wisdom literature of the Old Testament offers a vision of harmonious community, of mature and wise living, and of communion with the earth, with one another, and with the Creator. The title "wisdom literature" does not refer to a canonical grouping of biblical books but to a variety of texts found among the writings that share a similar outlook on life. These books include Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs.¹ The poetic and theological ground of these books is the earth itself. Current rebirth of interest in the wisdom literature arises, in part, from its earth-boundedness.²

The wisdom books contain an implicit spirituality that challenges our alienating individualism, our escapism and consumerism, and our sinful lack of hospitality to those different from us. For Christian communities in middle-class society in the United States today, wisdom's vision critiques our way of life by creating an imaginative alternative view of the world that calls us to into communion with creation and with the Creator.

In comparison to the other Old Testament books such as the pentateuch or the prophets, the wisdom literature presents a "theology from below," that is, a theology that focuses on human life rather than on divine action or revealed word (theology from above).³ Absent from the wisdom books is language of prophetic word, divine judgment, or torah. Wisdom has little interest in formal worship, the temple, or priestly matters. Wisdom avoids language of covenant, description of wars, and affairs of the nation. There are few heroes in wisdom nor references to Israel as a "chosen" people. Instead, wisdom prefers, indeed, revels in, ordinary human life in its daily-ness, its joys and its doubts, its ambiguity and its pain.

This is not to say that wisdom books avoid speaking about God, but when they do, it is in terms that emerge primarily from human life. The book of Job, for example, is a profound theological work, but its theological issues arise not from revelation but from the horrible tragedies that befall Job. Of course, wisdom's interests in daily life and in the world of creation are not absent from other books of the Old Testament,⁴ but wisdom starts there.

Wisdom's earthy interests are themselves refreshing. They remind us that divine human relationship cannot be contained within one theological framework or worldview. But there is more at stake in this vision for it stands in sharp contrast to the escapism from daily life encouraged in our passive video culture. Where we often avoid the mundane and devalue the daily, bodily, and social activities that make life human, the wisdom books urge us to engage life, to face it, and to recognize its sacredness.⁵ Two metaphors, the city square and the harmonious home, appear in the book of Proverbs that help to explore this orientation of the wisdom literature. Both metaphors potentially transform the world.

The City Square

Although the metaphor of the city square occurs infrequently in the book of Proverbs (1:20 and 8:2, and see 9:3), this urban image captures wisdom's

earthboundness and its fascination with the daily-ness of things. In the book of Proverbs, the sacred place, the hallowed sphere, is daily life. There, in the arena of routine and ordinariness, one meets personified Wisdom and encounters the divine. In Proverbs and in the wisdom books in general, the place to worship God is not the domain of kings, the world of warriors, nor the temples of priests. One meets the divine in ordinary life, represented as a city square or an open marketplace.⁶

In the ancient world, as in parts of the contemporary world, the city square, the street corner, and the gates of the town throbbed with life. They were the centers of social interaction and human exchange. Often, city squares were sites of open market places where people would come daily to purchase food, to exchange gossip, to make a living by buying and selling the necessities of human existence. At the city gates, people gathered to settle legal and political matters with the elders and judges of the town. When personified Wisdom invites listeners to follow her, it is in such places that she stands.

Wisdom cries out in the street;
in the squares she raises her voice.
At the busiest corner she cries out;
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
“How long, O simple ones will
you love being simple? (Proverbs 1:20-22a)

It is at the “crossroads” of life (9:2), “in the street,” in “the city square,” “at the gates in front of the town” (Proverbs 1:20, and see 8:2 and 9:3), where Wisdom invites her listeners to follow her. The poet of Proverbs is at pains to set her in these places for her locale is critical. Wisdom’s presence in the city square and its parallel locations sets her in the thick of human interaction in its mundaneness and deceit, in its triumph and ambiguity. Within this ordinary, chaotic, and ambiguous world, personified Wisdom invites human beings to become wise, to choose life, and to enter into right relationships with all the world and with Wisdom herself. Escape from boredom, tedium, from cooking, cleaning, clothing people, from the domestic and business responsibilities will not do. The holy place is here.

The location of Wisdom’s invitation in the city square is important for another reason as well. The city square signifies the breadth and prodigality of Wisdom’s invitation. It is for everyone. Wisdom stands in the marketplaces and city squares precisely to make sure her call misses no one. Wisdom yells out her invitation. She “shouts,” “calls out,” “raises her voice” (1:20 and see 8:2 and 9:3) to get attention. The repetition of the verbs of invitation in this poem stresses the urgency of Wisdom’s call. She wants to be heard above the din of life, and she wants to be heard by everyone.⁷

Wisdom’s call is startlingly all-embracing. Her addressees are “the simple,” that is, all who are not yet wise (Prov 1:22, 1:32; 8:5; 9:4). Since only Wisdom herself is truly wise, her call is for all who will listen. The people to whom she appeals, therefore, is not a narrowly defined group, not the pious, nor the sinless, nor even the elect nation of Israel, but “the simple” anyone in the squares of the city or at the “crossroads” (Prov 8:2) of the world.

This comprehensive invitation is global in its reach, and it gives the wisdom books an outward direction beyond the chosen community of Israel. Such a vision sharply

contradicts the practices of society and church that exclude people and divide them from one another on false criteria like race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Wisdom's community includes the foreigner, the widow, the orphan, the rich, the poor, the thief, and the sinner. Everyone is invited to put aside simpleness and to become wise.

To be wise means a variety of things in the wisdom literature.⁸ In the collections of sayings found in Proverbs 10-31, to be wise involves all the skills needed for surviving and thriving in the streets, that is, in daily life. Readers can learn the importance of cleverness (13:16), how to exercise prudent judgment (27:12), when to lend money (22:9), how to speak well (14:3), and how to live in right relationship during the course of daily life (21:13). Relationships with parents, siblings, extended family, with neighbors, and even with the self are the subjects of the sayings collected in Prov 10-31.

What seems important for modern readers here is less the precise instructions given by individual sayings than the vision implied by these instructions. Proverbs 10-30 is a storehouse of wise sayings that requires a series of wise decisions, prudent judgments, and just choices from morning till night. They require a contemplative alertness to the people and the world around one. They suggest that each moment matters and that every activity, no matter how banal or conflictual, can be an expression of wise and mature living. They teach the sacredness of the simplest of human endeavors, and they encourage the believers to live every moment wisely, consciously, in the "fear of God." Proverbs 10-30 might be considered a guidebook for flourishing and worshipping in the city square.

The Home

In the poems in Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31, texts that theologically frame the sayings in chapters 10-30, the acquisition of wisdom is imagined somewhat differently. Rather than involving a series of choices wisely executed in all one's behavior, these chapters understand the gaining of wisdom as a once and for all commitment. To be wise in chapters 1-9 means to offer total and loving allegiance to a person. Ultimately, in these poems to be wise means to set up a home with and to dwell in the company of personified Wisdom herself.

These chapters present the acquisition of wisdom as a major, once in a lifetime decision, portrayed in the text as a young man's choice of a marriage partner. In chapters 1-9, he must choose between two women, Stranger Woman (chapters 5, 7 and 9:13-18) and Wisdom Woman (1:20-33; 3:13-18; 4:5-9; 8:1-9; and 31:10-31). Stranger Woman represents all that is bad, Wisdom Woman all that is good. One is the path to death, the other the way to life. Both women pursue him, wait outside his house, look for him in the streets. He must make the right choice or die.

Women and men cannot read this literature uncritically today in our gender charged world, since the text assumes a male audience and the portrayal of women and men is dangerously stereotypical.⁹ Carol Newsom has discussed the profound conservative tendencies of Proverbs 1-9 and cautions us not to adopt uncritically the patriarchal notions of submission and blind obedience inherent in this vision.¹⁰ The text, nonetheless, presents us with a dramatic understanding of personified Wisdom that can be reinterpreted for our times, for metaphors and symbols are always capable of new interpretation.¹¹ In Proverbs 1-9, relationship with personified Wisdom also

symbolizes life lived in mutuality and justice, and in harmony with the earth and all its creatures.

Though Wisdom proffers her invitation in the city squares, her purpose is to bring people into her home (9:1-6), and to dwell with them there (31:10-31). In the ancient world, the home represented the space of women, children, and men, the place of intimate domestic life, the center of instruction, a place of safety and protection.¹² The proverbial sayings collected in Proverbs 10-30 undoubtedly had their origins in the family home and among the elders in the village even though the book itself was organized and expanded by educated and elite courtiers.¹³

In Proverbs 9 Wisdom herself builds a home of mysterious and grand proportions, and to it she invites a huge and sprawling family.

Wisdom has built her house,
she has hewn her seven pillars,
She has slaughtered her animals,
she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table.
She has sent out her servant-girls,
she calls from the highest places in the town,
“You that are simple, turn in here!”
To those without sense she says,
“Come, eat of my bread and
drink of the wine I have mixed.
Lay aside immaturity and live,
and walk in the way of insight” (Proverbs 9:1-6).

Wisdom’s home is a many-storied poetic symbol. Some interpreters say it is merely the home of a rich woman who opens the doors to invite in poor and the foolish to share in her plenty. Others suggest, because Israel’s temple was fronted with pillars, that wisdom’s home signifies the temple. Still others believe, because the earth itself was thought to rest upon pillars and is figured elsewhere as a house, that wisdom’s home is the earth itself.¹⁴ But it is the nature of poetry, to create a world of imagination by suggestion and nuance, so it is probable that Wisdom’s home combines all three allusions. If so, Wisdom’s home is the earth imagined as a temple, as the dwelling place of the Creator, and as a place of joyous feasting for all who come.

In her home Wisdom sets a table, kills a fatted animal, and serves bread and wine. Her feast is a sumptuous banquet that challenges us by its rich generosity and by its foolish inclusiveness. The very familiarity and potency of this metaphorical banquet in Wisdom’s home presses us to ask her identity. Who is this woman?

At the very least Wisdom is the emissary, agent, and darling child of the Creator (Prov 8:30).¹⁵ Or she is a divine force acquired by God and appropriated in his act of creation.¹⁶ Or she is merely a literary device that exalts the feminine presence.¹⁷ Or she is a metaphor that names God in terms borrowed from the wisdom religions around Israel.¹⁸ However one interprets this puzzling literary being, she represents God in these texts either directly or indirectly. The consequence is the same. To live with her is to live with God. This is our true home.

Consequently, Wisdom’s invitation to her home is a call to all believers to join with her in mutual and loving relations (Prov 4:5-9), and to enter into relationships of

mutuality and love with the Creator, the earth and its inhabitants (Prov 8:22-31). Life in Wisdom's home is not characterized by domination and subordination but by mutuality and loving respect among all its members of the new and eclectic family (Prov 31:10-31). To dwell in Wisdom's home is a highly contemplative way of being in the world, for it unites the believer with the fashioner, the host, and the builder of the home. To live with her means to give her absolute allegiance (Prov 1:23, 24, 32; 3:18; 8:34-35), for she "is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare to her" (8:11).

On the other hand, Wisdom's home functions as a prophetic challenge to us and our cultural assumptions. The earth as Wisdom's home with its banquet table spread for all peoples exists only as an eschatological hope and a utopic dream. Our nation devours up more than our share of the world's resources; the earth itself dwindles and grows barren from our carelessness and greed; our nation is torn by racism and poverty in a time of shrinking budgets and mean-spirited trampling of the poor. Churches are divided among themselves and fight furiously within themselves to keep others away from the table.

Yet Wisdom's home, her table, and her invitation in the city squares to the "simple" of the globe reappears in the New Testament in the teachings and actions of Jesus.¹⁹ Like Wisdom, Jesus teaches the gracious goodness of God in parables about meals and banquets. And Jesus, declared to be a glutton and a drunkard, reveals the rule of God by dining with tax collectors and sinners, with the outcast and the despised. Wisdom's home and her invitation in the marketplaces of the city reappear in the New Testament and continue to call us into communion with the Creator and all the creatures of the earth.

Notes

¹ The wisdom books also include the apocryphal works, Wisdom of Solomon and Jesus ben Sirach, considered by Orthodox and Roman Catholic communions to be deuterocanonical.

² See, for example, Ronald E. Clements, *Wisdom in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1992); Denis Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995); Leo G. Perdue et al., eds., *In Search of Wisdom: Essays in Memory of John G. Gammie*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

³ Roland E. Murphy, ["Wisdom: Theses and Hypotheses," *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien*, ed. John G. Gammie, et al. (New York: Union Theological Seminary, 1978), 35-42; and "Wisdom and Creation: *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 104/1 (1985): 3-11] calls these books, "theological anthropology."

⁴ Carole Fontaine, "Wisdom in Proverbs," *In Search of Wisdom*, 111-112.

⁵ Carole Fontaine, "Proverbs," *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 146-47.

⁶ Kathleen M. O'Connor, *The Wisdom Literature* (Michael Glazier; Message of Biblical Spirituality 5; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1988), 13-22.

⁷ Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Wisdom Literature and Experience of the Divine," *Biblical Theology: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. Steven Kraftchick, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 186.

⁸ For further reflection on the multiple meanings of wisdom in the Old Testament see Anthony R. Ceresko, "The Function of 'Order' (*Sedeq*) and 'Creation' in the Book of Proverbs, With Some Implications for Today," *Indian Theological Studies* 32 (1995): 208-36; Fontaine, "Wisdom in Proverbs," 99-114; and Ronald E. Clements, *Wisdom in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1992).

⁹ Cf., O'Connor, *Wisdom Literature*, 59-85.

¹⁰ Carol Newsom, "Women and the Discourse of Patriarchal Difference: A Study of Proverbs 1-9," *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy Day (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 42-59.

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multidisciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (Toronto/Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1975); and Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Meaning* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985).

¹² Claudia V. Camp [*Wisdom and the Feminine In the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: Almond, 1985)] describes the increased importance of the home and the heightened role of women in

Post-Exilic Israel when the book of Proverbs gained its final form. During that time, king and temple disappeared to be replaced by the home as the center of religious and cultural life. See also Ceresko, "The Function of "Order," 232, and Clements, "Wisdom and the Household," in *Wisdom in Theology*, 123-45.

¹³ See recent discussions of the origins of Proverbs in W. Sibley Towner, "Proverbs and Its Successors," *Old Testament Interpretation: Past Present and Future*, ed. James Luther Mays, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 157-76; Lester Grabbe, *Priests Prophets, Diviners and Sages: A Socio-historical Study of Religious Specialists in Ancient Israel* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1995), 168-76; Fontaine, "Wisdom in Proverbs," 100-108.

¹⁴ See R. N. Whybray, [*Proverbs* (The New Century Bible Commentary; Wm B. Eerdmans/Marshall Pickering, 1995), 142-43] for a summary of positions and O'Connor, ["Wisdom Literature and Experience of the Divine," 194] for further support for the view offered here.

¹⁵ Gale A. Yee, "The Theology of Creation in Proverbs 8:22-31," *Creation in the Biblical Traditions*, ed. R. Clifford and J. J. Collins (Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 24; Washington D. C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1992), 85-96.

¹⁶ Fontaine, "Wisdom in Proverbs," 113-14.

¹⁷ Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*.

¹⁸ O'Connor, "Wisdom Literature and the Experience of the Divine," 187-95.

¹⁹ O'Connor, "Wisdom in the New Testament," *The Wisdom Literature*, 185-92; Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child and Sophia's Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1994).