



Following the Science with Lady Wisdom

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“Follow the science, follow the science!” This terse phrase has been the battle cry of our worldwide COVID-19 response—a soundbite that epitomizes the modernist spirit of empirical knowledge in all its promise—three little words that seem to have power within themselves! If society would just “follow the science,” rather than following misinformation and myths, it could then safely embark upon the road to healing. And it seemed that simply uttering those three words provided the answer to our crisis. After all, it was obvious: Who could possibly be opposed to science? Only Neanderthals could protest.

And yet, as we’ve discovered, “following the science” wasn’t so easy, and it has led us down a long and winding road.

First, we were told that masks would only spread the disease more quickly, as we would touch our faces more often. Later, we were instructed that masks would not cause such a problem at all; rather, they were an effective, indispensable, and eventually mandatory means of preventing contagion.

Secondly, we were told that shutting down schools and businesses and quarantining at home were the only means available to “flatten the curve” and prevent our hospital intensive care units from being overwhelmed with critically ill patients. But we soon learned the cost of these shutdowns—rising mental illness

The wisdom tradition in the Bible is an important voice for our contemporary world in dealing with the moral and ethical issues of our day. So what is the relation of wisdom to our modern understanding and use of science? What can we learn from the wisdom tradition as we make scientific and technological decisions that affect our contemporary societies?

diagnoses, suicides, drug overdoses, not to mention economic crisis, hunger, and homelessness.

Finally, we were told that vaccines would be developed at “warp speed,” and once everyone was vaccinated, then we could get back to normal. But we soon learned that even with a vaccination, masks would still be required, because a chance (albeit a lower chance) of infection would remain, and the disease could be spread even by a vaccinated person.

Indeed, during this modern plague, the word *science* was used almost interchangeably with the word *wisdom*. If we could simply “follow science,” we would be able to make “wise” decisions, thereby protecting public health and allowing us to push through the crisis with a minimal loss of life. But in seeking answers in science, wisdom appeared ever more elusive—a mirage, one that when *almost* reached simply vanished from sight.

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THE SEARCH FOR WISDOM IN PROVERBS

Of course, the quest for wisdom is nothing new: it is a recurring theme throughout biblical literature, especially in Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes.¹ Of these, Proverbs is probably the most concentrated study on the topic, with its author traditionally believed to be King Solomon, the wisest man of his time,² although other authors and redactors have been posited.

In Proverbs, we see wisdom personified in the figure of Lady Wisdom, who is introduced in chapter 1. Wisdom is then discussed throughout the next six chapters in a nonpersonified form, but then reappears as Lady Wisdom in chapter 8, and also in chapter 9, where she is contrasted with her opposite, Lady Folly.³

I have decided to employ the archaic moniker “Lady Wisdom,” even though many other commentators have rejected the term, understandably preferring “Woman Wisdom” or merely “Wisdom” to conform to today’s sensibilities about the full inclusion of women in society. But sadly, this renaming of Lady Wisdom denies her the honor that is her due. She is a “lady” in the same sense that an

¹ R. N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 79.

² See 1 Kgs 4:30 (ESV): “so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt.”

³ See Prov 4:6–9 and 7:4 for examples of nonpersonified wisdom verses.

aristocratic palace's noble matron is—a woman of virtue, of stature, and worthy of honor. She's that classy and beautiful girl in high school who was way out of your league. *But* if you had been lucky enough to take her out to dinner, you would have hung on her every word.

SYNOPSIS

This article seeks to explore the topic of wisdom in Proverbs according to the counsel of just such a woman of stature, “Lady Wisdom,” to understand the biblical message for her contemporary audience, and for our own time amid the pandemic.

Lady Wisdom first appears in verse 20 of Proverbs' first chapter, and biblical scholars have long pondered her origins. Many have assumed her to be a Judaized version of the Greek wisdom goddess Sophia,⁴ while others have identified her as the antithesis of the goddess of love, Astarte, whose cult was attracting the attention of young Jewish men during this period.⁵ Von Rad and many other scholars also see Lady Wisdom as a possible reflection of the Egyptian goddess of order, Ma'at, who displayed an amazing love for humankind, and was present at the time of the earth's creation along with her father, Atum. However, it is important to understand that Lady Wisdom is a Ma'at presented with Jewish distinctives, to include the immanence of God.⁶ However, it is also possible that none of these options supplies the inspiration for her, and that perhaps the poetic nature of the book simply lends itself to a female personage.⁷

In this first scene, she appears as a sidewalk preacher, crying out in various public places: the town square, on top of a wall, and at the city gate, where people gathered to trade, discuss politics, and even solicit prostitutes.⁸ All these locations indicate her prominence in society, presiding over business, administration, and even her own personal life.⁹ Note that Lady Wisdom positions herself conspicuously, so her message isn't hidden or gnostic, but rather widely proclaimed and accessible to all. But sadly, the targets of her counsel are simply not listening, and she must shout her message to snap them out of their spiritual stupor.¹⁰

⁴ Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 196. McKane, however, rejects the possible connection between the Ma'at cult and Proverbs. William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 277, 344.

⁵ McKane, *Proverbs*, 367; Gerhard Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 167. Albright also references a Canaanite-Aramean wisdom goddess as a possible inspiration for Lady Wisdom. See Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs*, 84, 89. Whybray notes that since Ishtar, the Mesopotamian version of Astarte, was also worshipped as a goddess of wisdom, Lady Wisdom may be an anti-Ishtar.

⁶ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 167, 174. Whybray sees no reason why the personification of wisdom could not have been of Hebrew origins. See Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs*, 87.

⁷ Alter, *The Wisdom Books*, 196.

⁸ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 200, 396; Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 199.

⁹ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 202.

¹⁰ Longman, *Proverbs*, 111; Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 158; Alter, *The Wisdom Books*, 227; Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs*, 407–8.

Lady Wisdom identifies three types of individuals she seeks to reach, whom Longman categorizes as the “simple,” the “mockers,” and the “fools”—all of whom hold to their ignorance enthusiastically.¹¹ To those who repent (and there is still time), Lady Wisdom promises to pour her thoughts and teachings into them, but those who scoff at her lessons will be denied any assistance when calamity strikes. Time will have then run out, and in their crises she will ignore their pleas, allowing them to “eat the fruit of their ways” (1:31 NIV). According to Waltke, this metaphor is “like the English proverb, ‘You are what you eat,’ [signifying] the organic, boomerang nexus between foolish deeds and fatal consequences.”¹² The waywardness and complacency of these fools will lead to their destruction, *but* those who listen to her will “live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm” (1:33 NIV). To quote Waltke, “Wisdom rejoices in turning the present upside-down world right-side up, when wisdom overturns folly, righteousness ousts wickedness, knowledge overcomes ignorance, humility topples pride, and life swallows up death.”¹³

Lady Wisdom reappears in chapter 8, and once again, we find her calling out in public places. She reiterates her call from chapter 1, directed toward the “simple” who are urged to listen to her just and honest counsel that is more precious than silver, gold, or even rubies. The chapter also hints against the alternative, the false call of the “adulterous woman” portrayed so prominently in chapter 7. And perhaps as a warning against the lustful affections aroused by such a woman, the author of Proverbs explains that “nothing you desire can compare with [Lady Wisdom]” (8:11 NIV).

Lady Wisdom’s counsel is based on “a fear of the Lord,” an obedient posture characterized by a rejection of pride, arrogance, perverse speech, and evil behavior. Lady Wisdom prevents one from stumbling into these pitfalls through her sage ethical counsel, which has always ensured the successful reign of rulers.¹⁴ But not only do kings benefit, because everyone can profit from her good counsel. Indeed, all who love and seek Lady Wisdom will find her and will, in turn, receive the rewards of wealth and prosperity.

In a passage with messianic undertones, starting at 8:22, Lady Wisdom explains that she was the first of God’s works, created before the world came to be, and was present during the creation of heaven and earth, rejoicing in God’s presence and delighting in humankind. The explanation that she was present “when there were no springs,” reminds us of the days when “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Gen 1:2 ESV), a time prior to the creation of the world.¹⁵ So to quote McKane, “the intention here is to emphasize the vast intelligence of Wisdom by assigning to her an architectonic function in the ordering of the created world.”¹⁶ Indeed, there is no better evidence of the unspeakable wisdom of God than in God’s fashioning of the earth. Fox writes that “the quintessence

¹¹ Longman, *Proverbs*, 112.

¹² Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 211.

¹³ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 207.

¹⁴ Alter, *The Wisdom Books*, 228; Longman, *Proverbs*, 202.

¹⁵ Alter, *The Wisdom Books*, 230.

¹⁶ McKane, *Proverbs*, 351.

of [God's] wisdom came at the moment when he crafted an elegant, well-ordered world, looked at it, and judged it 'very good,' in Gen 1:31.¹⁷

But many have suspected that Lady Wisdom might have played a greater role than simply being present at the earth's creation. This speculation has been further fueled by her description (v. 30) as an *'ā-mō-wn* [אֵתְמוֹן], often rendered as a "craftsperson"—one who, not unlike the preincarnate Jesus, actively participated in the shaping of the world.¹⁸ This possible role as cocreator and the New Testament accounts of Jesus occupying a similar role have led Christian commentators, including Origen, Augustine, Calvin, and many others, to recognize Wisdom as a type of, or even, *as* the preincarnate Jesus himself. Indeed, this similarity in creator roles may have served as the inspiration, at least in part, for the Logos figure in John 1.¹⁹

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Paul connects the dots even further in 1 Corinthians 1:30 and Colossians 2:3, where Jesus is directly linked to the attribute of wisdom, and also in Colossians 1:15–17, where he explains Jesus's participation in the creation of the world in a manner reminiscent of Proverbs 8. Jesus may even be connecting himself to Lady Wisdom in Matthew 11:19, where after recounting the Pharisees' accusations against him, he responds by explaining that "wisdom is justified by her deeds" (ESV). But despite these traditionally recognized connections, most modern scholars reject a possible conflation of Jesus and Lady Wisdom, choosing to emphasize instead her "close proximity to the creator at the time, rather than a role in the co-creation of the universe."²⁰

Interestingly, it was the Arians who headed in the opposite direction, utilizing Proverbs 8:22 (which some translations, including NRSV, render "the Lord created me") as scriptural ammunition for their view that Jesus was a created being, an assumption that the Nicene fathers forcefully rejected.²¹ But the translation of the word "created" *qā-nā-nî*, קָנָנִי might also be rendered "possessed," "acquired," or "begotten,"²² thereby avoiding the conclusion that Jesus might be a created being.

¹⁷ Michael V. Fox, "The Epistemology of the Book of Proverbs," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 4 (2007): 684.

¹⁸ Longman, *Proverbs*, 209.

¹⁹ Alter, *The Wisdom Books*, 230; Longman, *Proverbs*, 212.

²⁰ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 417; For a helpful review of the Christological implications of Proverbs 8, see Longman, *Proverbs*, 210–213. He denies that Lady Wisdom is the second person of the Trinity.

²¹ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 127; Longman, *Proverbs*, 212.

²² Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs*, 100; Longman, *Proverbs*, 204.

Perhaps the best rendering, according to McKane, is “procreate,” in that “Lady Wisdom is a ‘child of Yahweh’ in a special sense.”²³

But all these christological controversies about Lady Wisdom may miss the true message of the second half of chapter 8, which is the importance of wisdom in our day-to-day lives. As Whybray explains, “If wisdom was precious to Yahweh before the beginning of the world, it is impossible to doubt its infinite value to [human beings].”²⁴

Lady Wisdom concludes the chapter by promising blessings upon those who heed her words. However, those who fail to find her will ultimately harm themselves because they are the lovers of death.

Chapter 9 contrasts Lady Wisdom and her antithesis, Lady Folly. It begins with Lady Wisdom’s proclamation that “Wisdom has built her house,” one hewn with seven pillars. Theories about the origin of the seven pillars range from palaces belonging to Baal, Solomon, or the Assyrian king, Ashurnasirpal II, to the great temple of Babylon, a house of instruction, or simply a stately home.²⁵ Other imaginative eisegeses have included the seven pillars as representing the seven then-known planets, the seven gifts of the Spirit, the seven sacraments, or even the seven churches of Revelation.²⁶ However, the seven probably refers to the “formulaic and sacred character of the number seven,” symbolizing perfection.²⁷

In that house, Lady Wisdom prepares a table with choice wine mixed with honey and spices, and the choicest meats (a rarity in those days).²⁸ She then sends her young women into the town to summon the simple, inviting them to dine with her. The young women cry out, “Leave your simple ways, and live, and walk in the way of insight” (9:6 ESV).

The verses that follow, starting at verse 7, prove difficult. They explain that the person who corrects the wicked or a scoffer, will only be asking for trouble. Waltke explains this verse by noting that “the wise aim to lead the potentially educable to repent and thereby to establish a true, spiritual friendship with them. If rebuke defeats this aim, as it will with those committed not to learn, then it is better not expressed.”²⁹ However, one who instructs the wise, will make them even wiser.

Verse 10 reiterates the overarching theme of Proverbs: that wisdom begins with fear of the Lord and knowledge of God’s ways. In this verse, the Lord is referred to as the “Holy One,” but the literal translation is “holy ones,” *qā-dō-šīm*, קָדוֹשִׁים. While “Holy One” may be an accurate translation in that a plural of majesty is often used in Scripture, one also wonders if a reference to the Trinity might be recognized here.³⁰ The chapter continues by explaining that the knowledge of God’s ways adds

²³ McKane, *Proverbs*, 352–353.

²⁴ Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs*, 98.

²⁵ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 432–433; Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs*, 90–91. McKane offers two other possibilities: the Akitu house in Babylon and a shrine with seven free-standing pillars like the one near Amanthus in Cyprus, see *Proverbs*, 362.

²⁶ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 433.

²⁷ Alter, *The Wisdom Books*, 233; Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 433.

²⁸ McKane, *Proverbs*, 363.

²⁹ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 440.

³⁰ Alter, *The Wisdom Books*, 234.

years to one's life, but sadly, the scoffer will bear the fruits of his own skepticism, for he alone is responsible for accepting or discarding Lady Wisdom's guidance.³¹

The second half of Proverbs 9, starting at verse 13, reveals a personified version of Wisdom's opposite, Lady Folly. This new character is a more vivid version of the unfaithful seductress described in chapter 7—a loud, ignorant, but nonetheless seductive woman. She symbolizes the pagan deities who have led fools away from the true God of Israel.³² Here one is reminded of Desiderius Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* (1511), loosely based on this character, whom he uses as the vehicle for this scathing attack on medieval society, including the many corruptions of the church.³³

In a manner similar to that of Lady Wisdom and her disciples, Lady Folly sits at the door of her house and in the highest places of the town, and calls out to those who pass by, namely individuals who are trying to walk the straight and narrow. Folly cries out to them using the same phrase that Wisdom did just a few verses before: "You who are simple, turn in here!" (9:16 NRSV). Her guidance is false, of course, but nonetheless enticing. She shouts, "Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant" (9:17 NRSV). Alter offers a useful paraphrase: "If you want to have a really good time, nothing works better than illicit behavior."³⁴

The chapter concludes when the simple one is fooled into following her. But regrettably, they realize much too late that her dinner guests are none other than the dead who reside in the depths of Sheol. The choice is clear: one can choose to dine with either Wisdom or Folly. One meal leads to life and abundance, while the other leads to the grave.³⁵

HOW CAN ONE ATTAIN TRUE WISDOM? IN PRAISE OF SCIENCE

Now lest I be labeled an enemy of science, I would like to start this conclusion by praising it a bit. Throughout this pandemic, it appears that the only thing that has really made a difference is the invention of the vaccines, and these inoculations are indeed marvels of modern science. The fact that a cure could be invented through the production of messenger RNA strands, and at such speed, is a marvel of what humankind can do through empirical study and innovation. Indeed, the very idea that a vaccine could be created without actually injecting someone with the disease's pathogens is a quantum leap in medicine. If you want an example of wisdom, there it is. So, the last thing I want to do is disparage research or create some kind of artificial dichotomy between science and theology.

But as amazing and lifesaving as modern science is, one also needs to realize that it has almost nothing to do with the biblical understanding of wisdom. As Fox points out so simply, "Contrary to the scholarly consensus, [wisdom epistemology]

³¹ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 442.

³² Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 429.

³³ Desiderius Erasmus, *In Praise of Folly*, trans. Hoyt Hudson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

³⁴ Alter, *The Wisdom Books*, 235.

³⁵ Longman, *Proverbs*, 222.

is not empiricism, the philosophical principle that all knowledge ultimately derives from sensory experience.”³⁶ So the view that Solomon, or some other author, simply wrote a book of proverbs, little gems of his own life experience from the world of hard knocks, is simply not accurate. Biblical wisdom is not derived from trial and error, or careful experimentation, but rather through spiritual enlightenment and moral commitment.³⁷

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Biblical wisdom is a different category altogether, more along the lines of good teaching rather than robust science. In a biblical sense, wisdom, and the adages in Proverbs that teach wisdom, must be based on eternal truths. Fox explains that these proverbs are not sayings that reveal “the discovery of knowledge but [rather] an experience that reinforces a known principle. The observation is an occasion for reflection, not inference, and the anecdote is a testimonial to an axiomatic belief.”³⁸ The bottom line is that the proverbs are not the result of “following the science,” whatever that means. True wisdom, according to the author of Proverbs, is never gained by personal experience, or even studied experimentation. Rather, it is built on God’s Word, something far deeper than our own understanding.

LIFESTYLE VS. KNOWLEDGE

Given this insight, it may be more useful to view biblical wisdom as a lifestyle choice rather than an accumulation of knowledge or some sort of scientific method. Biblical wisdom is a way of living, which if followed, allows one to make wise choices. So how does one then attain that kind of wisdom, according to Lady Wisdom? Here are a few possibilities:

1. By “Fearing God”

As noted before, the statement “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (1:7) has long been recognized as the theme of the entire book of Proverbs. Von Rad explains that this sentence is repeated “five times. . . . This is true of no other sentence, and this very fact argues for the significance which it must have

³⁶ Fox, “Epistemology,” 670.

³⁷ McKane, *Proverbs*, 275.

³⁸ Fox, “Epistemology,” 673.

had. The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and discipline.”³⁹

This “fear,” perhaps better expressed as an obedience toward God, includes the moral life, and Lady Wisdom repeatedly counsels on the benefits of ethical living. Fox writes that the writer(s) of Proverbs “recognized coherence not by logical testing but by . . . the quality I have elsewhere called *moral character* and described as ‘a configuration of soul.’ This configuration is wisdom itself.”⁴⁰ In other words, configuring one’s soul and living out a moral existence create a capacity to make wise decisions. And one need only look at the long line of politicians, business leaders, and even pastors who have recently been caught in the web of infidelity or sexual harassment to understand how a lack of moral character can quickly destroy one’s ability to be a prudent and effective leader.

So obeying God’s commands, found in God’s holy Word, is the first step in obtaining knowledge. Once that posture is assumed, wisdom can follow. To quote Von Rad again, “It enables a [person] to acquire wisdom; it trains [them] for wisdom.”⁴¹ Waltke warns against the opposite. He notes that “fools, seeing no need for the ‘fear of the Lord,’ do not carefully select it as their way of life. In fact, they decide against it and sanction other lifestyles.”⁴² The result? An inability to acquire true wisdom.

2. By Avoiding the Temptation of Money

Lady Wisdom also chides against the love of money. She writes, “Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her” (8:10–11 NIV). One can only speculate upon the myriad decisions that may have been altered by greed during the COVID crisis: from whether to keep a business open and risk further infection, to the use of new, more expensive therapies when cheaper medicines were already available. Lady Wisdom urges us to avoid the lure of mammon that makes true wisdom impossible. A decision must be made. She explains that “one loves either wisdom or riches, there is no third way.”⁴³

3. By Remaining Humble

Another pitfall that Lady Wisdom warns against is the temptation toward pride. Waltke describes this tendency as a “self-confident attitude that throws off God’s rule to pursue self-interests.”⁴⁴ One was struck by the blatant arrogance displayed on all sides during the COVID crisis. The clarion call to “follow the science” often

³⁹ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 65.

⁴⁰ Fox, “Epistemology,” 684

⁴¹ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 66.

⁴² Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 210.

⁴³ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 399.

⁴⁴ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 401.

led to a policy of shutdowns that had little to do with research and, sadly, everything to do with political motivations. Businesses were shuttered with impunity, resulting in untold job loss, while schools were closed with little evidence demonstrating how such shutdowns might protect children. Health experts and political leaders arrogantly ignored the negative effects of these closures: increased diagnoses of depression and an epidemic of suicides.

I also remember numerous discussions I had with parishioners regarding the ethics of receiving vaccines that either contained, or were tested with, cell lines originally procured from aborted fetuses in the 1970s. While these cell lines could have been derived from ethical sources, such as miscarried remains or other adult stem cells, the medical community arrogantly forged ahead, ignoring the moral convictions of millions. One can only imagine how many people refused to receive these inoculations for this single reason, and consequently how many lives were potentially lost.

And then there were the mockers. These are the people who irresponsibly attacked the vaccines, alleging all kinds of nonsense—the risk of “DNA replacement,” Bill Gates’s microchip, future infertility—cavalierly ignoring the assurances of our medical experts.

But think of how much more accurate “following the science” would have been if the key players in politics and medicine had followed a biblical lifestyle described by Lady Wisdom, one characterized by humility, forbearance, mutual respect, and open dialogue.

4. By Loving God

But the posture needed for wisdom requires something else too—a loving relationship with God. Von Rad explains that “the [person] who seeks knowledge is in a relationship of love to the mysterious order. [The person] is in a state of tension through being wooed, through seeking and being sought, through having to wait for and, at the same time, anticipating precious intellectual fulfilment.”⁴⁵ In other words, biblical wisdom is acquired through a love affair with God that lasts a lifetime and beyond. One grows in wisdom through the give and take of “seeking and being sought.” ⊕

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⁴⁵ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 173.