

Translation and Structure

<p>1 Wisdom has built her house. She has hewn out her seven pillars.</p> <p>2 She has slaughtered her meat. She has mixed her wine. She has also set her table.</p> <p>3 She has sent out her maidservants. She cries out from the tops of the heights of the city,</p> <p>4 “Whoever is simple, let him turn in here.” Whoever is lacking heart, she says to him,</p> <p>5 “Come, eat my bread, And drink the wine that I have mixed.</p> <p>6 Forsake the simple ones and live, And make progress in the way of understanding.”</p>	<p>The wise woman calls the simple one</p>	<p>The wise woman's preparations</p>	
<p>7 He who corrects a scoffer receives for himself shame, And he who rebukes a wicked one a blemish.</p> <p>8 Do not rebuke a scoffer, lest he hate you. Rebuke a wise one and he will love you.</p> <p>9 Give to a wise one and he will be still wiser. Cause a righteous one to know and he will increase learning.</p> <p>10 The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.</p> <p>11 For by me your days will multiply, And years of life will be increased to you.</p> <p>12 If you are wise, you are wise for yourself, And if you have scoffed, you alone will bear it.</p>	<p>The wise woman comments on the scoffer and the wise man</p>	<p>The difference between the scoffer and the wise man</p>	<p>A B B' A'</p>
		<p>True wisdom and her benefits</p>	

13	A woman of folly is clamoring, simple, and she knows... what?	The foolish woman calls the simple one	The foolish woman's preparations
14	And she sits at the entrance of her house, On a seat, in the heights of the city,		The foolish woman's words
15	To call to those passing by on the way, Those going straight on their paths,		
16	“Whoever is simple, let him turn in here,” And whoever is lacking heart, and she says to him,	The foolish woman calls the simple one	The foolish woman's words
17	“Stolen waters are sweet, And bread of secrets is pleasant.”		The conclusion
18	And he does not know that corpses are there. In the depths of Sheol are her guests.		

Introduction

Proverbs 9 is the last chapter of the introductory section of the book. Chapter 10 begins the section entitled, “The Proverbs of Solomon.”

The chapter personifies both wisdom and folly as women who are calling to the simple one as he passes by, and who are inviting him to turn into their houses. These two women represent the conflicting calls we hear throughout life – the call to live wisely in the fear of God and many temptations to pursue the lusts of the flesh and the pleasures of the world. The wise woman’s call is in verses 1-6, and the foolish woman’s in verses 13–18. Between these two sections the wise woman makes some comments about the difference between the wise man and the scoffer.

The Call of Wisdom (vv.1–6)

Both the wise woman and the foolish woman have houses. Though there is a variety of opinion about what these houses represent, the simplest interpretation is that they represent keeping company with one or the other of the two women. To turn aside into wisdom’s house is to seek wisdom, to walk with her and to make her a part of our lives. To turn aside into folly’s house is to walk in the way of folly, to heed the call of the flesh.

But the imagery is more extensive. Wisdom has built her house, hewn out her seven pillars, slaughtered her meat, set her table and sent out her maidservant to call her guests. Wisdom builds; she works to establish herself in the world. She sets pillars in place, to make those who dwell with her secure. She has seven pillars to signify that her house is a place of rest, especially rest from sin and its consequences. She provides lifegiving meat and drink (cf. 8:10–21). All things that are with her, here called maidservants, become means of blessing to those who choose her.

She also makes herself known. She goes out and cries out in the public places, the tops of the heights of the city (cf. 8:1–3). She is active and vigorous in seeking guests for her house.

She cries to the simple, the naïve and immature. Solomon wants his son to grow into wisdom. His character has as wise or foolish is not yet fixed. He lacks understanding (cf. v.4,16) and often acts foolishly, but has not yet grown hardened in the way of folly. He is young, or young in the faith, or weak in understanding regarding some specific area of the walk of wisdom.

Wisdom cries to him because of his very great need to make the right choice. The wise man has already made the right choice, and the scoffer is, humanly speaking, beyond hope, but the simple one is still able to go either way. He is vulnerable, but not beyond hope. So wisdom calls to him to turn in to her house, to keep company with her, to receive her instruction and to partake of her delights. She commands him to forsake his simplicity and the simple ones with whom he keeps company. He must make progress in the way of understanding, which is also the way of life.

This is the call of the gospel: “Forsake folly and simplicity. Become wise. Fear God and keep his commandments. Seek the wisdom who has come down from above.” This is the way of life.

Wisdom’s Reflections on the Wise Man and the Scoffer (vv. 7–18)

The first inclination on reading verses 7–12 may be to take them as words of Solomon himself inserted between the call of the wise woman and the call of the foolish woman, but verse 11 indicates that wisdom is still speaking. However, wisdom has changed the subject from the simple (vv. 1–6) to the scoffer and the wise man. She is now instructing the simple one about these two and thus encourages him to follow wisdom.

The scoffer is wicked and will not listen to rebuke. Whoever tries to correct him fails in his purpose, is publicly disappointed and frustrated by the hardness of the scoffer’s heart and suffers the public embarrassment that is the result of futile effort. When you rebuke him, he will turn on you in hatred, as if you are trying to do him harm. Implicit in wisdom’s description of the scoffer is the warning to the simple one, “Do not become like him.”

But the wise man receives rebuke and loves those who chastise him, admonish him and call him to the right way. He takes instruction to heart and becomes wiser. He knows that he doesn’t know enough and is always ready to take in knowledge to increase his learning.

The structure of verses 7–9 enhances the meaning. There are three double parallelisms here. The first is a synonymous one about the futility of rebuking the scoffer. The second is an antithetical one about the scoffer and the wise man; the scoffer will hate you for your rebukes; the wise man will love you. The third is again a synonymous one about the wise man’s willingness to receive correction and instruction.

But you could also see the verses as two triple parallelisms, the first three lines about the scoffer and the last three about the wise man. However, the two parallelisms do not follow the same order. Wisdom ends the discussion of the scoffer with the reason not to rebuke him: he will hate you. But she begins the description of the wise man with the reason to rebuke him: he will love you. The verses form a little chiasm neatly balanced between the wise man and the scoffer.

This all serves to make wisdom’s instruction very pointed and strong. Hear her. She is saying, “Receive rebuke and instruction. That is the way of wisdom.” This is one of the first things wisdom will teach us when we listen to her, and it is one of the first things we need to learn if we want to become wise. The way of wisdom is not necessarily an effortless way – you will be deeply humbled – but the way of the scoffer, though it may be easy and free from interference, is dangerous. It is the way of death.

To encourage the simple one even further in the way of wisdom, wisdom teaches him a little about wisdom in verses 10–12.

She first instructs us where to begin; Begin with the fear of the Lord. This fear is not the terror that the wicked know in the presence of God, but it is more than awe. It is trembling before the Lord because he is great and we are small, he is powerful and we are weak, he is wise but we are foolish, he is holy and we are not. It is understanding that he is light to which no one can approach. He is the Holy One, and we are, as George Herbert said, “guilty of dust and sin.” The difference between fear and terror is that fear loves his majesty and wants to be with him, even though it seems impossible to remain there without complete dissolution of soul and body. Daniel shows us what this fear is like in Daniel 10:8: “no strength remained in me; for my vigor was turned to frailty in me, and I retained no strength.” He trembled in his knees and the palms of his hands (v.10) and then stood trembling (v.11).

She then promises long life. That is according to the fifth commandment, but it is not really a promise of many years in this world. It is, instead, a promise of many years in the inheritance given by God, and that inheritance is a place among his people here and in heaven.

Verse 12 is mysterious. It sounds as if wisdom is saying the same thing about both wisdom and folly, and yet that cannot be. In a sense she is. Both the wise man and the scoffer will receive the reward of their works. The wise man will receive benefit for himself. The scoffer will receive suffering. The word “bear” in that line is important. The scoffer will have to bear a burden of judgment, of eternal trouble and death.

Therefore, hear the call of wisdom and enter her house. There is life and all good.

The Call of Folly (vv.13–18)

The verses about folly bear some resemblance to the verses about wisdom. Folly also has a house, she also cries in the heights of the city, and she also addresses the simple one and calls to him to “turn in here.”

But there are also crucial differences. She is simple and knows nothing truly. Her simplicity gives her, in a sense an advantage over the wise woman, because her simplicity appeals to the simplicity of the those she calls. But she cannot promise advancement from simplicity to wisdom. Furthermore, we get the impression from verses 1–3 that wisdom is active, while folly is quite passive. She does not build a house, though she has one; wisdom increases, but folly is the same in every age. She sits on a seat, but wisdom sends out her maidservants. Wisdom has authority but is humble and goes out seeking. Folly is proud and expects you to come to her. She assumes an authority which she does not have. Wisdom provides meat and wine; folly promises bread and water, but doesn’t have even that, for there are only corpses in her house.

Her only activity is crying out with her voice, but her voice is very clamorous. The word here is also used for the uproar of peoples (Ps 46:6, raged) and of the sea (Ps 46:3), for dogs growling and barking (Ps 59:6,14) and for the adulterous woman (Prov 7:11). That clamor is not necessarily in the mere sound of her voice but can be also in the persistence with which she pushes her false and perilous ideas. In fact, her voice may not sound clamorous to anyone except those who have a spiritually sensitive ear. The proponents of evil are sometimes loudly unreasonable for their evil ways, but at other times they sound very persuasive. It may be only to those who understand their folly and lack of fear of God that their arguments sound like the clamor of fools.

The woman of folly addresses “those passing by on the way, those going straight on their paths.” She is not interested in the wicked; they already dwell in her house. Her desire is to draw the upright from the straight path. They pass by her house because her house is found everywhere in the world and cannot be avoided. They have their faces to the front and walk as if they had a goal in mind. Nevertheless, folly hopes that there are some simple among them who will hear and follow her.

She uses the same initial words as wisdom: “Whoever is simple, let him turn in here.” But her appeal is different. She does not invite us to partake of food that she has prepared, but she says instead, “Stolen waters are sweet, and bread of secrets is pleasant.” She has no food of her own to offer and doesn’t bother to pretend that she does. Her “benefits” all come by way of theft and shortcuts. She always says that the broad and easy way is the right way, that thinking one’s own thoughts, following the desires of the flesh, and doing our own pleasure are best. We don’t know the narrow way, self-denial or the strenuous efforts of obedience.

The abominable truth is that she appeals directly to the basest impulses of our perverted natures. In his *Confessions*, Augustine tells the famous story of the theft of peaches and admits that he had no need of them and no desire for them. The appeal was in the act of theft itself. We are sinful enough to desire sin simply because it is sin. Stolen waters are sweet to us.

Sin always involves theft, taking what does not belong to us. We assume the authority to govern our own lives, which belongs to God. We rob God of his glory and proper worship. We deprive our neighbors of the love that is their due from us, and we take from them by desire, word or action, life, reputation or possessions.

What the woman of folly hides, of course, is that there is nothing in her house to satisfy our need, not even the bread and water she promises. The ghastly truth is that her house is full of corpses and her guests are in the depths of sheol, far from light and life.

Conclusion

There are two competing voices in our lives. One is the voice of wisdom who calls through the gospel to the way of wisdom, the way of the fear of God and obedience to his commands. The other is the voice of folly who calls us to the easy way of death. We hear her voice all around us, in worldly philosophies, false religions, politics and science, from friends (sometimes even from believing friends), relatives, co-workers and chance acquaintances. It can be hard to hear the voice of wisdom through that clamor.

The way of wisdom is a hard way. The way of folly is easy and comes easily to our fallen natures. But the way of wisdom is the way of life, and the way of folly the way of death.

Sometimes we do not want to hear the voice of wisdom. Sometimes we find it hard to distinguish wisdom from folly; there is still darkness in our minds. Sometimes our pride gets in the way of listening humbly to others or prevents us from hearing correction. All these obstacles must be overcome.

Acquire wisdom. Do not sell it. Turn in to her house. Eat her meat and drink her wine. She gives the food and drink of everlasting life.