

Images of Wisdom and Folly

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Abstract

As part of an anthology in the Biblical collection, Proverbs 9 provides some of the most essential and consequential teachings that is constitutive to the Christian way of life. Here we are introduced to the personification of Wisdom and Folly. Ruminating over the worldly yet ascetic facets of the particular chapter and how it renders a covenant between man and God, this paper would be an attempt to unravel the significance and the testament of the verses that has enriched and given moral and functional importance to Christians over centuries.

Keywords: Bible, Christians, Folly, Proverbs, Wisdom

Some of my earliest memories would be standing in the school assembly overlooking the huge school insignia that was hung up high above the chapel. It still stands there emblazoned with the words “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). To say that these words have never crossed my mind would be a blatant dismissal of all the years I have studied there. These words were supposed to be the *modus operandi* of our whole education. Drilled into our heads almost every morning and preached in every other imaginable institution. Along the years, somehow it lost its meaning. It became just another verse from the Bible. Just another set of words strung together. Funny thing about childhood and adolescence is that we are surrounded by the world, ripe for our picking but we are naive and foolish for we do not know how the world opens up for us once we look at it and seek for it. To say the least, brought up to be a devout Christian, these proverbs were inescapable. It was preached at church, at Sunday school, youth services and, at home. But the thing is, nobody has ever unravelled what it really entails for me. It has stayed with me all these years, with a question mark hanging over it, and me avoiding it by being deliberately obtuse. Perhaps, the time has come for me to really understand the verse that has in many ways dictated me my whole life.

For a more holistic understanding and a better perspective approach, I have decided to undertake not only the verse in itself but the whole chapter from the book of Proverbs. Proverbs is part of what is known as the Wisdom literature in the Bible. It is part of an anthology which dictates and lays down the edicts or canons to live by as a Christian. The chapter is taken from the GNB version of the Bible instead of the NIV with some variations in translations where Folly is also read as Stupidity.

Wisdom and Stupidity/Folly (Proverbs 9):

“Wisdom has built her house and made seven columns for it. ²She has had an animal killed for a feast, mixed spices in the wine, and set the table. ³She has sent her servant women to call out from the highest place in town: ⁴‘Come in, ignorant people!’ And to the foolish she says, ⁵‘Come eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed. ⁶Leave the company of ignorant people, and live. Follow the way of knowledge.’

⁷If you correct conceited people, you will only get hurt. ⁸Never correct conceited people; they will hate you for it. But if you correct the wise, they will respect you. ⁹Anything you say to the wise will make them wiser. Whatever you tell the righteous will add to their knowledge.

¹⁰To be wise you must first have reverence for the Lord. If you know the Holy One, you will have understanding. ¹¹Wisdom will add years to your life. ¹²You are the one who will profit if you have wisdom, and if you reject it, you are the one who will suffer.

¹³Stupidity is like a loud, ignorant shameless woman. ¹⁴She sits at the door of her house or on a seat in the highest part of the town, ¹⁵and calls out to people passing by, who are minding their own business: ¹⁶'Come in, ignorant people!' To the foolish she says, ¹⁷'Stolen water tastes better. Stolen bread tastes better.' ¹⁸Her victims do not know that the people die who do to her house, that those who have already entered are now deep in the world of the dead. "

Wisdom:

A vivid picture of wisdom is painted in verses 1-12. It is hardly a task to envision her as the wise woman. She is dignified and regal. Demure in her demeanour as she calls upon the people for the banquet she has prepared. She is seen to be seated in a house erect with seven pillars. The significance of the seven pillars can be no mere coincidence. In Jewish traditions the Menorah as commanded by God (Exodus 25) symbolizes the idea of universal enlightenment. In the Talmud, the Menorah is also said to symbolize wisdom. It has a very holistic approach in its representation. The candlestick with its six branches are said to allude to the six branches of human knowledge and are symbolically guided by the light of God represented by the central lamp. It is then that she is said to call upon on to the people from the highest point of the city, to appeal to the people to come into her abode and enjoy the feast that she has prepared herself. She has mixed spices in the wine herself. Spices can signify the component of internal truth and wine as a symbol of transformation and also as something that gives sustenance and life. These qualities encapsulate the *sine qua non* of what it takes for a true believer in God. Along with these we are told of the feast that has been prepared as in the bountiful and limitless blessings that is always spoken of and promised if one leads a life true to God and become one with Him. Wisdom tries to appeal to the people to leave behind their lives of ignorance and any of their attachments with ignorant people and follow the right way. She reprimands them of their foolish ways and endorses what can be the manner in which a wise person carries oneself through life. Jesus talked about something quite similar (Luke 6:29), from where the proverbial turning of the other cheek is derived from.

Stupidity/Folly:

The second half of the verse introduces us to Folly. She is a completely different image from that of Wisdom. She is brash, loud and boorish. She can be seen as someone who is not ashamed to present herself as a harlot and of her adulterous ways. Moreover the food she offers is as basic and plain as it could get given the fact that they are all stolen. Stealing is the product of one of the cardinal sins. In fact in the few verses Folly is seen to encapsulate almost all of the cardinal vices. The only people that she could seemingly attract are people in a rush, looking for the quick meal, the quicker route in life. Folly like Wisdom makes an effort to appeal to the simple and ignorant but maybe not entirely for the same reasons. While they both target the vulnerability of man, she also looks for them because they are weak and easy to lure. The men that go to her are enticed by the brazenness of her character and for a fact that she presents herself as an open and easy catch. Blinded by desire and ego they are trapped to a life of misery and of having to die spiritually.

Reflections:

Solomon tells the stories of these two women in a metaphorical and realistic manner. It appears anecdotal in its nature and the two figures are parallel characters made to infer the starkness of their characterization. As is relayed to us no two people can be as different as these two women in everything they do or say. In every way they present themselves Wisdom appears to exemplify the ideal woman any man would like to seek in a woman with the future in mind. While on the other hand Folly, is one who any naive young man would seek for during their youth for fleeting bouts of pleasure and she promises the same. Almost always one comes across the personification of Folly in their youth but will eventually settle with wisdom. Like a rite of passage. Even as we look at our society people always say that the right kind of woman can turn a man's life around. She is the cornerstone. Wisdom and Folly are both different sides of the same path and one should tread a careful path so as to not fall on the wrong side of the road. Now, over the years, with due reflections, I have settled on the growth of my own being. Even with the difference of a few years, I cannot claim to be the same person I was for better or for worse. I have grown in every aspect physically and psychologically. Thus, I can attest to falling for the bait of the folly of youth. Youth that is young and boisterous always seeking for attention and cheap thrills. I

look forward as every other to age with grace and subtlety. Although, I must admit I am still susceptible to the meanderings of youth as I still am one, I find myself wondering and looking forward to the transition from chaos and order.

Why is wisdom the way to Godliness? And why is wisdom always to be sought and not simply given? Wisdom is one of the seven gifts that God has given mankind. Wisdom is a bestowment of the highest honour from God and as the path that is going to bridge that is going to lead us from that of erring humans to that of near perfect embodiment of the God in us. Humans are made in the God image. Therefore we are a reflection of His own self. Gnostics recognize the personification of Wisdom as Sophia, the divine consort of God, and the Stoics also regarded her as the key to attaining the knowledge of both the divine and the human which is crucial in leading a life of morality. So this led me to the question of why both Wisdom and Folly were female. Wisdom brings a certain depth in one's interpretation of the world, one that goes beyond logic and pragmatism. It integrates one's worldly understanding of the outer world with that of the inner world. Humans are susceptible to being victims of our own hubris that stems from our grasp of worldly knowledge. While in familiar grounds, it is what we consider the process of individuation, the integration of the anima and the animus is what is going to help us move towards attaining the Self. To quote Carl Jung in a letter to Walter Lewino (Jung, 1973/2015, Letters vol.1, 499) "The anima is always associated with the source of wisdom and enlightenment, whose symbol is the old wise man". Here contextually, men are presented with the choice of having to choose between two women. They are the different souls of man; one that is ascetic and the other that belongs to the world. Two women of which he must choose from, one who is going to idealistically lead one on a path of glory and redemption and the other who is going to bring him nothing but lead him down the path of destruction.

Our lives are dictated by binaries. The concept of duality, of always having to choose between two sides is perhaps what makes us mortal and also divine. This makes us vulnerable and thus both Wisdom and Folly calls unto the simple and ignorant man. Overcoming this vulnerability through our pursuit of wisdom is indeed a gargantuan task. She is not such an easy lady to behold. This struggle is apparently not exclusive to humans as Jung (Jung, CW 11) in "Answer to Job" has demonstrated of God's own grapple with the good and the evil, whilst eventually redeeming Himself by reincarnating through a second more divine birth as the Son of God, Jesus. This is a transformation that God has undergone to become better, more wholesome; to finally rise above evil and be the good. As Jesus is indeed a symbol of the Self, this we can indeed draw as an analogical thesis of our own journey to individuation. This journey however is not the easiest hurdle to overcome for us, as it is just human of men to take the easier way out and completely ignore the repercussions for their actions.

It is always highlighted in the Bible where reverence and "fear" of the Lord is the key to unlocking his graces. This "fear" is talked of positively. It is indeed this reverence and awareness of a power that is beyond and above us. Often times we forget this. Knowledge without wisdom is quite a danger to us. Knowledge without wisdom is folly. Wisdom in us will dictate discipline and knowledge commanded in us will help us rein in our unbridled instincts and eventual actions. Knowledge can bring us worldly power and materials but it is not going to promise us a future. We can amass as much wealth and power through our knowledge and still but if we don't have the wisdom to give us insight and guidance there is none but only one peak we can climb during our lifetime and guaranteed downfall from there. The thought that there is a higher power than us keeps our ego in check. Therefore when we fear the lord, we act according to our means and not go beyond it. This fear comes from love and protects us. It is not the worldly fear that we envision. In the words of Carl Jung (Jung, CW 11, 459, ¶745) "Everything now depends on man; immense power of destruction is given into his hands, and the question is whether he can resist the will to use it, and can temper his will with the spirit of love and wisdom, He will hardly be able to do so on his own resources. He needs the help of an 'advocate' in heaven". It is for us to be tethered to our place in the order of creation. Which is idealistic of the Christian way of life as envisioned and commanded of us.

Looking back and looking at now, perhaps the decision for students to internalize this verse came as one of the highest of blessings. Fulton Sheen (Sheen 1947, 292) says, "Everyone wants the things that only a love of God will bring to him, but most men today seek them in the wrong places. That is why no one comes to God without a revolution of the spirit; he must stop seeking his good in Godlessness". Wisdom will thus only grow in us when we seek to grow ourselves and vice versa. To have understood and to have and to live by this teaching

should in all likelihood be one of the best lessons one could learn in a lifetime. After all to realize the wisdom of the world is to ascend into consciousness and eventually bring one to individuation.

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