

Who Is “Wisdom” in Proverbs 8?

Dr. Alexander Kurian

The theme running throughout the book of Proverbs is *wisdom for living*. Even in the very first chapter of the book, wisdom is personified as a woman inviting all to come to her and learn (1:20-23). In **chapter 8**, wisdom is exalted and personified again. **Lady wisdom** takes her message out into the open and appeals for all to receive her instruction. She stands in the middle of the street and calls out freely and offers a spiritual view of life.

It is important for the reader to remember that Solomon, at the beginning of his reign, asked the Lord wisdom to rule the people, and the Lord granted his request (2 Chro.1:10-12). Sadly, Solomon began to abandon his God-given wisdom as the years passed. But Solomon knew that wisdom was an essential requirement in ruling a nation. In Proverbs, he reminds his son the value of wisdom (1:8; 2:1; 3:1,11,21; 4:1, 10,20; 5:1; 6:1, 7:1,20 etc.). In a broader sense, Solomon as a wise teacher is addressing his pupil. Solomon personifies his wise teachings as a woman whom he wants his son to embrace. This context sets the stage for the wise teachings of the book.

In the immediate context, **chapter 7** is a warning against the **adulteress woman**. It is a paternal appeal to the son to keep away from the enticement of the adulteress. Like the adulteress woman in chapter 7 (seductress or forbidden woman, 7:5), wisdom is personified as a lady in chapter 8, extending an invitation to everyone to listen to her wise instructions. Unlike the seductress woman, Lady Wisdom’s invitation is very public in broad daylight, her appeal is spiritual not sexual, and her promise is life not death. Again, we see **Lady Wisdom in chapter 9**, preparing a banquet to dedicate her house. Remember, the chapter divisions were all added later. The flow of the theme and thought continue in these chapters – **contrasting Lady Wisdom with the adulteress woman**. Solomon has personified his wise teachings as a mighty woman.

Christological Interpretation of 8:22-31

This section has often been interpreted Christologically, as presenting a picture of Christ rather than simply the eternal character of wisdom. No doubt, Christ is the revelation of God’s wisdom (1 Cor.1:24), and He possesses all wisdom and

knowledge. Jesus is the wisdom of God (1 Cor.1:24, 30) and only through a personal relationship with Him can we become truly wise.

But does this section (8:22-31) really refer to Christ or is it a description of the divine origin and use of wisdom. The same wisdom that makes invitation to life and blessing is the wisdom that was present with God when He created the world. Wisdom was made by God before the earth began. Wisdom from the very beginning witnessed all the created activity of God. Wisdom was a craftsman in creation (8:22-31). She precedes and delights in creation. The power and splendor of God, seen all around us in creation, are evidence of what God's wisdom can do. All God created and all He does are the products of His infinite wisdom. Wisdom was beside God, but only God was the Creator. Wisdom was rejoicing in God's creation (8:30-31). Those who embrace wisdom can appreciate and understand the rationality of the majestic creation of God. A proper study of the universe is a progressive discovery of God's wisdom (Romans 1:20). Those who reject wisdom are called "foolish" throughout the book of Proverbs.

In the first few Christian centuries, it was widely accepted that wisdom in Proverbs 8 is a reference to Christ. The passage was interpreted Christologically. Even today, some commentators lean toward this view. But majority of the Bible scholars understand the passage as referring to wisdom. This passage was highly contested during the Arian controversy. Arius (A.D. 250-336) the Alexandrian Presbyter, taught that the Son of God was a created being. The A.D.325 Council of Nicea rejected the Arian heresy, and in the Nicene Creed affirmed that Jesus was not created. Arians and Jehovah's witnesses have misinterpreted some of the verses in this passage to formulate their heretical views (8:22: The Lord "possessed" me. Possible translations of the Hebrew verb *qanah* - "acquired," "created," "made," "fathered," "established" etc. For a detailed word study and possible translation options see, *NET Bible*, First Edition with Notes from the Translators and Editors, Footnote, 11,1100; Harris & Archer, *Theological Word book of The Old Testament*, Vol.2, 788, 803). Other verses include 8:23: "I was established;" 8:24, 25: "I was brought forth."

Wisdom was beside God, but only God was the Creator. Because wisdom existed before creation and was involved in creation and because the same is said of Christ also (John 1:3; Col.1:15-16), wisdom has been identified with Christ. It is true that

Christ is similar to wisdom in many respects, but He is far superior to it (Matt.12:42). He is wisdom's source and consummate expression. He personified wisdom in a way that was similar to Proverbs 8. The personification of wisdom in Proverbs provides a solid foundation for the similar but fuller revelation of wisdom in Christ. Just as Psalm 33:6 declares, "By the Word of the LORD the heavens were made", Prov.8 declares, by the wisdom of God the universe was created. Christ used His eternal wisdom in creation (John 1:1-3).

Concluding Observations

1. The speech of Lady Wisdom in Prov.8 is contrasted with the speech of the adulteress woman in Prov.7. Chapter 7 described the house of the crafty harlot and her invitation to the simple one (foolish or stupid). In chapter 9, Lady Wisdom has built her house and invites men to come to the banquet she has prepared. She is contrasted with Lady Folly (9:13-18). Not only does Solomon personify wisdom as a person, but he also personifies foolishness as a person. The smooth flow of contrasts in chapters 7-9 is to be taken into consideration in interpreting chapter 8. The context of these chapters is decisive in interpretation. It is about wisdom personified, and not about Christ, though we may find some similarities.
2. Personification of wisdom is found in 1:20-33; 3:14-18; 8:1-36; 9:1-12. This is a helpful interpretive clue. Does all these passages speak about Christ?
3. If it is Christ referred to as wisdom in Prov.8, then all other references to wisdom in Proverbs should refer to Christ too, which is quite unlikely.
4. Who is speaking in Prov.8:22-31? Is God the Father speaking, or God the Son speaking, or is wisdom speaking? It is evident from the context that it is wisdom speaking. Throughout chapter 8 wisdom refers to itself as "I," "me" and "mine." Then in 9:1 wisdom calls itself "wisdom." Chapter 9 is a continuation of chapter 8. "Me, and "I" in chapter 8:22-31 is about wisdom, and not about Christ. Lady Wisdom here is no more than a personification of wisdom revealed by God and rooted in His very own character.
5. I find it very difficult to avoid Arian heretical implications If we interpret wisdom as Jesus in Prov.8.
6. I believe Ryrie's observation well summarizes the true meaning of this passage (Prov.8:22-31): "While Christ is the revelation of God's wisdom (1 Cor.1:24) and possesses all wisdom and knowledge (Col.2:3), there is no clear

indication that Christ is revealed here. The passage shows that wisdom is older than creation and fundamental to it (v.23), that it assisted in creation as a master workman (v.30), and that it rejoiced in creation (vv.30-31)” [Charles Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible*, New American Standard Translation, 1978, 949].

The summary statement in *Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Old Testament, 923) seems to accurately reflect the meaning of this passage. “Wisdom is said to have been a **craftsman** at God’s side when He created the world. This attribute of God, personified as an assistant in the Lord’s creative work, poetically indicates that God was wise in what He created. Being **at His side** implies intimate association. Saying that God’s work is characterized by wisdom does not suggest that wisdom itself was the designer. God was the designer. This is an important distinction. Wisdom’s claim to be present before and during Creation and to be involved in it gives an important credibility to her claim to reward man. Wisdom personified, rejoices in God’s **presence** and in His created **world**, including **mankind**. If God involved wisdom in His creative work, then certainly people need wisdom!”

In the light of my understanding and interpretation of Proverbs 8, I do not support the view that wisdom in this section is Jesus Christ. Such a view creates more problems than it tries to resolve.