Throughout history, every culture has valued wisdom. Certainly all of us at times have wished we were wiser than we are. When life presents us with a difficult decision or an excruciating problem, and we are at a loss to know what to do, we long for divine wisdom. Sometimes God speaks directly to us to communicate His wisdom; often, however, He speaks through wise people instead.

Because God has given selected people extraordinary wisdom, it is not surprising that the teachings of these wise individuals were written down and preserved for future generations in ancient times. The Bible includes several books widely recognized as wisdom literature, particularly the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. There are also several wisdom psalms that address the same issues and concerns. The book of James in the New Testament has many characteristics of wisdom literature. In addition, the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox canons of the Old Testament include two apocryphal wisdom books: the Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach.

The Israelites were not the only ancient people who recorded wisdom literature. Mesopotamia and Egypt were also centers of wisdom in the ancient world, and both of these civilizations have left us various kinds of wisdom literature. Although there are many similarities between the wisdom of Israel’s pagan neighbors and the wisdom of the Bible, there are also important differences. The worldview of the people of Israel was profoundly different from their neighbors. The Israelites worshiped the one true God, the God who not only imbedded wisdom into His very creation (see Prov. 8:22-31), but also granted to His covenant people the ability to receive and understand His wisdom.

What Is Wisdom?

Defining wisdom is not quite as easy as it might seem. In fact, in some ways it is easier to say what wisdom is not rather than to say what it is. First of all, wisdom is not the same as information. We all know people who have mastered a great deal of data and factual information, yet who are not wise. Wisdom transcends mere information because it involves applying information to life in an appropriate, helpful, and meaningful way. Second, wisdom is not the same as law. The law codes of the Pentateuch are quite different from wisdom literature and have a very different purpose and function. Finally, wisdom should not be understood as a collection of divine promises. Even though some Bible readers have interpreted statements in Proverbs as unbreakable promises from God, this is probably not the most helpful way to understand and utilize this important biblical resource.

What, then, is wisdom? Whether we realize it or not, we rely on wisdom every day of our lives. Wisdom is, in part, the repository of human experience that enables us to live successfully in the world. When driving on a snowy road, for example, we slow down because it is the wise thing to do to avoid an accident. Human experience shows us that people who drive fast in such conditions frequently end up in the ditch. Similarly, we try to eat a healthy diet and exercise regularly because experience shows that people who do this are usually healthier and live longer and more fulfilled lives. Just as we do today, the ancient Israelites carefully observed how the world seems to work, what patterns of life are beneficial, and what patterns are harmful.

The Wisdom of the Bible

Drawing on centuries of experience, the Israelites recorded proverbs, instructions, and dialogues to encapsulate the truths God had taught them through observation. Hundreds of these sayings have been recorded in the Egyptian hieroglyphics crafted of colored glass cover the sarcophagus of Petosiris, priest of Thoth, god of wisdom and writing (ca. 300 BC). The Israelites were not the only ancient people who recorded wisdom literature. Mesopotamia and Egypt were also centers of wisdom in the ancient world, and both of these civilizations have left us wisdom literature. Although there are many similarities between the wisdom of Israel’s pagan neighbors and the wisdom of the Bible, there are also important differences.
In the world of the Bible, where the authoritative voice of woman was seldom heard, the sages who produced the book of Proverbs, in a daring and challenging way, presented the voice of wisdom as that of a woman (1:20-33; 8:1-36; 9:1-12). The first two passages (1:20-33; 8:1-36) are in the form of speeches given by Lady Wisdom. The third passage (9:1-12) contrasts the house of Lady Wisdom and the house of a seductive and adulterous woman (Dame Folly, also the subject of chap. 7).

In a number of places in chapters 1—9, the voice of a female speaker is implied; in these passages, however, the speaker is clearly a woman. Scholars do not know why wisdom teachers utilized a woman to represent wisdom (known in the scholarly circles as Lady Wisdom). The word for wisdom in Hebrew is a feminine noun, but that does not fully explain the practice.

Furthermore, the identity of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs is a subject of speculation among biblical scholars. Some understand it as a poetic and metaphorical personification of God's wisdom. Others think the personified wisdom in these passages is God's attribute of wisdom that has become an independent personal being, who shares the essential nature and characteristics of God (known as the hypostasis of God). Some recent feminist biblical scholars have argued that personified wisdom is a female personification of God's own being, involved in the work of creation and salvation.

Proverbs, however, clearly presents wisdom as “the first of his works” (8:22), and thus not identical with God's being. Wisdom was present with God when He created the world (vv. 22-31), and it was “by wisdom” that God created the world (3:19-20; see also Jer. 10:12). Wisdom, though personified in these passages, is equivalent to God's Word in the book of Proverbs. So, when Wisdom speaks, what one hears is a word from God.

Personified wisdom speaks her words of wisdom to those who are simpleminded (1:20-33; 8:1-36). The language of the first speech is similar to that of a prophetic speech. It begins with the indictment that those without wisdom (those “who are simple”; v. 22) have refused to pay attention to the counsel of wisdom. The first speech concludes with a detailed description of the consequences of rejecting wisdom's admonitions.

Wisdom's second speech has a more positive tone; it is almost self-praise. This speech sharply differs from the seductive speech of the adulterous woman (Dame Folly) who lurks in the street when darkness comes to lead astray the young who have no wisdom (see 7:27). Death is the destiny of those who are victims of Folly. Lady Wisdom, on the other hand, stands boldly in public (intersections and city gates; see 8:2-3) and offers a powerful alternative—the path of truth and uprightness (vv. 8-9). Her speech is addressed to everyone (v. 4). All humans are endowed with the desire to acquire wisdom; the Bible recognizes that some may seek to acquire wisdom on their own (as we find in Gen. 3). The Bible, however, asserts that true wisdom, true knowledge of what is good and evil, is God's gift to those who “fear the Lord” (Prov. 8:13), those who live in recognition of God as the sovereign Creator and Sustainer of the world.

This week's lesson comes from the second speech of Lady Wisdom. In the first part of our passage (8:12-16), wisdom shows how she contributes to the proper conduct of everyone in society, including those who are rulers. In the second part (8:17-21), Lady Wisdom shows the blessings she bestows on those who love her.

1. Wisdom’s Role in Social Order and Government (8:12-16)

12 “Wisdom, dwell together with prudence; I possess knowledge and discretion.
13 To fear the Lord is to hate evil;"
I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech.
14 Counsel and sound judgment are mine; I have insight, I have power.
15 By me kings reign and rulers issue decrees that are just; 16 by me princes govern, and nobles—all who rule on earth.”

12. I, wisdom: This entire chapter is made up of Lady Wisdom’s words. Throughout this chapter, wisdom utilizes the first person pronoun (I) to assert her authority to speak words that will benefit all humans, and to offer counsel to them for proper conduct and behavior. She establishes herself as teacher, guide, and counselor, and even the standard for speech and conduct in society. The meaning of I . . . dwell together with prudence in Hebrew is not clear. With a slight change in the vowels, the Hebrew verb could mean, “I cause to possess”; thus, the first line could be read: “I, wisdom, cause (humans) to possess prudence.” In the same way, the second line, I possess knowledge and discretion, could be read: “I cause [humans] to find knowledge and discretion.” Prudence, knowledge, and discretion are all qualities we need for proper conduct and to maintain order in the world. Proverbs 1:4 makes clear that one of the goals of the book is to give “prudence” to the “simple” and “knowledge and discretion to the young.”

Knowledge in Proverbs is shrewdness, not in the negative sense of cunningness or treachery, but in a positive sense as the opposite of foolishness. Knowledge means discernment, the ability to distinguish between good and evil, and that which is profitable and that which is destructive. Discretion is one’s ability to formulate plans that are realistic and practical. All of these qualities are essential for success and for morally- and ethically-responsible actions in society.

13. The key theological theme of Proverbs can be summed up as “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (1:7). To fear the Lord is to hate evil. Fear of the Lord in Proverbs means recognition of the reality of God’s absolute claim on everything in creation; in the context of Israel’s covenant with God, fear the Lord also means to live in response to God’s claim on Israel by loving, serving, and obeying God with one’s whole heart, soul, and strength (see Deut. 10:12-13). God’s claim on human lives—indeed, of the whole creation—requires us to pursue that which is morally good and profitable for everyone, which in turn means to hate and turn away from anything that is evil and destructive (see also Prov. 3:7). Lady Wisdom identifies specific manifestations of wickedness that she hates: pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech. By an emphatic assertion, I hate, Lady Wisdom disassociates herself from the world of wickedness; the list here presents the opposite of the qualities found in the world of wisdom—prudence, knowledge, and discretion. Pride and arrogance are usually manifested by those who trust in human wisdom and autonomous thinking. These manifestations of evil are also clear evidence of a lack of humility, or fear of the Lord. Perverse speech is another form of wickedness; it does not profit anyone except those who practice it for their own evil purposes.

14. This verse introduces the list of qualities necessary for proper governmental leadership and administration. Counsel . . . insight, or understanding, and power, or might, are among the attributes of the ideal Davidic ruler of Israel according to Isaiah 11:2. In Isaiah, God bestows these attributes on the coming messianic ruler. The book of Job states that God possesses wisdom, power, counsel, and understanding (12:13). In Proverbs, however, Lady Wisdom claims that she is the source of these qualities necessary for successful leadership and administration. Lady Wisdom thus associates herself closely with the Lord; as stated previously, when Lady Wisdom speaks, we hear a word from God. Counsel is advice given to rulers, particularly on political or military matters. Sound judgment means making sound decisions on practical matters. Insight is one’s intellectual capacity and discernment. Power is strength exercised in political or military matters.

15-16. Lady Wisdom claims that political leaders carry out the functions of the govern-
2. The Life of Those Who Love Wisdom (8:17-21)

17 "I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me.
18 With me are riches and honor, enduring wealth and prosperity.
19 My fruit is better than fine gold; what I yield surpasses choice silver.
20 I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice,
21 bestowing a rich inheritance on those who love me and making their treasuries full."

17. This passage begins and ends with a description of the reciprocal relationship of love that exists between Lady Wisdom and those who love her: *I love those who love me* (see also v. 21). The language of love in this passage is taken from the context of family relationships. More specifically, the language of love in these verses belongs to the context of courtship that leads to marriage and family life. Wisdom’s relationship with those who love her is intimate and personal. This love is healthy and wholesome and totally the opposite of the illicit love of the strange woman in chapter 7 (see 7:10-20), who lavishes her words of love upon “a youth who had no sense” (v. 7). In contrast, Lady Wisdom makes clear that she will not disappoint those who apply themselves wholeheartedly to acquire wisdom: *those who seek me find me.*

18. Lady Wisdom presents herself as the source of riches and honor, ... wealth and prosperity that last forever. Those who seek her and find her, those who acquire wisdom from her, will certainly enjoy the blessings and benefits that she lavishes on them. In wisdom tradition, *wealth and prosperity* are usually linked to one’s fear of God. These

verses, however, do not suggest that possession of wisdom is a guarantee of material wealth or temporal success. Wisdom teachers did not think the wise were always rich and powerful, or that wealth was a sign of one’s wisdom. These verses are about the honor and respect bestowed on those who exemplify the virtues of wisdom in their public and private lives. Such people will be respected and remembered for their integrity and honesty forever. The literal meaning of the Hebrew word translated *prosperity* is “righteousness.” This conveys the moral tone of this verse: Wealth without righteousness has no enduring value.

19. Lady Wisdom compares herself to a fruitful tree; however, the fruit she produces is no ordinary fruit that spoils and loses its value. The fruit of wisdom is precious and valuable and enduring; *fine gold* and *choice silver* represent that which is pure, without any trace of impurity.

20-21. Our passage ends with a description of the close relationship between Lady Wisdom and the path of *righteousness and justice.* Lady Wisdom invites her followers to *walk with her in the way of righteousness and justice.* Righteousness and justice are fundamental to the well-being of any society and necessary for the removal of all evil in the world. Righteousness is right conduct and right relationships; *justice* is the fulfillment of legal, moral, and ethical obligations within a community. The path of wisdom is not an easy path; walking along with wisdom requires discipline, intentionality, and commitment to pursue that which is good and pleasing to the Lord. The *rich inheritance* they receive is wisdom—wisdom to live in fear of the Lord, doing that which is just and righteous. Those who inherit wisdom will have their treasuries full; they will be always resourceful and ready to meet any circumstance in life. They will not lack wisdom to make the right decisions, say the words that are gracious and grace-filled, and do the things that would promote wholeness in society.

All Scripture quotations marked † are the author’s own translation from the original languages.

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