

The Banquet of Wisdom

An Exegetical Study of Proverbs 9:1-12

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The Old Testament pericope set for the Second Sunday after Trinity is Proverbs 9:1-10, but I shall take it as far as 9:12, since that is the end of the unit. The reason for the choice of this passage is obvious enough, as it ties in well with Luke 14:15-24, the Gospel for this Sunday. In fact, this poem may well have influenced Jesus in his parable of the guests who refused the invitation to the banquet. It could be in part his interpretation and application of Proverbs 9:1-12.

Many New Testament scholars now claim that the tradition of wisdom was much more important for Jesus and the early Church than has been previously acknowledged. In it he found the warrant for his preaching of the Gospel and his practice of table fellowship with sinners. In it the early Church, beginning with St Paul and St John, found confirmation of his divine status and identity. If that is so, then the Book of Proverbs, which has been so neglected in recent years, deserves much more study and use than it has received. This is especially so for Proverbs 1-9, which contains, as it were, the promise of the Gospel as revealed to the wise men in Ancient Israel.

A. The Context and Structure of Proverbs 9:1-12

This poem comes at the end of the prologue to the Book of Proverbs. The prologue which runs from chapter 1-9 hints that the rest of the book with its many proverbs and passages of instruction is to be read as the words of Lady Wisdom, by which she teaches her disciples and gives them her own spirit (1:23). In this prologue Lady Wisdom addresses her audience directly on three occasions. In 1:20-33 she calls all those who live foolishly to repentance and discipleship in the school of life, with her as their teacher. In 8:1-36 she tells about her task as the teacher of mankind, her status as God's companion since before creation, and her role as the mediator between God and man. In 9:1-12 which follows immediately on her self-disclosure in the previous chapter, she sends out the invitation to a banquet in her house.

The whole of chapter nine forms a single unit. In it there is a clear contrast between the banquet in the house of Lady Wisdom in 9:1-6, and the banquet in the house of Miss Folly in 9:13-18; both parts interpret each other. If that is so, then it is hard to see how 9:7-12 is to be understood. It seems intrusive as it spoils the symmetry of the chapter. It may well have been added, as some reckon, to explain why some people reject Lady Wisdom, and so become seduced by Miss Folly. But, whatever its origin, the present reference to 'me' in 9:11 shows that the NIV is right in taking 9: 5-12 as the words of Lady Wisdom.

Proverbs 9:1-12 then falls into two parts with the following structure and thematic development.

1. The Preparation for the Banquet: 9:1-3)
 - a. The building of the house (9:1)
 - b. The preparation of the food (9:2)
 - c. The sending out of the invitation (9:3)
2. The Reaction to the Invitation: 9:7-12
 - a. The rejection and acceptance of the invitation (9:7-9)
 - b. The condition for the reception of Wisdom and her benefits (9:10-11)

c. The advantage of acceptance and the penalty of rejection (9:12)

B. The Interpretation of Proverbs 9:1-12

It is a general rule that wisdom literature does not always explain itself fully. It hints at and alludes to what it means. It may present an analogy, or else it may juxtapose observations and ideas without telling how they are to be connected. Proverbs, therefore, are not axioms or truisms, but models and aids for meditation and reflection on experience. They encourage the listener to trace connections and reach conclusions by himself. He must learn to think for himself, if he is to make sense of proverbial material. That, then, is my basic assumption about the nature of this text and its proper interpretation.

The poem begins with the description of the preparations which Lady Wisdom makes for her banquet. First of all, she builds her house (9:1). It is no ordinary house, but a large building with seven stone pillars which create the space for a large hall. It is her palatial residence, and perhaps even a temple, since the word for house also means a temple in the Old Testament. If it is a temple, it would be a temple built by the wise King Solomon in Jerusalem. There Lady Wisdom celebrates in God's presence (8:30); there are her gates and doors (8:34); there she mediates God's life and favour to her disciples (8:35). That, at least, is how Sirach 24:1-22 takes this passage. He connects Lady Wisdom with God's glory resident in the temple (24:4), and describes her as God's liturgist in it (24:8-11). So Dame Wisdom who teaches publicly in the school of the world (1:20-22; 8:1-3) also has her own residence. There she holds her banquet and invites her guests to feast with her.

After building her house, Lady Wisdom prepares her banquet (9:2). She slaughters her animals for meat, a rare treat then for any except the very rich. She mixes wine with honey and spices to enhance its flavour and effects (cf Song of Sol. 8:2; Isa. 5:22). Then she sets her table for her guests (cf. Ps. 23:5). Ordinary people would have enjoyed such a spread only on the three great festivals, when they ate their peace offerings and drank their best wine in God's presence together with their family and friends. But a meal like this would have been common at the court of the king. The LXX is probably right in interpreting this banquet as a sacrificial meal. It is the orthodox counterpart to orgiastic, pagan celebration of sex with the crony of Miss Folly in 7:14-18.

Once the meal is ready, Lady Wisdom sends out the invitations to her banquet (9:3). The literal translation of the Hebrew text is given in the NIV: 'She has sent out her maids, (and) she calls from the highest point of the city.' This can be taken in two ways. It could mean that she issues her invitation through her messengers from the top of the town, or else it could also mean that she herself issues her invitation publicly from her residence after sending out her messengers. In the ancient world, the high places of the town made up the acropolis where the temple was situated, together with the royal palace and its fortress. This was also the case in Jerusalem (see Jer. 31:12; Ezek. 17:23, 20:40). The important thing is that the invitation is public and open to all comers. Like a queen, Lady Wisdom invites the townspeople to become permanent guests in her palace. She offers to provide them with much more than they need for their livelihood.

The invitation is for those who are 'simple'. Note that Miss Folly, too, is out after the same people (as in 9:16). 'Simple' is perhaps a little misleading as the translation of *pethi*. The English word suggests the lack of intelligence, knowledge, and even sanity. The Hebrew word refers rather to those who are uneducated and inexperienced, raw and immature. Since they are mentally, emotionally, and spiritually immature, they are reckless (22:3) and gullible (14:15). They lack a 'heart' (9:6); they have no mind or character of their own, but change with their environment; they are not yet firm in their convictions and set in their ways. They are raw material either for Lady Wisdom or Miss Folly. The invitation to the banquet of wisdom is directed to them, because they, unlike the fools, are not yet in the grip of folly,

nor are they, like the wise, already attached to wisdom. Their personal destiny depends on whether they follow Lady Wisdom or Miss Folly.

The invitation consists of three things: an offer, a demand, and a promise. The offer is the decisive thing. Lady Wisdom offers a place at her table. There she gives her guests meat to eat and wine to drink. There is no mention of teaching and instruction. She doesn't give a lesson on how to think and how to live; instead, she gives physical nourishment and mental refreshment to her guests. She offers them more than they need to survive; she offers them the fill of all that will make them thrive. She offers a life of celebration and enjoyment with her. It is interesting to note that in Sirach 24:19-21 Lady Wisdom identifies herself with the food and drink that she gives. That is not the obvious sense of 9:6, even though Miss Folly clearly offers herself to the young man in 9:17 with her sexual talk of bread and wine.

The demand of Lady Wisdom follows from her offer. Those simple, spiritually immature people, who would be her guests, must leave the company of their kind. The footnote in the RSV gives the literal translation of the Hebrew word here as 'simple ones' which can, however, also be understood abstractly as 'simplicity.' The two things go together. As long as an immature person keeps the company of other immature people, he will remain irresponsible and immature. Immaturity is socially reinforced. No matter how sophisticated a person may be, or how sophisticated his peer group seems to him, he must accept the judgment of Lady Wisdom, leave his immaturity, and start off from scratch with her. Only those who accept her critical demand become her guests and benefit from her patronage. With her they must become as little children. They can have no autonomous adulthood; they must become totally dependent on her. She is the source and measure of maturity.

The invitation ends with the promise of vitality and insight. Our English translations do not make it clear that the second and third imperatives are not further demands but promises. They indicate the result of making the break with simplicity and taking up the invitation of Lady Wisdom. We could therefore translate 9:6: 'If you abandon immaturity, you will live and walk in the way of insight.'

The promise of vitality is both spiritual and physical. On the one hand, the banquet of Wisdom gives and nourishes that vitality which comes from God through fellowship with him and participation in his divine life (see 8:35). On the other hand, Lady Wisdom also increases that physical vitality which leads to healthy longevity (see 9:11). In this she differs from Miss Folly who offers her body to take away the souls of her victims, together with all the other dead souls in the realm of the dead (9:18, cf. 2:18, 19; 7:26,27).

As a guest of Lady Wisdom, the disciple who lives with her in fellowship with God is set on the way that leads to insight. Insight is often closely connected with wisdom in Proverbs 1-9 (e.g., 4:5, 7; 7:4). If wisdom is the art of living a good life in fellowship with God, in association with others, and in harmony with the given order of creation, then insight is the moral and spiritual understanding which comes from that way of life. In her invitation, Lady Wisdom offers that kind of insight to those who participate in her banquet. By associating with her and drinking her wine, her guests are led by her on the way that yields ever-increasing insight (cf. 4:18).

From what we have discovered, we would suppose that everybody would be happy to take up the generous invitation of Lady Wisdom. But that is not the case at all. Lady Wisdom makes this quite plain in 9:7-9. Here she addresses her servants who pass on her invitation. Although she invites all comers to the banquet of wisdom, some do not come. Some miss out on it. They disqualify themselves by their reaction to her invitation. They are sceptical of her promises, and irked by her implied criticism of their immaturity. These are the scoffers. They are the worst kind of fools, since they are deluded by their own imagined sophistication and self-importance (2 1:24). Their values are so perverted that they justify the evil they do, and ridicule those who disagree with them (22:10; 24:9). Cynically they

despise, reject, and mock the invitation of Lady Wisdom and the bearers of that invitation. The person who scoffs at wisdom is regarded as ‘wicked’, because he has rejected God by rejecting Lady Wisdom and so in turn is rejected by him (9:7, cf. 3:34^a). He is set against wisdom, because he is set against God. His reaction to the messengers of wisdom discloses his secret attitude to God. There is then no point in trying to instruct (*yôser*) and correct (*môkiah*) a scoffer, when he scorns the invitation to the banquet. The scoffer gains nothing from this except an excuse to vent his hatred of what is good and godly; the messenger gains nothing except verbal abuse and physical injury. It is best for the servant of wisdom to let the scoffers stew in their wickedness and scoffing.

While the proud scoffer is set against Lady Wisdom and quite unreceptive to her invitation, the wise soul is open to her and eager to benefit from her (9:8^b-9). This shows itself in two ways. First, since he has no illusions about his moral and spiritual maturity, he welcomes constructive criticism. He isn’t threatened by it, but regards it as useful for the growth of insight into himself, others, and God. Secondly, since he is aware of how little he knows, he is eager to learn. Note that, since the Hebrew verb ‘give’ in 9:9 lacks an object, it can refer both to correction (cf. 8^b) and to learning (cf. 9^b). Both the teacher and the student gain something good, when a wise teacher instructs a wise student. The teacher gains the love of the student, and the student increases in his learning and in his capacity to learn (*leqah* means both of these in 9b). A wise person is therefore someone who knows that he is still immature and in need of instruction, no matter how much he has learnt. His acceptance of the invitation shows that he is not only wise, but also righteous.

The crux of the matter comes with 9:10. Ultimately, the response of a person to Lady Wisdom and her invitation is decided by his attitude to God. This is summed up by the phrase: the fear of the Lord. It covers both the exercise of personal piety and the practice of public religion. It includes all aspects of a man’s relationship with God from existential awe before God to sacrificial worship, from personal confidence in God to the knowledge of his character, from a sense of morality to obedience to his Law. The fear of the Lord is the prerequisite for both wisdom and insight (cf. 1:7; 15:33; Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10). God gives wisdom to those who honour and worship him. Wisdom in turn empowers them to live a godly life in fellowship with God. Out of this comes the personal knowledge of the holy God given by God (cf. 1:29; 2:5; 30:2). This results in the kind of insight mentioned here and in 9:6. When a person gets to know God, he gains insight into God and the things of God. He discerns the hand of God in the world and in his own life. That in turn increases his reverence for God, which is the quintessence of wisdom. Therefore 9:10 connects the banquet of wisdom closely with the fear of the Lord. It seems to imply that the invitation of Wisdom separates the righteous God-fearer from the wicked scoffer.

Verse 11 shows that the gift of insight serves a very practical purpose. Through it Lady Wisdom lengthens and fulfils the lives of her guests. The first half of 9:11 mentions the extent of a person’s life, while the second half of it talks about the quality of it. Its literal translation is: ‘and years of vitality will be added’ (cf. 3:2). Lady Wisdom is therefore a generous hostess, whose chief concern is for the good of her guests. She nourishes the growth of insight through which she in turn nurtures the lives of her disciples.

The final verse of our poem sums up the results of accepting or rejecting the invitation of Lady Wisdom. In the final count, wisdom is something deeply personal. It has to do with a person’s self, his soul, his character. It makes him a particular kind of person with a particular mentality, and personality. It gives him his soul and nourishes it. And so a wise man benefits personally from his wisdom. It helps him grow and flourish as a person. But the reverse is also true. The scoffer spurns himself, when he spurns wisdom (see 8:36). He damages his soul more drastically than he ever realizes. By refusing the nourishment given at the table of Lady Wisdom, he starves himself to death. His soul gradually dies from malnutrition, and he ends up in the clutches of Miss Folly together with her host of dead souls (9:13-18). His negative reaction to wisdom seals his fate.

C. Theological and Homiletical Considerations

1. In Matthew and Luke, Jesus identifies himself with the figure of Lady Wisdom. This comes out best in Matthew 11:16-19 and Luke 7:31-35 where Jesus defends his practice of eating and drinking with sinners. Each gives a slightly different slant to the matter. In Matthew, Jesus says that like Lady Wisdom he is justified by his 'deeds'. He then goes on in 11:20-30 to condemn the three main cities of Galilee for their unbelief in him, and to offer himself to unsophisticated 'babes'. That fulfils what was said of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 9:1-12. In Luke, Jesus says that he like Lady Wisdom is justified by his 'children', i.e. his disciples. Luke 7:36-50 then adds the story of the woman who came to anoint and wash him as he dined with Simon the Pharisee. The sinner is invited to wisdom's table that she may live and walk in the ways of the Lord. Luke implies that Jesus is the ultimate and perfect embodiment of wisdom. He achieves all that wisdom promises, when he forgives her sin and restores her peace. He gives her life. The action of Jesus in forgiving her is vindicated by her love and devotion to him, which is the mark of the true disciple of Lady Wisdom (see Prov. 8:17, 21). So Jesus justifies his preaching of the Gospel from the book of Proverbs. It should be remembered in this connection that Lady Wisdom is presented in Proverbs 1-9 not only as a prophet who calls people to repentance (Prov. 1:22-33), and a teacher who instructs the human race (Prov. 8:6—16, 32-34), but also as a saviour from evil (Prov. 2: 10 - 19; 4:6; 7:4, 5), and the benefactor of her disciples (Prov. 3:13-18; 4:8, 9, 13; 8:17—21, 34, 35).
2. In a book called *The Themes of St Luke* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1970), J. Navone does a study of the banquets in Luke. He shows how Luke 7:31-50 sets the theological framework for the understanding of the six other banquet scenes in the Gospel. They are 5:27-39; 11:37-52; 14:1-24; 15:1-32; 22:1-38 and 24:13-49. They are all to be understood as banquets of wisdom. The first five of these seven scenes show how these banquets create a division between the scribes and Pharisees, who regarded themselves students of wisdom, and the 'foolish' tax collectors and sinners, whom Jesus invites to enjoy table fellowship with him. Luke 14:15-24 explains this division. Since those who first received the invitation to the heavenly banquet turned it down, the invitation goes to those who were not originally invited - the spiritually impoverished, handicapped, blinded, and maimed Jews as well as the unbelieving Gentiles. The parables in Luke 15 mark the final division between these two parties. The older son refuses to celebrate the return of the lost son. The last two banquet scenes are the institution of the Lord's Supper in 22:1-38 and the resurrection meals in 24:13-49. The disciples of Jesus alone are present at these. Here Jesus is no longer a guest at the meals of other people, but acts as the host who serves the guests at his own banquet.
3. Since the time of Origen, the Fathers of the Church have interpreted Proverbs 9:1-6 sacramentally. The Church was the house of wisdom with the altar as the banquet table. In it Christ presided as the host in the sacrificial banquet of wisdom. Here he gave the bread of his body to nourish his guests and the wine of his blood to refresh them. Here they received eternal life from God and were set on the way that leads to spiritual enlightenment. This meal was open to all born-again children of God who needed this food and heeded this invitation. This meal separated the scoffing unbeliever from the simple believer (see John 6). This sacramental interpretation is not as fanciful as some modern critics maintain. It has its roots in Luke's Gospel, and does not depend on the doubtful use of allegory so prevalent in the Early Church. In fact, the obvious application of this poem is in the Lord's Supper.
4. The most unexpected feature of this passage is its stress on festive celebration. Since Proverbs was basically designed as a textbook for religious education in Ancient Israel, we would expect the Prologue to culminate in an appeal for diligence in learning and zeal in the application of what was learnt. Instead, we have an invitation to a sumptuous meal. There is no talk of effort and achievement.

The accent falls rather on rich enjoyment and lavish nourishment, on full satisfaction and mental intoxication, on total revitalization and growing enlightenment. The kind of religious education promoted in Proverbs therefore finds its goal in the banquet of wisdom which lies at the heart of worship both in Ancient Israel and in the Christian Church. The goal of Lady Wisdom is to get her student-guests to enjoy and celebrate the goodness of God in worship together with her. We can do no better than that as the teachers of our people.

