

## TWO WOMEN IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

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### ***Introduction***

The Book of Proverbs is addressed principally to young men. This is evident from the opening verses of the book and from repeated warnings to “my son.”<sup>1</sup> This book, prized by believers old and young, preserves ancient instruction that was codified to help prepare young men for life and leadership. If the lad could learn to honor and obey his father and his mother in the incubator of the home,<sup>2</sup> he would be well on his way to navigating successfully in the larger arena of society.

While instructions for young women are conspicuously absent, that does not mean that Hebrew society did not encourage wisdom and literacy among its women. On the contrary, wisdom itself is personified as a feminine virtue and is depicted with feminine pronouns like “she” and “her.”<sup>3</sup>

Among the young man’s faithful tutors were women. Mention the author of the biblical Proverbs and Solomon readily comes to mind. We should not forget, however, that wise women also are portrayed as counselors. Young men were to give heed to their mothers. A chief counselor of the obscure King Lemuel was his mother. He repeated her teaching as one of the beneficial guides that brought him to responsible leadership.<sup>4</sup>

This oracle is thereupon followed immediately by Proverbs’ descriptive picture of the Bible’s virtuous woman. Once the young man obtained majority, he would need the right kind of woman in his life to be his faithful counselor and companion. Behind her successful husband stands this successful woman of Proverbs 31. His heart safely trusts her to manage his domestic affairs and to do him only good.

God-fearing women who followed this divine pattern were honored in the spiritual community. We hear nothing in Proverbs about their spiritual or domestic training, yet they are regarded as worthy guides for the next generation and as confidants for the godly men who needed them.

### ***Women that Mother Warned Against***

Besides virtuous women, there are also evil women in the Book of Proverbs. Solomon warns of immoral seductresses who prey on simpletons and fools.

This is no small issue in the Proverbs. More than half of the first nine chapters issue danger signals against the prostitute and adulteress. It is a major theme in chapters five, six,

seven, and nine. The warnings are extensive because of a man's natural vulnerability to sexual temptation. He should never think that he can take fire into his bosom without being burned.<sup>5</sup>

Besides the scandalous misery that stems from every adultery, Proverbs warns of another danger that lurks especially in the city. Besides adulterous women, there are pagan prostitutes. These are agents of idolatry whose godless mission is to plunge lives into the pit of destruction.

### ***The Two Women of Proverbs 9***

After extensive development of the graces and origins of Lady Wisdom in chapter 8, the theme continues in chapter 9. Lady Wisdom appears all the more attractive when compared to "Dame Folly" at the end of this chapter.

At first reading, the clamorous woman of 9:13 appears to be nothing more than an impudent tart, a promiscuous woman who is looking for trouble. She must be understood in the light of the virtuous woman at the beginning of chapter 9, and that woman is no ordinary woman—she is Lady Wisdom. Because of deliberate parallels between the two women, each must be viewed in the light of the other. Consider these similarities:

1. Both have a house<sup>6</sup>
2. Both have a house on a promontory of the city<sup>7</sup>
3. Both invite seekers to their homes<sup>8</sup>
4. Both offer refreshment in their homes<sup>9</sup>
5. Both offer something more than a meal<sup>10</sup>

The dramatic difference is in the offer. Lady Wisdom offers life. After a few fleeting "pleasures of sin for a season," Dame Folly, on the other hand, robs men of their lives as she plunges them into the depths of hell.

The identities of these women become clearer when we learn that ancient temples were always built on the high places of a city.<sup>11</sup> The house of each woman was a religious shrine. The meals they prepared were religious, sacral offerings. And the personal association with either woman would have life and death consequences.

Dame Folly represents so much more than brazen foolishness. Personified as a cult prostitute, she does not merely coddle the foolish atheist who "has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'"<sup>12</sup> To the delight of the devil she fills the atheist's spiritual vacuum and leads him in the worship of worthless idols.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

Two women—two ways of life, two ways of viewing oneself in God's world, two ways of living and dying. The right life companion can mean the difference between heaven and hell.

The wisdom that is from above and that leads to God is more precious than rubies.<sup>14</sup> The virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 is a man's ideal life companion and confidant. Yet she is more: she is the epitome of wisdom, for her worth also is far above rubies.<sup>15</sup>

In the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31, women of all ages have an ideal to strive for. In this marvelous woman, eligible bachelors have a noble companion to seek out. In so doing they will begin to find life.

“He who finds a wife finds a good thing, And obtains favor from the LORD.” (Prov 18:22)

“For whoever finds me (wisdom) finds life, And obtains favor from the LORD.” (Prov 8:35)

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<sup>1</sup> “The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel... <sup>4</sup>To give prudence to the simple, To the young man knowledge and discretion” (Prov 1:1, 4). Twenty-three random verses in Proverbs are addressed to “my son.”

<sup>2</sup> “My son, hear the instruction of your father, And do not forsake the law of your mother” (Prov 1:8; also 6:20).

<sup>3</sup> Granted, wisdom (חָכְמָה) is a feminine word in Hebrew. This, however, does not fully explain the virtue's personification in Proverbs 8. For a fuller treatment of “lady wisdom,” see Roland Murphy's *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, pp. 133-140, and Bruce Waltke's article “Lady Wisdom as Mediatrix: An Exposition of Proverbs 1:20-33,” *Presbyterion: Covenant Seminary Review* 14 (Spring 1988) 1-15.

<sup>4</sup> “The sayings of King Lemuel—an oracle his mother taught him...” (Prov 31:1).

<sup>5</sup> Prov 6:27

<sup>6</sup> 9:1, 14.

<sup>7</sup> 9:3, 14.

<sup>8</sup> 9:4, 16.

<sup>9</sup> 9:5, 17.

<sup>10</sup> 9:11, 18.

<sup>11</sup> A prime example outside of Palestine is the Temple of Diana of the Ephesians (Temple of Artemis) on a high bluff over Ephesus.

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 14:1. The source of all wisdom is found in the pivotal verse of Proverbs 9, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom...” (Prov 9:10). Proverbs' definition of wisdom here and in 1:7 leads us to conclude that the opposite of wisdom is not ignorance, but sinful rebellion.

<sup>13</sup> Ironically, modern devotees of Sophia (Greek for “wisdom”), in their search for wisdom with a feminine face, have missed the true message of Lady Wisdom. She leads to the reverent fear of Jehovah (Prov 9:10), but feminists have created the goddess Sophia in their own image.

<sup>14</sup> Prov 3:15.

<sup>15</sup> Prov 31:10.