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## Proverbs 3:13-20: an exposition

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# PROVERBS 3:13-20

## An Exposition

*Ragnar C. Teigen*

Our lesson stands as the Old Testament text for the twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, Series B, in *Contemporary Worship* 6. The corresponding New Testament lessons are Hebrews 4:12-13 and Mark 10:17-27. While the listing is common knowledge, data is given here simply as a matter of quick and ready reference. We are confining our attention to the Old Testament lesson though we are by no means unmindful of interrelationships and their importance among all three lessons for this Sunday or any other in a given church year.

The lesson is a hymn, as modern sources on the Book of Proverbs have observed. Hymns are not the preponderant form in Proverbs. Chapter 8:22-31 also belongs to this category, while much of Proverbs is made up of sentence observations or admonitions (cf. 10:1ff). The hymn form is found more often in Psalms, as we might expect; but we need not exempt the sages of Israel from the creative abilities of hymn composition, should occasion demand it. When the wisdom figure reaches proportions of the kind found in our lesson or Proverbs 8:22-31, hymns seem a most proper mode of expression since in these poems wisdom is depicted in imagery of celestial dimensions. Our lesson is intent on recommending wisdom to any and all listeners; with such a main purpose in mind, we turn to the passage itself for a further exposition.

### THE VALUE OF WISDOM

Verses 13-15 provide an opening and main reason for loyal discipleship by using the technique of comparison. Wisdom is worth following because it offers more value than the best of metals, silver and gold, or the finest of jewels. Verse 13 opens with the expression, “happy” (R.S.V.), more traditionally rendered as “blessed.” Other wisdom poems have the same introductory affirmations, cf. Psalm 1:1, 32:1, etc., and note also the Beatitudes, Matthew 5:3-11 or Luke 6:20-22. In our lesson the sage stresses differing values by declaring that wisdom and understanding is far better than wealth gained from commercial transactions or the satisfactions derived from the most

highly prized gems. True happiness consists not primarily in the best of possessions people own but in other values such as wisdom.

In verse 14, the pronouns “it”, “its” (R.S.V.) appear to be better translated “her” in both instances. The result is a consistent imagery of wisdom as a woman figure throughout verses 13-18 since in verses 15-18 that image is portrayed by the pronouns, “she” and “her.” This also does more justice to the tone and spirit of verses 13-14. The imagery does not make wisdom in this portrayal unique as a giver of blessings since, quite apart from this picture (e.g. Chapter 2), wisdom still offers the same or similar blessings. More unusual is the portrayal of the woman figure at all and the celestial or broadly societal proportions she reaches in such personification. The male depiction is the usual fashion when the Bible speaks of the heavenly world. Certainly God is consistently male or masculine gender in the Bible, even though he exhibits feminine characteristics, e.g., compassion and tenderness. On the other hand, we may well wonder if these characteristics are not common to both male and female roles for our societies in the human realm. Female authority over all society or pre-existent with God in heaven (Proverbs 2, 3, 8) is not usual in the Biblical spectrum. Here the sages present their quiet apologetic against foreign goddesses and fertility cults of the time. But notice that the woman figure in Proverbs is by and large profoundly a teacher — an instructress in exhorting people to life, not some goddess attempting to assume God’s place. Not even the calmly adventurous sages of Israel could have stepped that far from tradition and not even within the grand hymn of Proverbs 8:22-31.

Verses 14-15 point to a well worn but not worn out theme: Life has ascending priorities. Good ones often but not always of equal calibre; the constellations in our heavens can be quantitatively measured through such sciences as astrophysics but can we still appreciate the poetry of sun and moon, as much now as humans have for ages? Who can quarrel with gold and jewels but must we not strive to understand how we shall appreciate them in their proper place? Midas is so familiar we need only mention how he valued gold and lost sight of all else. He needed the human touch of wisdom and discernment more than any touch of gold. Readers are long since familiar with related and wise admonitions like “not by bread alone . . .” or “seek ye first . . .”. In many instances ascending values need to be held together for maximum significance. Must we really have to choose between material on the one hand and the intangible values on the other? To separate wisdom and wealth in this fashion is to do both an injustice. Such dichotomizing is certainly not the hymn writer’s intention. That it is both improper and unnecessary shows up in Verse 17 where wisdom herself is described as offering to followers riches along with other less measureable benefits.

Verses 16-18 expand on reasons why disciples should follow wisdom. She bestows life. “Long life is in her right hand.” Here the hymn writer is reflecting on something all Israel had considered a prime blessing over the centuries — longevity! In contrast to a brief life span (lamented for example in Psalm 90), a long life on this earth was viewed among the distinctive legacies. Yet life had more than length. Quality, too, was essential. It is illustrated in our lesson by the word “honour.” While a basic meaning in Hebrew is “weight”, this in turn refers to such concepts as “influence”, and “reputation”, e.g., the esteem which one enjoyed in a given community. Joseph in

the court of Pharaoh possessed "honour" in such senses once he had established himself.

Other attractions offered by wisdom are described in the expressions "ways of pleasantness" and "paths of peace." The "ways" and "paths" signify totality of life on this earth characterized as a peaceful, tranquil existence. All of this sounds ideal, perhaps unrealistic, unattainable in our modern world or any other age. Yet the affirmations in our lesson merit our attention. In a time of increased complexities within technologically oriented societies, it seems pertinent to remind ourselves of the need for a tranquil centre in our beings. The lesson suggests that the encouragement of such quietness should assume the proportions of a style of life, rather than only momentary placidity. In a day when religious movements are capable of breaking out in stark violence, we might well consider those biblical canons which recommend stability as vital to life itself. The hymn we are considering, not to mention other references in Proverbs, are of value toward implementing the qualities suggested.

In verse 18, wisdom is praised as the "tree of life." Elsewhere, Genesis 3:22, Revelation 2:7, this figure is viewed as a source of primordial life. Here it denotes a vitality, a life energy which wisdom offers followers. Interestingly, while Genesis and Revelation relate the tree to life that goes on forever, the wisdom teacher saw fit in the lesson to place the tree image in the midst of our human life. Evidently the figure of the "tree of life" serves as an auxiliary image to wisdom in verse 18 and is meant to emphasize even further the blessings of which she is capable. Commentators are generally agreed that the tree of life in Proverbs comes out as a pale metaphor. Their proposals though unsatisfying may be right. In the series of benefits offered by wisdom in verses 13-18, vital life energy provided by the tree might be construed as climactic. One wonders if it is coincidental that this figure occurs in the verse just prior to verses 19-20, where wisdom takes on greater dimensions than ever before.

## WISDOM BEYOND LIFE ON EARTH

Verses 19-20 form the second and concluding division of the hymn. Here wisdom is viewed beyond the perspectives of life and society on earth. It is now a vital part of the original creation itself, though subservient to God the Creator supreme. There is no question here about the sovereign role of God in creation. This theme is abundantly emphasized, e.g., in Isaiah 40-55, cf. 40:12-20, 27-31; 42:5; 45:18 or in the Psalms, e.g., 78:69; 104:1-9. Further, the visualizations of primordial creation are as demonstrative of divine sovereignty in the noted references as in our hymn. A salient contribution of the wisdom circles is the theological affirmation that wisdom itself pertains not only to this life and society but that it had its origin with God in the beginning of all things. This is the basic theological declaration of wisdom in the Old Testament: wisdom was with God and God was with wisdom from the time of creation. This much is affirmed by verses 19-20. The sophisticated problem in these verses concerns the nature of wisdom, or the intent in how it is portrayed.

Is wisdom here a quality or attribute of Yahweh, e.g., like "righteousness" or is there a suggestion that wisdom is meant to have an independent existence? This is not obvious. The personification of wisdom in verses 13-18 and elsewhere in Proverbs 1-9,



especially 8:22-31 is clearly depicted. Verses 13-18 personify her in human society; 8:22-31 personifies her in the celestial dimensions of the original creation; verses 19-20 leave us guessing about imagery! With modern commentators this much can be said with certainty: verses 19-20 represent a step on the way toward the fuller theological picture of wisdom presented for us in Proverbs 8:22-31.

Verse 20 describes a world view commonly held at the time. The earth, a flat disc rested on giant pillars reaching down to the very foundations of the great underworld ocean. This ocean provided water for the earth through holes in the surface where lakes, springs, etc. formed. Over the earth resided the dome of the heavens containing sun, moon, stars and constellations but also giving added moisture to earth in the form of rain. In the Old Testament as a whole it is very important for Israel's faithful that God, and no other, should be seen as creator and sustainer of this earth and universe. For Israel's wisdom circles this view was equally vital and they provide their declarations of it, one summary as it is glimpsed in verses 19-20 of our lesson.

#### SELECTED READINGS AND NOTES

McKane, William. *Proverbs*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975. (Original printing, London: SCM Press Ltd., 1970.) This volume stands with other valuable works in *The Old Testament Library Series*.

Whybray, R.N. *The Book of Proverbs, The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible*. Cambridge: At the University Press, 1972. A semi-popular handy source for ministers and teachers.

Whybray, R.N. *Wisdom in Proverbs, Studies in Biblical Theology, #45*, London: SCM Press, 1965, pages 98ff. A specialized study on literary forms and concepts in Proverbs with attention to backgrounds in the Near East, especially Egypt.

Habel, Norman C. "The Symbolism of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9", *Interpretation*, XXVI, 2, April 1972. My assumptions about the holistic character of "ways" and "paths", and the importance of the woman figure symbology, all of which occur in our lesson, have been influenced by Habel's article in addition to other works including those listed here.