

Two Voices

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According to Proverbs, everyone hears conflicting voices saying, “Listen to me!” But behind the cacophony of daily existence, only two speakers call out to mankind personally and through their spokesmen. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen explains the competing worldviews that appeal to mankind: “In Proverbs 1-9, Wisdom offers love within limits, freedom within form, life within law. It is within the bounds of cosmic order that human freedom and fellowship are nurtured. In contrast to Wisdom, Woman Stranger [Lady Folly] and sinners promise a *communitas* of wealth and unbridled passion. Their invitations, however, conceal only a *communitas* of death (1:32; 2:18; 5:5; 7:26, 27; 9:18).”

Note, as well, that the battle is waged in both private and public. Both Wisdom and Folly promote their perspectives within the realm of ideas. Both want to influence the public spheres of life. Both want to capture individual minds and imaginations. And, both propose lifestyle corresponding their worldviews, folly and wisdom.

Wisdom speaks through pious family members (father, mother, and grandfather) representing the sacred tradition of ancient Israel. They address their “son” repeatedly: “Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching” (1:8; see also 2:1; 4:1, 10; 5:7; 7:24). Likewise, Folly speaks through her proxies. “Sinners” incite the gullible to a lifestyle of violence and graft under the guise of faux-brotherhood: “Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood; let us ambush the innocent without reason ... we shall find all precious goods, we shall fill our houses with plunder; throw in your lot among us; we will all have one purse” (1:11—14). Folly also communicates through the temptress (“forbidden woman,” “evil woman,” “adulteress,” “married woman,” and “prostitute,” addressing a “young man lacking sense” (7:7b), enticing him with illicit sexuality.

Wisdom calls out in the public square: “In the street, in the markets she raises her voice; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates.” She asks, “How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?” (1:20--22a). She assures everyone that, “whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster” (v. 33). Personified Wisdom (Lady Wisdom) also speaks to prospective followers “in the heights beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries aloud” (8:2—3). In chapter 9 she speaks from a position of ultimate influence, authority, and visibility--“from the highest places in the town” (v. 3b). She sends representatives to converse with everyone and declares: “Whoever is simple, let him turn in here” (v. 4a).

Lady Folly speaks similarly. She calls out to the passersby “from the highest place in the town” (9:14b) and declares audaciously: “Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!” And to him who lacks sense she says, ‘Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant’” (vv. 16—17). But Folly merely mimics Wisdom. Verse 13b declares that she “knows nothing” and she has



little to offer. Rhetorically, she can only parrot Wisdom and hope the subterfuge snares someone off guard.

But at a deeper level, the two voices represent more than ethical alternatives or differing worldviews and social agendas. Lady Folly, for instance, is more than the “personification of foolish thought and behavior.” In ancient Israel promiscuity and infidelity (or cultic prostitution) were real moral, social, and spiritual evils. But the Old Testament amplifies those sins metaphorically as apostasy and idolatry. In reality, Folly represents the “gods of the peoples” (Deut 6:14), who call out to humanity with false promises, alternative realities, and ontological ascent. This is why the location of the rival households at the “highest places in town” is significant. As Tremper Longman points out, “Throughout the ancient Near East, the only building allowed on the high place was the temple.” Wisdom and Folly, therefore, represent two temples and two divine speakers. Van Leeuwen summarizes how each woman impacts human imagination evocatively: “Wisdom and Folly are powerfully attractive ‘women’ who issue contrary invitations to naïve young men ... Like the love that pulls humans either to Augustine’s City of God or to the City of this World, so Proverbs 1—9 presents humans as pulled by *eros* for Wisdom or Folly.”

This duality, Wisdom and Folly, necessitates a decision. Listen to one or the other. Associate with one temple or another. Love one and hate the other. There is no neutral position, no middle ground, no objective stance by which to evaluate the two. As Longman says, the book of Proverbs urgently queries its readers: “Will we dine with Woman Wisdom, who represents Yahweh’s wisdom, even Yahweh himself? Or will we dine with Woman Folly, who represents the false gods of the surrounding nations”?