

Rest: Life in the Easy Yoke of Jesus! Week 5

Additional Resource: “Jesus as Wisdom” by Michael Heiser¹

Proverbs 8:22–31 describes the Wisdom of God as a person or entity—a deity-like figure who assists God with the creation of the world. The passage is crucial for understanding the New Testament’s use of Wisdom imagery and terminology for Jesus.

Jesus as Wisdom in the New Testament

The writers of the New Testament often identify Jesus with Wisdom. Paul’s reference to Jesus as the “Wisdom of God” in 1 Corinthians 1:24 may be an explicit statement to that effect. However, in light of 1 Corinthians 1:30, Paul may not have meant to identify Jesus specifically with the Wisdom of Prov 8: “But from him you are in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom to us from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” Paul here simply seems to include Wisdom in a list of theological themes. Since Paul may have derived his notion of Jesus as co-Creator (Col 1:16; 1 Cor 8:6) from other sources, many hesitate to attribute a fully developed “Wisdom Christology” to Paul.

Luke 11:46–51 provides a much more striking example. This text, specifically Luke 11:49, directly refers to the personified Wisdom of God in Prov 8:

So he [Jesus] said, “Woe to you also, legal experts, because you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers! Woe to you, because you build the tombs of the prophets, and your fathers killed them! As a result you are witnesses, and you approve of the deeds of your fathers, because they killed them and you build their tombs! For this reason also the wisdom of God said, ‘I will send to them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and persecute,’ so that the blood of all the prophets that has been shed from the foundation of the world may be required of this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the temple building. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of this generation!”

At the beginning of this passage, Jesus rails against the hypocrisy of His enemies. But in Luke 11:49, He suddenly introduces another speaker, the Wisdom of God, who proceeds to say in the first person, “I will send to them prophets and apostles.” Here, Jesus does not directly quote any OT passage about Wisdom, but rather alludes to a passage in the Wisdom of Solomon, a book certain Jews and early Christians considered sacred. According to Wisdom 7:27, Wisdom “makes everything new, although she herself never changes. From generation to generation she enters the souls of holy people, and makes them God’s friends and prophets.” With this allusion, Jesus implies that *Wisdom* sent the prophets and apostles—an action that both the OT and NT attribute to *God the Father* (see Isa 6:8; 10:6; Jer 1:7; 1 Cor 1:28). Jesus’ statement therefore identifies Wisdom with God the Father.

¹ Michael S. Heiser, “Jesus as Wisdom,” in *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016).

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A comparison of Luke 11:49 with the parallel account in Matt 23:29–36, particularly verse Matt 23:34, indicates the deeper reality of Jesus' statement:

[And Jesus said,] “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees—hypocrites!—because you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous, and you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in the blood of the prophets!’ Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets! And you—fill up the measure of your fathers! Serpents! Offspring of vipers! How will you escape from the condemnation to hell? For this reason, behold, I am sending to you prophets and wise men and scribes. Some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will flog in your synagogues and will pursue from town to town, so that upon you will come all the righteous blood shed on the earth from the blood of righteous Abel up to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation!”

Whereas Jesus quotes Wisdom as a second speaker in Luke, Matthew puts the very words of Wisdom—whom Luke directly identified with God the Father—into Jesus' own mouth. Together, Luke and Matthew fully identify Jesus as God's co-Creator, Wisdom, whom Luke also identifies as Yahweh, the God of Israel.

The writer of Hebrews also identifies Jesus with Wisdom. Hebrews 1:1–3 reads:

Although God spoke long ago in many parts and in many ways to the fathers by the prophets, in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made the world, who is the radiance [Greek: *apaugasma*] of his glory and the representation of his essence, sustaining all things by the word of power.

The word *apaugasma* is exceedingly rare: it occurs only here in the NT and once in the LXX's version of the Wisdom of Solomon (7:24–26):

For wisdom is more mobile than any motion;
because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.
For she is a breath of the power of God,
and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;
therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her.
For she is a reflection [*apaugasma*] of eternal light,
a spotless mirror of the working of God,
and an image of his goodness.

Hebrews 1:3 draws from Wisdom of Solomon 7:22, where *apaugasma*—the radiance of God's glory—refers specifically to Wisdom. For the writer of Hebrews, then, Wisdom and Jesus are one in the same.

The Jewish theology of Jesus' day had a developed theology of Wisdom as an enthroned divine being in Yahweh's Divine Council (see the links below). The Jewish writer of Wisdom of Solomon contributed to the development of this theology by elaborating on the idea of

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personified Wisdom in the book of Proverbs. The following two examples of this theology were written a century or two before Jesus:

O God of my fathers, and Lord of mercy, who has made all things with your word, And ordained man through your Wisdom, that he should have dominion over the creatures which you have made, And order the world according to equity and righteousness, and execute judgment with an upright heart: Give me Wisdom, who sits alongside your throne; and do not reject me from among your children:

And Wisdom was with you, who knows your works, and was present when you made the world, and knew what was acceptable in your sight, and right in your commandments. O send her out of your holy heavens, and from the throne of your glory, that being present she may work with me, that I may know what is pleasing unto you. For she knows and understands all things, and she shall lead me soberly in my doings, and preserve me in her power (Wisdom of Solomon 9:1–4, 9–11).

Wisdom shall praise herself, and shall glory in the midst of her people. In the council of the most High shall she open her mouth, and triumph before his power. I came out of the mouth of the most High, and covered the earth as a cloud. I dwelt in high places, and my throne is in a cloudy pillar. I alone compassed the circuit of heaven, and walked in the bottom of the deep (Sirach 24:1–5).

These Jewish writers—committed to the uniqueness of the true God, Yahweh—startlingly place Wisdom alongside the throne of God, or depict Wisdom as coming from God’s throne. Some Jews considered this sort of Wisdom language to coincide perfectly with other Godhead language in the OT (see the link below). Others took this language another way—one that had dramatic ramifications for framing Paul’s struggle with Jewish loyalty to the law.

The word for Wisdom is grammatically feminine in Hebrew, which explains why the writer of Proverbs uses feminine pronouns in personified descriptions of Wisdom. Some Jewish theologians, making much of the fact that the word for “law” (*tora*) is also grammatically feminine, identified the law itself with Wisdom. This connection meant that, for many Jews, the Torah (as Wisdom) was divine. While NT writers understood Wisdom in terms of Prov 8 (as a co-Creator deity alongside God), other Jews saw God’s Word, Torah, as Wisdom and His agent of creation.

Ultimately, the NT merges these ideas by equating God in human form with the Word (John 1:1–3, 14). But many Jews, refusing to see Jesus as the focal point of these references, put their loyalty in the Law. Given this, Paul’s struggle to articulate the gospel “apart from the law [Torah]” takes on an entirely new light (Rom 3:21). The apostles’ strategy of defining Wisdom as Jesus was crucial for their articulation of the gospel: that Jesus, as Wisdom (and the Word), is the means of salvation—not the Mosaic law (compare Matt 5:17–20).

Jesus, Wisdom, and Nicaea

The early church’s identification of Jesus with Wisdom in Prov 8 became a controversial issue in early theological debate. The Council of Nicaea was called in AD 325 to address a debate about the relationship of Jesus to God the Father. The dominant view at the council was that Jesus (the Son) was God in the flesh—that the Word (or Wisdom) incarnated in the person known as Jesus of Nazareth. Consequently, there was never a time when the Son had not existed. In contrast, the

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Arians believed that there was a time when the Son had not existed—that he was a created being. One of their arguments came from Prov 8:22: “The LORD possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old” (ESV).

The Hebrew verb translated “possessed” (*qanah*) was at the root of the controversy. The verb has a wide range of meanings in biblical usage, including “to create” (Gen 14:19, 22; Deut 32:6). Understanding it as such, the Arians argued that Prov 8:22 states that Wisdom is a created being. Therefore, they argued, since the NT identifies Wisdom with the Son, the Son is also created. However, they maintained that the Son (Jesus) served as the agent for the rest of God’s creation (Col 1:16; 1 Cor 8: 6) and Savior of the world.

Those who held that the NT presents Jesus as the truly incarnate, eternal God argued that the best translation of *qanah* in Prov 8:22 is “bring forth.” Genesis 4:1 provides an example of this translation, where Eve “brings forth” her son Cain. There, the use of *qanah* does not convey conception (i.e., bringing into existence)—another verb (*harah*) expresses this idea in the same verse. Rather, it speaks of Cain’s emergence from Eve’s womb after having been conceived. This reflects the ancient Israelites belief that *birth* was not “creation,” but a “bringing forth” of something already living inside the womb. Hence, *qanah* refers to *the moment of emergence*—not the beginning of the life. The Godhead therefore brought forth Wisdom to assist God the Father with creation. This understanding of the verb in Prov 8:22 preserves the Son’s eternity (who is Wisdom).