

# Proverbs 8: Simply Wisdom Personified or Christ Himself?

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## Introduction

The point of this paper is to examine Proverbs 8 and give an educated opinion of whether Wisdom personified in that chapter is just that, a personification of a faculty of God, or Christ himself, an actual *hypostasis*, that is, a person separate from the Father, though co-eternal with him. This paper will focus on verses 22-31 in particular, as they are the most debated and they are also the ones that seem to speak most Christologically (if one accepts that interpretation). To come to a position on this issue, this paper will move from wisdom as a whole in Scripture and the Proverbs to its use in Proverbs 8, especially verses 22-31. While the interpretation of these passages is and must always remain an open question this side of heaven (the New Testament contains no explicit statement on the issue), an informed view is possible and beneficial.

## Wisdom Defined

Webster defines wisdom as, “1. the quality or state of being wise; sagacity, discernment, or insight. 2. scholarly knowledge or learning. 3. wise sayings or teachings; precepts. 4. wise act or saying.” The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (TWOT henceforth) says the following about חֵכְמָה:

The usages of ḥokmâ cover the whole gamut of human experience. Wisdom is seen in the skill of technical work in making garments for the high priest (Exo 28:3), craftsmanship in metal work (Exo 31:3, 6), as well as the execution of battle tactics (Isa 10:13). Wisdom is required from government leaders and heads of state for administration (Deut 34:9; 2Sam 14:20), including pagan leaders as well as Israelites (Ezek 28:cts-5). The Messiah demonstrates wisdom and discernment in his function as leader of his people (Isa 11:2).

Wisdom is expressed in shrewdness. The woman of Tekoa averted a town's bloodshed in her clever plea for its safety (2Sam 20:22). But a shrewd person is not to boast of his gift (Jer 9:22). The ostrich displays traits lacking shrewdness when she acts in her silly selfish manner (Job 39:17). The gift of shrewdness can be used in an ungodly way to deny the omniscience of God (Isa 47:10).

Prudence, an aspect of wisdom, is expressed by those who speak with wisdom (Psa 37:30; Prov 10:31), and who use time carefully (Psa 90:12). This kind of wisdom in the practical affairs of life is derived from the revelation of God (Isa 33:6).

The source of all wisdom is a personal God who is holy, righteous, and just. His wisdom is expressed against the background of his omnipotence and omniscience. By his wisdom God numbered the clouds (Job 38:37), founded the earth (Prov 3:19), and made the world (Jer 10:12). Wisdom, being found in God, is regarded as a divine attribute (Job 12:13). He alone knows wisdom in its truest sense (Job 28:20, 23). The wisdom of God is not found in man's speculation. He alone must provide this wisdom for man's guidance so that man can live the best possible moral and ethical life (Prov 2:6; Job 11:6)...

Wisdom for man is not only to make one humanly wise, but also to lead him to fear the Lord, for this is the beginning of all wisdom (Job 28:28). True wisdom for man involves knowing the Holy One. So, men are to listen to the wisdom of God with attentive ears (Prov 2:2). In fact, inner happiness only comes when man attains this wisdom (Prov 3:13) through a strenuous search (Prov 2:4), which is actually a search for God himself (Prov 2:5). Skeptics will never find this wisdom and will never know the full meaning of life (Prov 14:6ff). In the great poem of Job 28 wisdom in this special biblical sense is practically defined as trust in God and the avoidance of sin. (647a)

As you can see, wisdom is no simple concept. This fact will become even clearer as we delve deeper into its use in Proverbs, and especially its personification in Proverbs 8.

### **Wisdom as a Whole in Scripture**

The English word “wisdom” appears 218 times in the NIV, 227 in the NKJV, 216 in the NASB, and 234 in the KJV. Luther uses *Weisheit* 194 times in his translation. Forms of *sapientia* occurs well over twice that many times in the Vulgate. Most importantly, the Hebrew word חֵכְמָה occurs 77 times in the Old Testament, 30 times in proverbs. The Hebrew verb חָכַם and its derivatives occur 312 times. All three times that the word “wisdom” appears in Proverbs 8, it is חֵכְמָה.

### **Wisdom Personified**

This paper will particularly focus on wisdom personified, especially in Proverbs 8. Where else is Wisdom personified, besides this chapter? In Proverbs, wisdom is personified in chapter 1 and chapter 9 as well. Wisdom is discussed in numerous other Scripture passages, but is not personified anywhere else as in these three chapters of Proverbs. TWOT agrees, “This personification of wisdom is not found outside these chapters” (ibid).

Wisdom is probably personified as a female because the word is feminine. TWOT notes, “That Wisdom is personified as a woman in Prov 1-9 is partly explained by the fact that the noun is feminine. There the Lady Wisdom is contrasted with the woman Folly who is personified sin.” (ibid.). In addition, in verse 30, Wisdom is referred to as a “craftsman,” which is masculine. The gender used is not necessarily meant to be a defining factor in the interpretation of the passage and/or type.

### **Christ and Wisdom as a Whole**

Before beginning a debate concerning whether or not Christ is Wisdom personified in Proverbs 8, it is useful to take a cursory look at how Christ and Wisdom are associated throughout Scripture. Christ is called the Logos. John’s use of the word logos definitely made a connection between Christ and reason, wisdom, truth, and logic, all appealing concepts to the Greek minds of his day.

Moreover, Christ is connected with wisdom in other passages as. For instance, Paul writes in Colossians:

I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of *wisdom* and knowledge. (2:1-3)

Paul asserts in 1 Corinthians 1:21-24:

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the *wisdom* of God.

He continues in verse 30, “It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us *wisdom* from God-- that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.” Thus, in addition to John assigning Christ the title, “Logos,” Paul also connects Christ with wisdom.

### **Proverbs 8 Breakdown**

The location of Proverbs 8 is important. Chapter 7 deals with the calls of Wisdom and Folly. Chapter 9 describes the ways of Wisdom and Folly. In these chapters, wisdom and folly, or Wisdom and Folly, are contrasted. Chapter 8 can be divided into four sections. The first is 1-11, Wisdom’s invitation. The second is 12- 21, Wisdom’s description of herself and her relationship with men. The third is verses 22-31, Wisdom’s role in creation and her relationship with God. The fourth is verses 32-36, Wisdom’s admonition to follow her. It is the third part, verses 22-31, that served as a battleground for the Christological controversies of the fourth century, with Athanasius and Arius each claiming it as their own, which is of particular interest for us. While some take the whole chapter as Christological, verses 22-31 have been the main focus of scholars’ attention, primarily because of its possible implications concerning the eternal generation of the Son of God. It is upon these verses that this paper will focus.

### **The History Behind Verses 22-31**

In the Christological controversies of the fourth century, the interpretation Proverbs 8:22-31, and especially verses 22 and 30, became a bone of contention between the Arians and the orthodox, between Arius and Athanasius. The Arians contended that the passage clearly taught that Christ was a subordinate creature. The orthodox held that the Arian interpretation was a break with the interpretation the Fathers of the church had given it and that it was bad exegesis. Traditionally the church had used this passage to prove Christ’s preexistence and to show that he was different than created things. Athenagoras argued that, since God was “endowed with reason,” reason, or Wisdom [Christ], was co-eternal with the Father and “did not come into

existence” (*The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, by Jaroslav Pelikan, 191). For a more detailed account of this passage’s role in the Arian controversy, see pages 191-197 of the aforementioned work. Suffice it to say that it was Arius’ [mis]interpretation of this traditional proof text for the Son’s co-eternal existence with the Father that Pelikan claims started the whole debate (193).

It is important to note that, in all this, the Fathers were operating almost exclusively on the basis of the Greek. Arius clung to the LXX’s rendering of this verse. Delitzsch describes the gist of the debate over the Greek word κτίζω in verse 22 as follows:

In the christological controversy this word gained a dogmatic signification, for they proceeded generally on the identity of σοφία υποστατική (*sapientia substantialis*) with the *hypostasis* of the Son of God. The Arians used the ἐκτίσε με as a proof of their doctrine of the *filius non genitus, sed factus, i.e.* of His existence before the world began indeed, but yet not from eternity, but originating in time; while, on the contrary, the orthodox preferred the translation ἐκτῆσατο, and understood it of the co-eternal existence of the Son with the Father, and agreed with the ἐκτίσε of the LXX. by referring it not to the actual existence, but to the position, place of the Son. (183)

There are, of course, several unfortunate mistakes the Fathers made in this whole process. They argued on the basis of a translation, they sought to make the translation fit their interpretation rather than making their translation match the original language and context, and they argued over a text that was not indisputably Christological in its character in an attempt to solve a Christological question (the Fathers often “found” Christ in the Old Testament more often than many today, this student included, would be comfortable with). Fortunately, the emphasis on this text as a *sedes* for Christology was eventually lessened as the Church focused on clearer passages on the topic.

### **Verses 22-31 in Focus**

The content of these verses does not give a clear answer as to whether Wisdom personified is Christ or simply Wisdom personified. Much of what it says is true of Christ, but

not necessarily peculiar to him (over/against Wisdom “herself”). The point could be that God uses wisdom in his creative activity and that man should do the same in his labors. The question, however, is not necessarily of what is Proverbs definitively speaking, but of what is Proverbs most likely speaking, since there is not a clear-cut answer provided by Scripture itself.

First, let's look at the Hebrew words used and decide whether they could be properly applied to Christ, and if they can, if they can also *only* be applied to Christ. There are two main words that need consideration. They are קָנָה and אָמוֹן.

קָנָה is usually the word for acquiring (or possessing), purchasing or buying something. Sometimes it can mean create, though such use is infrequent. TWOT lists six places where this seems to be the meaning (2039). Some scholars try to enhance the creative idea of the verb by pointing to Ugaritic usage, but there is no proven connection between the two and this is often done with less than honorable motives. Delitzsch commends the idea of bringing forth, producing, or creating, although in the sense of revealing, and not in the sense of an origination of the thing (184). BDB lists this passage under the definition to “get or acquire...of God as originating, creating” (08889). The New American Commentary suggests “create” or “procreate” (108).

TWOT, in the same entry cited in the previous paragraph, points out that the verb also has the idea of possession (the noun derivative from the verb can mean wealth or possessions). “Possessed” seems to be the preferred English translation (NIV footnote, NKJV, NASB, KJV) as well as the choice of the Vulgate and Luther (“have”). Kidner suggests that the possession idea is that of having one as a member of your family. For instance, one might say, “I *have* a dad.” In this case, the Father would not have possessed Wisdom as one would possess an inanimate object (“I own that car.”), but as a relative (“I have a Son.”) (*Proverbs*, 79-80). This would

preserve the possible Christological connotations of the passage as well as fit the idea being presented in the context of things as a whole. “Acquired” is not as preferable because Wisdom, and Christ for that matter, has been a constant companion of the Father from eternity. “Brought forth” is acceptable, as it would preserve God’s eternal possession of Wisdom as well as the idea of bringing forth (or producing), which קָנָה at times includes.

The meaning of אָמֵן is hard to nail down. Context here rules out any reference to the Egyptian deity Amon. BDB lists “artificer, architect, masterworkman” as possible translations (54c). For this verse in particular it suggests, “I was at his side architect, master-workman” (ibid.) “Foster-son” is also listed as a possibility, but this translation could be taken in the wrong way, supposing that the passage is Christological—Delitzsch also brings up the possibility of such a meaning, drawing on Aramaic, but the argument is not convincing and such a meaning does not occur elsewhere in Scripture (ibid.; 190). TWOT also suggests “architect, artificer” (1161). The word seems to derive from אָמַן, which means to support, uphold, establish, or confirm something. Thus, an architect or builder would be a sensible derivative idea.

The main idea seems to be that Wisdom was the “craftsman” working side by side with God in creation (“his Son...through whom he made the universe”—Hebrews 1:2; “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made—John 1:3), supporting, establishing, upholding, and participating beside (side by side with) the Father in the creative work being done. The majority of English translations, along with Luther and the Vulgate, favor such a translation (craftsman or workman). Such an understanding of the word would seem to favor a Christological interpretation of the passage, with Wisdom being an active partner with, rather than a faculty possessed by, the Father.

These are by far the two most controversial words in verses 22-31 in this student's opinion. While the other verses and vocables are important (as are all the verses and vocables in Scripture), they neither commend nor reject a Christological interpretation. These two words have both been sources of debate throughout history, both between orthodox Christianity and Arians (both old and new—Jehovah's Witnesses, etc), and between those who favor a Christological interpretation and those who do not.

### **New Testament Support**

Some New Testament references to Christ as wisdom have already been given. Books and papers have been written on the topic of Christ as Logos. They prove useful in a discussion like this, but require more time and space than this paper has been allotted. Since there is no one New Testament passage that proves that Proverbs 8, and verses 22-31 in particular, has to be taken Christologically, permit me simply to list, with no/limited commentary, those passages that have been enlisted to support the Christological interpretation. John 1:1-18 is similar in content and style. Hebrews 1:1-4 and Colossians 1:15-17 also sound a lot like Proverbs 8:22-31. Paul speaks of Christ as wisdom in 1 Corinthians 1:24 and Colossians 2:2,3. Matthew 11:19 has been taken by some to be a reference by Christ himself to his identification as Wisdom personified in Proverbs 8. Luke 11:49 has also been wielded in support of Christ as Wisdom personified. Revelation 3:14 is made use of as an allusion to Proverbs 8 (especially verse 22), but does not actually mention wisdom. Once again, none of these establish the Christological interpretation as the only acceptable one beyond a shadow of a doubt, but they do offer support and credibility (one can debate the extent to which they do so) to such an interpretation. Most commentators seem to agree. Others seem to want to agree, but dance around the issue, unwilling to straightaway declare Christ and Wisdom personified one and the same, but unable to deny a connection. Delitzsch is a fine example. The following extended quotation is an example of the

semantics and beating-around-the-bush he is willing to employ in order to deny a

Wisdom=Christ equation, while maintaining a connection between the two:

Wisdom is not God, but is God's; she has personal existence in the Logos of the N.T., but is not herself the Logos; she is the world-idea, which, once projected, is objective to God, not as a dead form, but as a living spiritual image; she is the archetype of the world, which, originating from God, stands before God, the world of the idea which forms the medium between the Godhead and the world of actual existence, the communicated spiritual power in the origination and the completion of the world, as God designed it to be. This wisdom the poet here personifies; he does not speak of the personal Logos, but the further progress of the revelation points to her actual personification in the Logos (183).

### Conclusions

Is Wisdom personified in Proverbs 8 Christ? The safe answer is “maybe.” This student thinks it is, but that by no means closes what is an open question. What is said of Wisdom, especially in verses 22-31, is certainly true of Christ. Some New Testament passages, especially John 1:1-14, Colossians 1:15-17, Hebrews 1:1-4, and Revelation 3:14, lend a Christological interpretation support. Moreover, Christ is called or identified with wisdom in other passages, as well as being called Logos—the source of all true reason and wisdom.

Does our understanding of Christ rise or fall with the interpretation of these verses? No. Christ's eternal generation is established in other passages of Scripture (this passage has not been anything close to a *sedes* on the issue since the fourth century controversies resolutions). Rather, this passage can either reinforce our understanding of Christ if we accept it as Christological, or be of no consequence whatsoever to our understanding of his person if we reject a Christological understanding. While Christians do well to find Christ throughout the whole of Scripture (as all of Scripture is the account of the realization of God's plan of salvation in the person and work of Christ), we also do well not to haphazardly read him into Scripture wherever we find a possible connection. The New Testament does not clearly answer this question for us, and so the safest and most responsible answer a person can give to the question of whether or not

Christ is Wisdom personified in Proverbs 8, as mentioned above, is “maybe.” As far as this student is concerned, however, context, New Testament similarities in speech and terminology, the Christocentricity of Scripture (whether or not we read the passage Christologically, we read it Christocentrically), the selection of Hebrew words (חָכְמָה rather than בְּרָאָה), and the tradition/the number of supporters of the Christological interpretation (especially Lutheran Fathers) make it the preferable interpretation. The only major factor opposing such an interpretation is that there is no direct New Testament statement that it must be taken this way. This student prefers to err on the side of seeing his Savior here and, so far as he can tell, there is no harm in that.

## Works Cited

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