



Research article

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EXPLORING THE WISDOM/FOLLY MOTIF IN PROVERBS 9

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the wisdom and folly motif within Proverbs 9, delving into the nuance presented in this biblical text. It examines the personifications of Wisdom and Folly as contrasting figures, analysing their respective invitations and the consequences of heeding or disregarding their counsel. This study aims to explore the concept of wisdom/folly motif in Proverbs 9 by engaging in a comprehensive literary analysis of the chapter, dissecting its linguistic and stylistic features and philosophical underpinnings and seeking to uncover the cultural and historical contexts that shaped this timeless allegory. The aim is to understand how the portrayal of wisdom and folly in Proverbs 9 aligns with or challenges prevailing philosophical ideas of the time and how it continues to resonate with contemporary audiences.

Through a literary lens, the paper navigates the rich symbolism and rhetorical devices employed in Proverbs 9, shedding light on the moral and practical implications of this ancient wisdom literature.

Keywords:

Wisdom, Folly, Proverbs 9, motif



1.0 Introduction

Wisdom and folly are twin forces that have eternally danced through the annals of human existence and serve as archetypal themes that resonate across cultures, eras, and belief systems. These diametric concepts have the power to shape the destinies of individuals and societies alike, and their exploration has often been at the heart of humanity's quest for understanding the moral and ethical dimensions of life. Within the corpus of biblical wisdom literature, the Book of Proverbs offers as rich an embroidery for exploring these concepts. Central to this enigmatic book, celebrated for its ethical and practical wisdom, is the striking motif of wisdom/folly as Tova Forti personified them by Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly.ⁱ This motif, encapsulated most vividly in Proverbs 9, has intrigued scholars, theologians, and philosophers for millennia. Its timeless allure beckons a more profound study into its multifaceted layers, unravelling its mysteries and understanding its implications.

The Book of Proverbs is prominent for its pithy and insightful sayings that guide virtuous living and the perils of waywardness. Proverbs 9, nestled within this ancient treasure trove, offers a unique narrative portraying wisdom and folly as rival hostesses, extending invitations to feasts, where the choices made by individuals have profound consequences for their lives. The vivid imagery, the moral dichotomy, and the ethical imperatives inherent in this chapter have made it a focal point for exploration and interpretation across generations.

This study aims to explore the concept of wisdom/folly motif in Proverbs 9 by engaging in a comprehensive literary analysis of the chapter, dissecting its linguistic and stylistic features and philosophical underpinnings and seeking to uncover the cultural and historical contexts that shaped this timeless allegory. The goal is to comprehend how



Proverbs 9's depiction of wisdom and folly fits into or contradicts the time's dominant philosophical theories and why it still impacts audiences today.

2.0 OVERVIEW OF WISDOM/FOLLY MOTIF IN BIBLICAL WISDOM LITERATURE

The folly/wisdom motif is a central theme in biblical wisdom literature, which includes books like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and some parts of Psalms and Song of Solomon.ⁱⁱ According to Tremper Longman III, most scholars today would agree that the Bible comprises three core books: Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes; additional books include Song of Songs and two deuterocanonical books: Wisdom of Solomon and Ben Sira. However, some scholars disagree with this classification and cast doubt on the notion that "wisdom literature" is anything more than a term coined in the middle of the nineteenth century.ⁱⁱⁱ Besides these, other sections of the Bible were designated as such; these are (Gen. 3; 37–50; 2 Sam. 9–20; 1 Kings 1–2; Dan. 1–6 and Deut. 4:4–8). Others might contain passages from prophetic texts or a variety of prophets.^{iv}

The wisdom/folly motif in biblical wisdom literature highlights the distinction between wisdom and folly, emphasising the importance of seeking wisdom and avoiding foolishness. Wisdom involves pursuing knowledge, understanding, and fear of the Lord, promoting a righteous and morally upright life, virtuous, practical knowledge, moral integrity, experience, and humility.^v On the other hand, folly represents the opposite of wisdom, characterised by foolish decisions, moral wrongdoing, and a lack of understanding. Also, folly represents foolishness, ignorance, and moral depravity, often resulting from a lack of knowledge or refusal to heed God's guidance.^{vi}

Wisdom is personified as a virtuous and noble woman who offers guidance and blessings, while folly is portrayed as a seductive and destructive woman who leads people



astray. The motif is significant, particularly in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job.^{vii} Wisdom is portrayed as virtuous and divine, offering guidance, understanding, and the path to a righteous life. At the same time, folly is associated with short-sightedness, moral degradation, and the rejection of wisdom's guidance. Those who follow her are portrayed as heading towards destruction and calamity. The contrast between these two personified figures is a moral lesson, encouraging one to seek wisdom, understanding, and righteousness while avoiding foolishness and its negative consequences, which are powerful literary and didactic tools to convey moral and practical wisdom. The personification of the wisdom motif resonates with other theological concepts found in Wisdom Literature and other parts of the Old Testament.

In wisdom literature, suffering is one of the ideas closely linked to the wisdom/folly motif. The lessons found in the Book of Proverbs contrast the advantages of wisdom with the drawbacks of stupidity. It promotes wealth and success for the virtuous by contrasting the smart and dumb ways of living. It also emphasises that while the evil will experience punishment, the good will be rewarded, addressing the suffering of the righteous.^{viii} Ecclesiastes and Job provide different perspectives on human experience, focusing on the futility of human endeavours and the limitations of wisdom in understanding life's mysteries. Edward M. Curtis argues that Ecclesiastes takes the approach to the wisdom/folly motif, grappling with the randomness and futility of life, suggesting that true wisdom involves recognising the limitations of human wisdom and finding contentment in one's relationship with God.^{ix} Job addresses the problem of suffering and the limitations of human wisdom in explaining God's ways. The book challenges the simplistic notion that wisdom always leads to prosperity and that folly always leads to suffering, which raises questions about the



relationship between wisdom, folly, and the ways of God. The book is perhaps the most profound exploration of the wisdom/folly motif in the context of the suffering of the righteous. Job experiences immense suffering and loss despite his piety. While his companions contend that sin is the cause of suffering, Job insists on his innocence and challenges God's justice. Ultimately, God highlights the boundaries of human comprehension and the magnificence of heavenly knowledge. The wisdom/folly motif, in the context of the suffering of the righteous, explores the tension between human understanding of justice and the unpredictable nature of life. These books offer different perspectives on the relationship between righteousness, wisdom, and the suffering people may experience. These books' wisdom/folly motif provides practical guidance for everyday living, guiding individuals to choose the path to wisdom or avoid folly, which aligns with God's will, leading to blessings and prosperity. In contrast, folly leads to suffering and destruction.^x

Another essential concept dear to the wisdom literature that Duane Garrett considers to the theme of wisdom books is the "The fear of the Lord,"^{xi} Tremper Longman III describes it as the motto of the entire book as it is repeated with some variation in several places (especially 9:10, but see also 1:29; 2:5; 3:7; 8:13; 9:10; 10:27; 14:2, 26, 27; 15:16, 33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17; 24:21; 28:14; 29:25; 31:30), and this serves as the foundation of wisdom and moral living.^{xii} This subject, which is varied and repeated, emphasises the significance of a respectful connection with God as the basis for a life of righteousness and genuine wisdom. In the words of Duane Garrett, fear of God is the most profound manifestation of a humble acknowledgement of one's humanity before God.^{xiii} It is said that people who fear the Lord are wise, and those who do not are foolish. In order to live a morally upright and satisfying life, one must have great regard and respect for God and acknowledge His almighty authority,



wisdom, and sovereignty over all of creation. According to Kaiser and Garrett, everything that Ecclesiastes affirms—such as God’s sovereign freedom, the boundaries of human knowledge, reflections on the misuse of riches and power, and the fleeting nature of human existence—leads to the imperative to fear God.^{xiv}

The concept of vanity, more profoundly mentioned by the Qoheleth in the Book of Ecclesiastes, is also associated with the wisdom/folly motif. This motif takes a more existential approach by exploring the idea that the wise and the foolish face the same fate—death. This book emphasises the fleeting nature of human existence and the limitations of human wisdom. The Qoheleth presents a unique perspective on life’s meaning and purpose. The pursuit of wisdom with the famous declaration, “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, says the Preacher, all is vanity!” emphasising human endeavours’ fleeting and empty nature (1:2; 12:8). “Vanity” often refers to the futile and transitory aspects of human existence, suggesting that human efforts and accomplishments are often without lasting value.^{xv}

The Qoheleth begins a quest for wisdom and knowledge, exploring various paths in search of meaning and fulfilment, including pleasure, wealth, work, and wisdom. He highlights the contrast between human folly and divine wisdom, observing that many human endeavours, driven by pride, ambition, and self-reliance, are futile. He underscores the limits of human understanding and control over life’s events, emphasising humility and reliance on God’s wisdom. The call to fear God and keep His commandments is a clear moral and theological message, reinforcing the importance of living a life of reverence for God and obedience to His wisdom. The wisdom/folly motif in the Book of Ecclesiastes challenges readers to reevaluate their priorities, recognise the limits of human understanding, and seek meaning in a life of reverence for God.^{xvi}



The concept of invitation is another closely associated with the wisdom/folly motif in the wisdom literature that emphasises reflecting the path to wisdom and understanding. In Proverbs 9, the chapter contrasts wisdom and folly's invitation to partake in her banquet, leaving the invitee with a choice and discernment when accepting these invitations.^{xvii} Proverbs 1 introduces the theme of the invitation, personifying wisdom as a woman calling mockers and fools to turn from their ways and receive knowledge and understanding.^{xviii} Proverbs 8 depicts wisdom as a personified figure, asserting its inherent value and desirability. Proverbs 4 instructs a father to his son to listen and gain wisdom, emphasising the importance of embracing wisdom as a life-enhancing choice. Proverbs 2 highlights the diligent search for wisdom as a treasure and understanding as a hidden gem, highlighting the conditions for obtaining wisdom, including passion and dedication.^{xix}

Several pages of wisdom literature have a consistent invitation to seek and embrace wisdom. It is presented as a valuable and life-giving pursuit that leads to blessings, long life, and favour with God. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job all explore the wisdom/folly motif, emphasising the importance of wisdom and a reverent attitude towards God. Proverbs emphasises the beginning of wisdom, and Ecclesiastes explores the futility of human pursuits and the impermanence of life's pleasures.

The concept of warning and rebuking is evident in several portions of the wisdom literature associated with the wisdom/folly motif. This concept strongly warns against folly and foolish behaviour. These warnings highlight the negative consequences of living a life devoid of wisdom, such as poverty, disgrace, and spiritual emptiness. The wisdom literature, especially Proverbs, encourages people to avoid the path of folly. Longman III regards the concept of warnings as one of the genres of the book (10:1–31:31). Ecclesiastes, a



philosophical book that emphasises the futility of pursuing worldly pleasures and earthly wisdom, also promotes the concept. In one of the several passages, “The expression also occurs in Eccles. 12:11, where the unnamed frame narrator warns his son that the words of the wise are like goads and firmly implanted nails, things that hurt. He warns his son of them (12:12).”^{xx} It highlights the importance of fear of the Lord as true wisdom and the futility of pursuing worldly pleasures. The book of Job indirectly touches on these themes, demonstrating trust in God even in suffering. They encourage one to choose the path of wisdom, rooted in reverence for God and living according to His principles.

Another concept associated with the motif under discussion is the seductive nature of folly.^{xxi} Proverbs 9:13-18 established by the invitation of wisdom who invites passersby to partake in her feast of knowledge and understanding. In Proverbs 5, folly’s seductive nature is portrayed by the seductive adulteress, warning against the dangers of an adulterous woman’s lips and the consequences of succumbing to her seduction. While Proverbs 7 continues to explore the seductive nature of folly by narrating the story of a young man falling victim to the seduction of an immoral woman. Ansberry explains it to be the seductive rhetoric of the ‘strange woman’ in Proverbs 7 into a sharp description of a calamitous creature who hunts the pious at all costs, threatening to overpower the mature and lead the righteous into eternal flames.^{xxii} Few passages, such as 6:25 and 14:15, warn against the seductive nature of an adulterous woman’s beauty, emphasising that it can lead a man to ruin and, therefore, address the gullibility and vulnerability of those easily seduced by folly, indicating that discernment is crucial in resisting its allure. The wisdom/folly motif is used as a didactic tool to impart moral and practical lessons, encouraging readers to choose the path of wisdom and avoid the seductive allure of folly.



The final concept considered in this discussion is the feast motif of wisdom literature, also associated with the wisdom/folly motif. The feast concept in Proverbs 9 is a powerful metaphor that symbolises the abundance of wisdom and the importance of heeding wisdom's call.^{xxiii} The chapter contrasts wisdom's feast of bread and wine, symbolising a life of wisdom and righteousness, with folly's feast, which is depicted as inviting but ultimately destructive. It presents wisdom as the path to a happy and prosperous life, while folly is depicted as the way to ruin.^{xxiv} Ecclesiastes uses the feast motif to illustrate the fleeting nature of pleasure and the futility of seeking fulfilment solely in worldly pleasures. The Feast motif is a backdrop for exploring deeper philosophical and moral questions, emphasising the importance of choosing wisdom over folly, the consequences of one's choices, the pursuit of meaning and fulfilment in life, and the need to seek higher, lasting wisdom and righteousness.

3.0 Exegetical Analysis of Proverbs 9

The book is named after the ancient Near Eastern practice of calling books by their first word. The title is a reflection on what is known in Hebrew as מִשְׁלֵי *mišlê*, which translates to “proverbs of.” The Latin title that Jerome gave the book in the Vulgate, *Liber Proverbiorum*, or “The Book of Proverbs,” acted as a transitional term to the English title *Proverbs*. Proverbs are located in the Hebrew Bible's third and last portion, “Writings,” and are given a unique emphasis similar to Job and Psalms. It is classified as a poetic book in the English Bible (Job — Song of Solomon).^{xxv}

3.1 Structural Analysis of Proverbs 26:1-12

Structural analysis of Proverbs 9 involves breaking down the chapter into its constituent parts to better understand its organisation, themes, and literary features. Proverbs 9 is a pivotal



chapter in the Book of Proverbs, and its structure is vital to comprehending its core messages.

Below is a structural analysis of Proverbs 9.

- I. Wisdom's Feast (Verses 1-6).
- II. The Choice (Verses 7-12).
- III. Folly's Invitation (Verses 13-18).

3.2 Syntactical Analysis of Proverbs 9

- I. Wisdom's Feast (Proverbs 9:1-6).

[1] חָכְמוֹת בָּנְתָה בֵּיתָהּ חָצְבָה עֲמוּדֶיהָ שִׁבְעָה:
[2] טָבְחָה טָבְחָה מְסַכָּה יִיגָה אֶף עֲרִכָה שְׁלַחָנָה:
[3] שְׁלָחָה נַעֲרֹתֶיהָ תִקְרָא עַל-גְּפִי מִרְמֵי קִרְתִּי:
[4] מִי־פָתִי יִסֵּר הָנָה חֲסֵר-לֵב אֲמַרָה לוֹ:
[5] לָכוּ לֶחֱמוּ בְּלֶחֱמִי וּשְׁתּוּ בִינִי מְסַכְתִּי:
[6] עֲזַבּוּ דְתָאִים וְחַיּוּ וְאַשְׁרֵי בְדַרְדָּרֵי בִינָה:

- 1 Wisdom has built her house; she has erected its seven pillars.
- 2 She has slaughtered her animals; she has mixed her wine; and she has prepared her table.
- 3 She has sent out her servant girls; she cries out on the tops of the heights of the city,
- 4 "Whoever is gullible, let him turn aside here." As for the one who has no sense, she says to him,
- 5 "Come, dine on my food, and drink the wine I have mixed.
- 6 Leave your ways, you gullible ones, and live, and proceed on the way of insight."

Personified as a regal hostess readying a banquet, wisdom builds a spacious house, prepares a sumptuous feast, and extends an open invitation. Given her societal standing, this implies that she should be expected to act noblessly.^{xxvi} Her house's construction foreshadows the homes that each of her daughters will create, and the word "has built" בָּנְתָה refers to the act of creating something with a certain kind of artistry. Wisdom's home is probably an aristocratic home, and the seven pillars עֲמוּדֶיהָ שִׁבְעָה that support the ceiling in the open room facing the inner courtyard are probably from the open room itself. The number of supporting pillars



(usually three) depended on the room's length and the home's total size.^{xxvii} In this literary work of fiction, the seven supporting pillars stand for perfection since her ideal home has enough space to amuse everyone.^{xxviii} The dedication of Baal's palace in Ugaritic writings, which describes the building, killing, inviting, and feasting process, is similar to the scenario described in 9:1-3.^{xxix}

According to Waltke, the Hebrew words "she" and "her" in this verse refer to a woman's wisdom, highlighting her diligence in the preparation scene.^{xxx} *She has slaughtered her animals* טָבַחָהּ לְבָהֶמָּה to prepare a festive feast, symbolising the many ways in which one might savour the greater spiritual realities of Solomon's teachings that provide stability and happiness. The sequence "her animals" לְבָהֶמָּה "her wine" יַיִן, represents a widely used and ancient Near Eastern custom.^{xxxi}

She has prepared her table עָרְכָהּ שֻׁלְחָנָהּ, a metonymy for its dishes and meals, signifying that Solomon's sayings are organised in the most kind way possible to delight people who study them. Archaeological, artistic, and textual evidence indicates that in wealthy homes, tables were typical but probably not in ordinary houses. *She has sent out* שָׁלְחָהּ, which entails that the banquet is now ready. Wisdom, who of necessity is feminine, sends out female servants to depict the teachers as enjoying the closest possible proximity and intimacy with Wisdom. When Wisdom yells תִּקְרָא, "To invite," about a feast, the single word attenuates the boundary between her and her attendants. This phrase indicates that Wisdom, a part of heaven's heavenly realm, personally extends an invitation to her guests and says that the instructors associated with her and whose homes become her homes should be considered elevated.



In verses 4-6, Wisdom's invitation to the gullible begins in verse 4 and extends to verse 6. She invites the gullible to turn aside to her house and dine on her sumptuous meal, motivating them to respond by promising them eternal life. In verse 3, Wisdom introduces her invitation to v. 4a and 4b, looking forward to v. 5-6. The designation entails that a person must evaluate whether they count themselves among the credulous and in need of committing. They will abase themselves, acknowledge their devotion to the sage's wisdom, and turn away if they accept wisdom's call. In this way, the naive turns wise and becomes a welcome guest at Wisdom's table.

Now, wisdom shifts from the negative aspect of "turning aside" in repentance to the good aspect of sticking to a course of action. "Come" לָכוּ adds urgency to the appeal. "Come dine on my food" לָכוּ לֶחֱמִי בְּלֶחֱמִי refers to accepting the teaching metaphorically. *Dine* לֶחֱמִי is a poetic word for partaking of solid food (לֶחֶם 6:8). *And drink the wine I have mixed* וְשָׁתוּ בִּינִי וְשָׁתוּ בִּינִי looks back to v. 2a. Wisdom now pictures repentance as changing direction along the way, using the sage's favourite metaphor of "way" דֶּרֶךְ for his teaching.^{xxxii} Accepting or refusing Wisdom's offer carries a significant risk—it might mean the difference between life and death. The method of insight suggests that, in contrast to the seductress, whose house is the road to death, wisdom's house is an entry into life (2:19; 7:27). The direction of the repentant stands in marked opposition to that of the wicked. *Of insight*, בִּינָה supplies the basic need of "the one who lacks sense," linking v. 6b with v. 4b even as synonymy concerning the "gullible" linked v. 6a with v. 4a.^{xxxiii}

II. The Choice (Proverbs 9:7-12).

[7] יָסֵר אֶלֶּי לֵב לֵקַח לוֹ קֶלֶון וּמִכֵּיחַ לְרָשָׁע מוֹמִיו:
[8] אֶל־תּוֹכַח גֵּץ פֶּן־יִשְׁנָאךָ הוֹכַח לְחָכְם וַיִּצְדָּקְךָ:
[9] תֵּן לְחָכְם וַיִּחַפֵּם־עוֹד הוֹדַע לְצַדִּיק וַיּוֹסֶף לָקֵחַ: פ
[10] תַּחֲלֹת חֲכָמָה יֵרָצֵת יְהוָה וְדַעַת קִדְשִׁים בִּינָה:



^[11] כִּי־בִי יִרְבּוּ יַגִּיד וְיִוְסִיפוּ לְךָ שְׁנוֹת חַיִּים:
^[12] אִם־חָכְמָתָּ חֲכַמְתָּ לָּךְ לֹא־צַדִּיק לְבַדְּךָ תִּשָּׂא:

- 7 Whoever chastises a mocker gets shame, and whoever corrects a wicked person gets hurt.
8 Do not correct a mocker lest he hate you; correct a wise person so that he will love you.
9 Give [instruction] to the wise so that he may become wiser still, inform the righteous so that he might increase learning.
10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is insight.
11 Surely through wisdom your days will be many, and years of life will be added to you.
12 If you are wise, you are wise for yourself; but [if] you mock, you alone will incur guilt.

verses 7 and 8 are linked by two occurrences of “mockers” מַגִּיד and three occurrences of the root, meaning “to rebuke,” and vv. 8 and 9 are linked by three occurrences of the root חָכַם, meaning “to be wise.” The sage discards wisdom’s invitational metaphor in favour of the literal expression, “whoever chastises מַגִּיד, which denotes the inherent foolishness of the inferior and the correction of a superior. The foolish are warned by wisdom, but a mocker is so full of himself and disdainful of others that he will submit to no authority, not even the LORD. As a result, the disciplinarian of a mocker receives disgrace or insults, either יָכָה from the mocker himself, who publicly humiliates the wise and verbally criticises them, or from foolishly squandering time and energy on a pointless cause.

The root יָכָה reprises the common synonymous nouns מוֹסֵר and תּוֹכַחַת, both denoting correcting a wrong. The sage’s correction stands behind the LORD, and since mockers reject “the fear of the LORD,” the religious evaluation of the mocker as a wicked person is fitting. In order to achieve the wise goal of leading the theoretically educated to repentance and forging a genuine, spiritual relationship with them, scolding should be substituted for fining the mocker. Verse 8 aims to advance the teacher-student relationship, while v. 9 focuses on developing only the latter.^{xxxiv} The catchword to the wise לְחָכָם firmly links v. 9a with v. 8b, underscoring that the wise person is a growing, maturing individual and not without defects.



Verses 11–12 compare the substantial loss of being a mocker with the personal benefit of wisdom. The poet skillfully arranges the benefits of wisdom in ascending order (v. 11) and the drawbacks of mocking in descending order (v. 12), creating a seamless transition to folly's invitation in vv. 13–18. The text focuses on the relationship between wisdom and wickedness, with verses 7 and 8 linked by the root יָכַח, meaning “to rebuke,” and verses 8 and 9 linked by the root חָכַם, meaning “to be wise.” The sage uses the metaphor of invitation to describe a mocker as a superior correcting an inferior, which is seen as a sin. The mocker's hatred can lead to verbal and physical abuse, as seen in verse 22.

The sage emphasises the importance of correcting a mocker, as it can lead to negative emotions and rejection of relationships.^{xxxv} While the wicked may reject this goal, the wise want to guide the potentially educated to repentance and a genuine spiritual connection. The sage advises the authority to correct a wise person who is not perfect but represents education. Verses 8 and 9 aim to advance the teacher-student relationship, while verse 9 aims to develop only the latter. The catchword to the wise לְחָכָם links verses 9a and 8b, emphasising that the wise person is a growing, maturing individual with defects. The righteous assumes that an essential religio-ethical component of being wise is serving the community, not the self.

Verse 10, The sage traces *the beginning of wisdom* תְּחִלַּת חָכְמָה and learning among the righteous to *the fear of the LORD* יִרְאַת יְהוָה its essential source and fundamental principle.^{xxxvi} The wise begin their educability by submitting to the highest Authority, the LORD, and their *knowledge* דָּעַת *of the Holy One* קְדוּשֵׁים בִּינָה. His “otherness,” or the area of his sanctity that is distinct from the commonplace, recognisable, and profane, is highlighted by this term. To be wise is to participate in the divine, the holy, and transcend the fallen human world.^{xxxvii}



The argument shifts from the benefits gathered by the sage for his instruction of the wise (but not the mocker) to the profit gained by the attentive wise and the baneful consequences felt by the obdurate mocker for their varied responses to his instruction. Intelligent people are wise for themselves, meaning that each individual is the main and final gainer of the abundant life that arises from the wisdom they learn. On the other hand, if one mocks, they are religio-ethically wicked and will incur guilt, suggesting capital punishment for arrogance and impenitence.

III. Folly's Invitation (Proverbs 9:13-18).

[13] אִשָּׁת בְּסִילּוֹת הַמָּיָה פְתִיּוֹת וּבִלְגִדָּעָה מָה:
[14] וְיֹשֶׁבֶת לְפֶתַח בֵּיתָהּ עַל־כִּפּוֹא מְרִמִּי קִרְתָּ:
[15] לִקְרֹא לַעֲבָרֵי־דָרֶךְ הַמְיֻשָּׁרִים אַחֲחֹתָם:
[16] מִי־פִתִּי יֵסֵר תְּנֶה וְחִסְר־לֵב וְאֶמְרָה לוֹ:
[17] מַיִם־גִּנּוּבִים יִמְתְּקוּ וְלֶחֶם סִתְּרִים יִנָּעַם:
[18] וְלֹא־יֵדַע כִּי־רָפְאִים שָׁם בְּעֵמֶקוֹ שְׂאוֹל קִרְאֶיהָ: פ

- 13 The woman folly is turbulent; she is totally gullible and does not know anything.
14 And she sits at the opening of her house, on a throne on the heights of the city,
15 calling out to those who pass along the way, to those who make their paths straight,
16 “Whoever is gullible, let him turn aside here.” As for the one who has no sense, she says to him,
17 “Stolen water is sweet, and hidden food is pleasant.”
18 But he does not know that the dead are there; those she invited are in the depths of the grave.

Folly is described as a turbulent and gullible moral ignoramus who invites gullible youth to her house. The poet adds אִשָּׁת to connect folly with the seductress.^{xxxviii} She is shown to be wholly credulous and to lack the will or determination to overcome her ignorance and complacency and act morally. She lacks prudence and compassionate shrewdness, so she is left to follow her desires for power and pleasure and is adamant that she will not realise that



life's ultimate goal is death. She has not cooked any meat, mixed or poured any wine, laid any tables, or dispatched any messengers while she sits at the door of her home.^{xxxix} She does not need discipline, industry, or investment to draw in the insane since her lifestyle is titillating, and she does not need moral rectitude. Her crass invitation draws The public to her thrilling but lethal supper.

On a throne, אִשָּׁה means a “seat of honour.” Fighting with Wisdom, who issues summonses from the highest walls of the city (9:3b), foolishness perches on the city's peaks to draw attention from the populace and establish her dominance over them. Some scholars see an allusion to a hill in the shape of a city acropolis where the pagan temples with their sacred prostitutes were located.^{xi} However, this probably overreads the metaphor.

Calling out לְקַרֵּא introduces the attendant circumstance of the two preceding verses and rivals wisdom's (v. 3). folly addresses her invitation to those who pass along the way דֶּרֶךְ. Until she captures their attention, she has no edge over them because once individuals focus on temptation, they are more likely to transgress.^{xii} The oppositional clause to those who straighten their courses emphasises and makes clear that the objective and manner of life of the gullible were not originally intended to transgress moral boundaries. His dumb wife serves as a litmus test for his determination. The gullible are easy pickings for those who are determined and know exactly what they want. The essence of seduction is the talent of successfully persuading someone to change their mind about something.

Folly's invitation to her banquet, which switches the order of food and drinks for drink and food, is a chiasm of wisdom. She forms her invitation as a proverb that gives insight into what is prohibited and censored, but it is a half-truth. *Water* מַיִם is an incomplete metaphor for sexual pleasure, while slaughtered meat is not mentioned as part of her meal.^{xiii}



Folly makes up for this deficiency with an allure for the obscure, hidden, outlandish, and peculiar. Sex pleasure can be considered *stolen* גְּנוּבִים when it is taken from the married partner to whom it is legally due. *Is sweet* מֵתֶקֶן stands in opposition to “is bitter” (Exod. 15:23-25). Folly allures her victim with the half-truth that sin gives pleasure (Heb. 11:25), but like Satan (Gen. 3:4), she denies the connection between sin and death. *Food* וְלֶחֶם serves as part of a merism to signify a complete feast, another incomplete metaphor for sexual gratification (30:20).^{xliii} *Hidden* סְתוּרִים complements גְּנוּבִים: “stolen,” adulterer conceals his “theft” in the same way as a robber must take from its victim when it is dark (7:19–20). Her saying is misleading since she calls her victims to a feast that is a toast to death. The brassy whore does not care whether her victim dies or not; she is aware that death is the price she pays for her transgressions.

With a *but* ב, the sage corrects her misleading half-truth. The image of the deceased (v. 18a) in the depths of the grave (v. 18b) is behind the scenes of physical joy. The essential understanding of wisdom is that the ethical God maintains a moral order in which he rewards virtue with life and punishes evil, such stealing and adultery, with death, which is purposefully overlooked by them.^{xliv} *The dead* רַפְּאִים *are there* שָׁם, and *those she invited* קִרְאִיהָ refer to the apostates who followed her siren invitation (v. 18). This is in agreement with the opinion of Ross, “Many ‘eat’ on earth what they ‘digest’ in hell.”^{xlv} The sage closes the prologue with this warning to compel the uncommitted to pick life.

4.0 Inferences and Implications of Wisdom/Folly Motif in Proverbs 9

From the exegesis of Proverbs 9, several inferences can be drawn, but few are considered here:



1. The personification of Wisdom and Folly are portrayed as hostesses who have prepared a banquet in their houses. Wisdom is portrayed as a noble and virtuous hostess. She has prepared a sumptuous banquet, symbolising the nourishment and guidance she offers to those who seek her. The “meat” and “wine” she provides symbolise the rich and fulfilling knowledge and understanding she imparts. Wisdom sends out her invitations, calling those who lack understanding to come and partake of her wisdom. She promises that they will grow in knowledge and righteousness by embracing her.

At the same time, folly is depicted as a seductive woman who lures the gullible with her enticing but ultimately destructive invitation. She calls out to anyone who passes by from a conspicuous and alluring spot at her house’s entrance. She is loud, gullible, and without understanding, offering stolen water and bread eaten secretly, symbolising forbidden and deceitful pleasures. Folly’s invitation may appear alluring, but ultimately leads to destruction and moral decay. The text explores the Wisdom/Folly motif, urging the reader to decide whether to dine with Wisdom or Folly. Since wisdom is a personification of Yahweh’s characteristic of wisdom and her residence is situated on the highest point in the city, wisdom may represent both Yahweh and Yahweh himself. Folly, on the other hand, represents foolish thought and behaviour and represents deities, including pagan gods and goddesses. Choosing Wisdom and Folly is fundamental for exercising wisdom, and there is no middle road. The terms “wisdom” and “folly” have significant theological meaning, as seen in the proverbs.^{xlvi} The house built by wisdom withstands assault, while that by folly leads to destruction.

2. Wisdom’s house has seven pillars, symbolising perfection and an abundance of space for those seeking wisdom. Since she constructed her home with seven pillars—a symbol of solidity and completion—it is evident that Wisdom’s home was a sign of social standing and



money.^{xlvi} McKinlay states that archaeological investigation has discovered that Israelite houses were pillared, and sometimes even nonroyal residences had seven pillars.^{xlvi} This imagery conveys the idea that wisdom's foundation is solid and trustworthy. In various cultures and belief systems, seven is often associated with completeness, perfection, and spiritual significance. It is considered divine perfection and frequently appears in religious and symbolic contexts.^{xlvi} In the context of wisdom's house, the "seven pillars" convey that her foundation is perfectly constructed and complete, signifying the solid and flawless nature of her teachings and guidance. The symbolism of the seven pillars also suggests that wisdom is open and accessible to everyone. There is ample space and support for those who seek her. This inclusiveness conveys that wisdom is not limited to a select few but is available to all willing to seek it. The invitation to her banquet is extended to anyone who lacks understanding, emphasising that there is room for everyone at her table.

The image of a house with seven pillars also implies abundant space and nourishment. Just as a house with multiple pillars is spacious and can accommodate many guests, wisdom's teachings and guidance are abundant, providing ample nourishment for the soul. Those who partake of her wisdom will find sustenance and fulfilment in their pursuit of knowledge and virtue. The symbolism also reinforces the idea that wisdom is not exclusive or limited but is a complete and accessible source of guidance and knowledge, offering a place for anyone who seeks to embrace it. This imagery encourages individuals to come and partake of her wisdom, emphasising the universal nature of wisdom and its potential to enrich the lives of all who seek it.

3. Wisdom's invitation to the gullible emphasises the importance of "turning aside" from foolishness, the seductive lures of folly, and embracing the path of insight. It is an



invitation to repentance, humility, and the pursuit of wisdom. It highlights the importance of recognising ignorance, mistakes, and wrongdoings and taking the first step toward change. Repentance is an essential theme in many religious and moral traditions.¹ It involves acknowledging one's errors and seeking forgiveness or making amends. Wisdom's invitation implies that those who respond to her call acknowledge their past foolishness and are willing to change their ways, which is a form of repentance.

To embrace wisdom, one must exhibit humility by admitting one's lack of understanding and acknowledging the need for guidance and knowledge. Humility is vital in pursuing wisdom because it opens the door to learning and self-improvement.^{li} The ultimate goal of wisdom's invitation is to lead individuals on the path of insight and righteousness. By accepting her invitation, individuals consciously seek knowledge, understanding, and moral virtue, thereby pursuing wisdom as a lifelong journey. This invitation is a powerful call to individuals to examine their lives, acknowledge their shortcomings, and take steps toward positive change and self-improvement. It encourages them to embrace wisdom as a guiding principle, emphasising that it is never too late to turn away from foolishness and embark on a path of insight and righteousness.

4. The study highlights the consequences of rebuking a mocker and correcting a wise person. It suggests that the mocker, who rejects the fear of the LORD, will face shame and hatred, while the wise person will grow in wisdom and knowledge. The contrast between the Wise and the Mocker in Proverbs 9 underscores the significant differences in their responses to correction and rebuke and the consequences that follow their choices: The Wise Person Responds positively to correction and rebuke and always listens, learns, and seeks to improve when corrected or offered guidance. They accumulate knowledge and understanding by



heeding advice and adjusting their behaviour based on feedback. Also, he Values the “fear of the LORD.” This phrase often signifies a reverence for God and a desire to follow divine principles and moral values.

On the other hand, the mocker rejects correction and rebuke and is resistant to accepting criticism or guidance. They may dismiss the wisdom and insight offered to them, eventually leading to shame and hatred. The consequence of rejecting correction and wisdom is that the mocker is likely to face shame and the disapproval of others. Their arrogant attitude and unwillingness to learn can negatively affect their relationships and reputation. They reject the “fear of the LORD.” The mention of rejecting the “fear of the LORD” implies a lack of reverence for divine principles and moral values, which can contribute to their downfall.

This contrast highlights the importance of humility, receptivity to correction, and a willingness to embrace wisdom and guidance. It suggests that those who reject these principles will likely face negative consequences, while those who cultivate wisdom and understanding will continue to grow and flourish. It reinforces that wisdom is a valuable asset leading to a more fulfilling and righteous life, while arrogance and mockery can lead to shame and discord.

5. The fear of the LORD is presented as the beginning of wisdom. It highlights genuine wisdom based on a respectful and lowly attitude towards God. It implies a profound reverence, awe, and respect for the divine rather than a fear of God. It recognises the majesty, omnipotence, and moral authority of God. This respect reflects realising that the divine is the ultimate fount of knowledge and direction. A humble understanding of one’s shortcomings in light of God’s holiness and perfection is necessary for a person to have the fear of the LORD.



It is an acknowledgement that human wisdom is limited and that true wisdom comes from aligning one's life with God's wisdom. This fear also serves as a moral and ethical foundation for making the right choices. It implies a commitment to following God's principles and values, the path to true wisdom and righteousness. The statement that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" means that wisdom, in its truest and purest form, starts with this attitude of reverence and humility before God. Without this foundational posture, the pursuit of wisdom may be incomplete or misguided.^{lvi} The fear of the LORD sets the stage for a moral and intellectual growth life, emphasising that true wisdom is rooted in a humble and respectful relationship with God, from which all other aspects of wisdom and understanding flow.

6. The text also outlines the benefits of wisdom, including a long and prosperous life, which leads to a more fulfilling and frequently linked to a longer life. Wisdom is portrayed as a source of numerous advantages, both in the spiritual and practical sense. Making wise choices and living according to moral principles can lead to a healthier lifestyle and reduce the risks of reckless behaviour. Thus, wisdom is seen as a contributor to a longer and more fulfilling life.^{lvii} Wisdom often leads to financial and material success through financial prudence, and ethical business practices associated with wisdom can result in increased wealth and prosperity. Wisdom provides a sense of purpose and fulfilment. It guides individuals toward meaningful and fulfilling life choices, resulting in contentment and well-being.

Wisdom fosters better interpersonal relationships by encouraging qualities like empathy, patience, and good communication, essential for maintaining healthy and harmonious relationships with others. Wisdom acts as a form of protection by guiding one to



avoid pitfalls and dangers associated with hasty or foolish choices by making wise decisions. It helps individuals discern right from wrong and make choices that align with their values and principles. It aids individuals in their quest for a deeper understanding of the divine and their place in the world. Also, it encourages individuals to live with honesty, integrity, and compassion, contributing to a virtuous and honourable life. The benefits of wisdom go beyond mere intellectual knowledge; they encompass a holistic and fulfilling way of life by living according to godly principles and making wise choices.^{liv}

7. Folly's invitation is portrayed as deceptive, offering temporary pleasures but concealing the ultimate consequence of death. It serves as a warning against succumbing to temptation and sinful behaviour. The invitation appears enticing and alluring, offering temporary pleasures and indulgences. However, beneath this facade of immediate gratification, it conceals the profound and destructive consequences, often symbolised as "the way to Sheol" or death.

Folly is depicted as a seductive woman who invites people with enticing offers of forbidden pleasures and hidden vices. The deception lies in making these temptations appear attractive while concealing the harm they can cause. This invitation promises immediate gratification and sensual pleasures. It preys on the desires and weaknesses of individuals, luring them with the prospect of indulging in momentary delights. The text suggests that her path results in death or moral decay and her temporary pleasures, emphasising the hidden, long-term damage. Her deceptive invitation serves as a moral and spiritual warning. It cautions against giving in to sinful or immoral behaviour driven by impulsivity and the pursuit of immediate pleasure, as such behaviour can lead to ruin and spiritual death. This warning within Proverbs reminds readers of the dangers of succumbing to the allure of



immediate and sinful pleasures. It encourages one to exercise discernment and to choose the path of wisdom and righteousness, even when faced with tempting but deceptive invitations. The message is one of caution, emphasising the importance of considering the long-term consequences of one's choices and not being misled by superficial and short-lived gratifications.

8. The text underscores the choice between wisdom and folly, life and death. Those who answer the call of knowledge will discover life; those who choose the road of stupidity will end up at the bottom of the tomb. The decision to accept knowledge or give in to foolishness is portrayed as a significant and crucial choice between life and death or wisdom and folly. This decision is portrayed as being life-or-death. Life will come to those who answer the call of knowledge and walk the straight and narrow road. This life consists of a bodily presence and a more contented, ethically pure style of being. In addition to physical death, individuals who choose the folly route will also find themselves in the depths of the grave, which represents moral and spiritual devastation.^{lv}

5.0 Conclusion

The study explores the folly/wisdom motif in Proverbs 9, extending a timeless invitation to their feasts. The investigation has traversed the realms of literature and philosophy, unravelling the multifaceted layers of meaning and significance that the chapter offers. The insights gained from the examination reveal a profound and enduring exploration of human nature, moral choices, and the pursuit of wisdom. Proverbs 9 personifies the abstract concepts of wisdom and folly into two distinct and contrasting female characters. With her grand banquet, Lady Wisdom symbolises the path of righteousness, understanding, and a life well-



lived. At the same time, Dame Folly's enticing but treacherous table represents the allure of foolishness and its destructive consequences. The juxtaposition of these two feasts underscores the central theme of choice: the choice between a life guided by wisdom and virtue or one driven by ignorance and moral decadence.

Furthermore, the exploration extended to the cultural and historical context, underscoring the enduring relevance of the wisdom and folly motifs, as they resonate with universal aspects of the human condition. The study challenges one to continually seek the path of wisdom, to heed the call of virtue, and to avoid the siren's call of folly. This chapter is a beacon of wisdom in the vast sea of human experience, guiding one toward lives of virtue, understanding, and righteousness. As one continues to navigate the complexities of existence, the lessons of Proverbs 9 remain as pertinent today as they were in ancient Israel, offering timeless guidance for the ages.

ENDNOTES

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