

Wisdom Christology

How Jesus Becomes God's Wisdom for Us

Daniel J. Ebert IV



P U B L I S H I N G
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Introduction: The Need for Wisdom

ANDREW DELBANCO, in *The Real American Dream*, describes the spiritual history of the United States in three chapters: “God,” “Nation,” and “Self.” In Puritan New England, according to his analysis, the self stretched toward the vastness of God. From the rise of democracy until the Great Society of the 1960s, people turned more and more to a national ideal less than God but larger than any individual citizen. Now, Delbanco writes, “hope has narrowed to the vanishing point of the self alone.”¹ The historical divisions, of course, are too neat; there are some wonderful counterexamples of God’s grace and goodness in the world today. But the indictment is telling: the story of contemporary culture centers largely on the self.

Today this destructive narrative lures the church; it threatens to turn us and our children into “‘black holes of self-absorption’: manipulating, cheating, deceiving, and exploiting others.”² We have all felt its demonic pull. This self-centered wisdom permeates our culture and subtly woos us into its ways. It is not the voice of true wisdom, but of folly.

While this destructive voice sings a contemporary song, its message is not new. The book of Proverbs teaches that “the woman Folly is loud; she is seductive and knows nothing” (Prov. 9:13). In the early church, Jesus’ brother James described such thinking

1. Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 103.

2. Miroslav Volf, *Against the Tide: Love in a Time of Petty Dreams and Persisting Enmities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), xi.

as earthly and unspiritual, characterized by bitter envy, selfish ambition, disorder, and evil (James 3:14–16).

God offers us an alternative wisdom. It “cries aloud” and promises, “If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit to you; I will make my words known to you” (Prov. 1:20, 23). James describes this wisdom as pure, peace-loving, gentle, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial, and sincere. It is marked by humility and belongs to those who seek peace (James 3:13, 17–18).

Although seldom noticed, the heavenly wisdom James recommends is thoroughly Christological.³ His description of wisdom echoes the deepest insights found in what the rest of the New Testament confesses about Christ. There is a profound sense in which wisdom and Christology belong together. In the words of the apostle Paul, Jesus is “wisdom from God” for us (1 Cor. 1:30).

In this book we explore, through the study of selected New Testament passages, how the doctrine of Christ functioned as wisdom for the early church. We need to tune our ears to this wisdom. It is our best hope “to counter the multiple manifestations of human self-absorption and to connect human beings with what ultimately matters—God, whom we should love with all our being, and neighbors, whom we should love as ourselves.”⁴

To prepare us to explore this fascinating and important interface between wisdom and Christology, we begin by considering several introductory matters:

- Reasons to Study Christology
- The Focus on Christ as Wisdom
- Preliminary Questions
- A Warning for the Journey

3. “Christology” is a word commonly used in theology to refer to the study of the person and work of Christ. “Christological” is the adjective, and means “related to Christ.”

4. Volf, *Against the Tide*, 110.

Reasons to Study Christology

The vitality of our Christian lives, our families, and our churches depends on how we understand and follow Christ. One writer put it this way: “Christianity stands or falls by the adequacy or otherwise of its Christology.”⁵ There are four specific reasons why we need a deeper understanding of Christ.

First, as the apostle John reminds us, a full account of the person and work of Jesus is inexhaustible (John 21:25). There are depths to Christ that we have not yet discovered. One aspect of Christology that awaits further study is its function in the New Testament as wisdom.

A second reason for exploring Christology is its impact on the health of the church. The church constantly needs to be renewed in the light of both the written and living Word of God. The traditional Reformed motto about the church is true: “the church reformed and always to be reformed.”⁶ In every age there are characteristics of the church that need to be reshaped by Christological wisdom. The antidote for the unhealthy habits of thought and practice that have infiltrated our churches is the wisdom found in Christ.

Third, our understanding of God’s ways must never be stagnant. Scripture is unchanging, and Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. There is an important stability to the basic confession of the Christian faith (Eph. 4:14; Heb. 13:9; Jude 3). But, at the same time, our theological constructs, our human reflection on God and his Word, must constantly be refreshed. There are two questions we must persistently ask if our faith is to remain vital. What does it mean for me to follow Christ in my life, in this time, and in this place? And what does it mean for us today to be his church in the world? The answers to these questions come in the shape of God’s wisdom in Christ.

5. Colin Greene, *Christology in Cultural Perspective: Marking Out the Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 96.

6. The Latin of this saying often added the key phrase “by the Word of God” (*ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbi Dei*).

Fourth, the study of Jesus is for our good and God's glory. The Father is pleased when much is made of his Son. As we will see, the study of the doctrine of Christ leads us to the heart of God's triune life, where we must bow and worship Father, Son, and Spirit. Here, wonder of wonders, through Christ and his wisdom, we come to participate in the very life of God (2 Peter 1:3–4)!

The Focus on Christ as Wisdom

Scattered throughout the New Testament are concentrated Christological passages that reflect a set of themes confessed about Jesus by the earliest church. These joyful celebrations of Christ lead us in a unique way to God's wisdom. The biblical authors apply a set of Christological motifs to the various circumstances of the early church, and to the practical problems the church faced. As a result, these texts model for us how to live in the wisdom of Christ. This study will examine several of these passages to seek this pattern of wisdom.

This focus on the wisdom of Christ cannot be separated from two other questions often discussed in New Testament scholarship. First, did Jesus fulfill the role of a wisdom teacher or "sage" during his earthly ministry? Second, in what way did Jesus' identity relate to that of personified Wisdom? Wisdom is treated as if it were a "lady" in Proverbs 1 and elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g., "Wisdom cries," etc.). Later Jewish writings amplified the narrative of this female literary figure. So the question arises whether Lady Wisdom contributes to the explanation of Jesus' identity in the New Testament. It will help to clarify our study if we look at these two questions briefly here in our introduction.

We will see Jesus functioning in the role of a sage or wisdom teacher in Matthew 11, but Jesus is far more than a sage or wisdom teacher. We will also see language used of the Wisdom figure, such as her presence and role at creation, and her reflection of God's glory (John 1; Col. 1; Heb. 1). But Jesus is far more than the

personification of Wisdom. We will argue in this study that it is a mistake to give too much explanatory value to the Wisdom figure in the development of the doctrine of Christ. Personified Wisdom is a way of talking about an attribute of God, and reflects some important truths about God's work in the world. But Jesus, as a distinct person, along with the Father and the Spirit, is identified as God. This divine identity of the Son is grounded in multiple Old Testament themes, as well as in the events of the life of Christ. These questions of Jesus as sage and Jesus as Wisdom personified will necessarily play a role in our study, and we will set them in their historical context in the next section of this introduction. But they are not our main focus.

The primary focal point of this study is the application of Christology to issues in the life of the New Testament church. We are investigating them in pursuit of "Christological wisdom." The church has usually studied these important texts (e.g., Phil. 2; Col. 1; Heb. 1) to develop or prove aspects of the doctrine of Christ (e.g., his preexistence, his divine nature). This is appropriate and has its place. However, we consistently find that these passages themselves are not so much developing or proving Christology as assuming it, and then applying it in various ways to the life of the church. Jesus (Matt. 11) and the gospel (1 Cor. 1) are identified in the New Testament as the unique places where God's wisdom is now revealed (Heb. 1:2; 1 Peter 1:20). The application of various elements of this revelation to problems in the life of the church is a glimpse into early Christian wisdom in practice.

Preliminary Questions

To set our study in historical perspective, it will be helpful to briefly answer four questions: What is Jewish wisdom literature? How was wisdom understood in these writings? How is wisdom different in Christ? And why are we studying these particular New Testament passages?

What Is Jewish Wisdom Literature?

We are studying Christ in relation to an ancient Jewish understanding of wisdom. This calls for a brief look at the Jewish wisdom literature found both in the Old Testament and in apocryphal books written during the period of the Second Temple.⁷ The Hebrew term for wisdom (*hokmah*) in its various forms (verb, noun, adjective) occurs more than 300 times in this literature, and about three-fourths of these are in the five wisdom books discussed below.⁸ The theme had become increasingly important as the New Testament period approached.

Definition of Wisdom Literature. One of the best definitions of wisdom literature is provided by James Crenshaw. He distinguishes between what this literature is *formally* and what it is *thematically*:

Formally, wisdom consists of proverbial sentence or instruction, debate, intellectual reflection; *thematically*, wisdom comprises self-evident intuitions about mastering life for human betterment, groping after life's secrets with regard to innocent suffering, grappling with finitude, and quest for truth concealed in the created order and manifested in a feminine persona. When a marriage between form and content exists, there is Wisdom literature. Lacking such oneness, a given text participates in biblical wisdom to a greater or lesser extent.⁹

Some Old Testament writings, such as the psalms, by this definition are not technically wisdom literature. However, they do reflect wisdom themes. This distinction is also important for the New Testament, where we do not have wisdom literature by definition, but we do have distinct wisdom themes.

7. Second Temple Judaism covers the period from 516 B.C., when the Second Temple was constructed, until A.D. 70, when it was destroyed. The literature of this period, not included in the Protestant Bible, is sometimes called "intertestamental literature."

8. Cf. Roland E. Murphy, "Wisdom in the Old Testament," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:920.

9. James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 12 (emphasis added).

Works Included in Jewish Wisdom Literature. The wisdom literature of ancient Judaism includes three Old Testament books, Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes,¹⁰ as well as two apocryphal works, Sirach (also known as the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira or Ecclesiasticus) and Wisdom (also known as the Wisdom of Solomon). While Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon are not part of inspired Scripture, they are important literary works that provide part of the background to the New Testament.¹¹

How Was Wisdom Understood in Jewish Wisdom Literature?

While this is not the place for even a brief survey of the teachings of Jewish wisdom literature, several observations will help situate our study of Christ in relation to this wisdom background.¹² There are two types of material from the wisdom literature that feed into the New Testament. First is the actual wisdom teaching. The second involves the personification of Wisdom. We will look at the personification of Wisdom below. Here we consider some of the more salient features of an Old Testament theology of wisdom.

Wisdom's voice in Israel is a form of God's self-revelation; it invites the hearer to choose between two paths; it leads to a virtuous life; it addresses the skills needed for everyday living. It also struggles with the deepest problems of life, including suffering and evil. Israel's wisdom is unique from that of the surrounding nations because it is set within the framework of God's covenantal law (Torah).¹³

10. Sometimes the Song of Solomon (Song of Songs) is included in this list.

11. A helpful resource on Jewish literature in the background of the New Testament is Richard Bauckham, *The Jewish World around the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), especially chapter 14, "The Relevance of Extra-Canonical Jewish Texts to New Testament Study," 207–20. Other texts from the Apocrypha that are significant for the personification of Wisdom include Tob. 4:3–21; 12:6–13; and Bar. 3:9–4:4.

12. For two helpful works on the theology of the canonical wisdom literature, see Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010); and Daniel J. Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1–9* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

13. This section's insights are largely adapted from Daniel Treier's excellent article "Wisdom," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 844–47.

Wisdom as Revelation. There is much in wisdom literature that is from the perspective of the wise person seeking to discern truth. Thus, it is different from prophetic material where we read, “This is what the LORD says” (e.g., Ex. 8:1). But through the human search, divine wisdom cries out; in this sense wisdom is revelatory. True wisdom for Israel is the wisdom of the Creator—their covenant God. This relationship with Yahweh is the context for all Jewish wisdom literature.

There is a tension in the literature between the accessibility of wisdom (Proverbs) and its inaccessibility (Job 28; Eccl. 7:23–29). It is accessible because of God’s self-revelation, whether in creation or by his Spirit; it is inaccessible because of human finiteness and the fall.¹⁴ God would eventually reveal his wisdom more fully in Christ. But the lesson here, from the Old Testament, is that we must remain teachable before God. As finite and fallen human beings we are dependent, through our suffering and the enigmas of life, on his gracious self-revelation.

The Two Paths. Wisdom in the Old Testament invites people to choose between two paths: that of wisdom (the way of justice) and that of folly (the way of wickedness). This is poetically captured in Psalm 1, a “wisdom” psalm. In this sense, the wisdom literature calls us to live a virtuous life, a life of godly character. But this, too, has a broader biblical context. In Genesis, Adam and Eve failed the test, choosing rather the path of folly and disobedience. Choosing the right path starts with “fearing the Lord” and then walking in obedience. This call to the path of wisdom is related to the law or Torah:

See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight

14. Craig Bartholomew (*Ecclesiastes* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009], 93) prefers to translate the word “vanity” (*hebel*) in Ecclesiastes as “enigmatic,” which reflects the mystery of life apart from God’s full revelation.

of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." (Deut. 4:5–6)

When Jesus came as the fulfillment of the Old Testament, including the fulfillment of its wisdom and law, he taught a parable that reflects the two paths of the wisdom literature:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a *wise* man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a *foolish* man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it. (Matt. 7:24–27)

Creation and Fall. Another tension found in the wisdom literature is between a good creation, in which wisdom can be discerned, and the fallen creation, in which evil and suffering exist. Job and Ecclesiastes wrestle with these problems. Both books leave the reader wanting more; this is, in part, because of their place in redemptive history. The solution to evil and suffering was still waiting for the Messiah and God's ultimate victory. When Jesus came, he would deal a death blow to evil and turn suffering upside down. But this is getting ahead of ourselves.

Wisdom and Law. We must return briefly to the question of the law in Jewish wisdom literature. In Israelite wisdom, commitment to Yahweh and his covenant is assumed (cf. Prov. 1:7; Deut. 4:5–6). The nation's wisdom literature was set in this context, including Ecclesiastes:

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. (Eccl. 12:13–14)

In Sirach, law and wisdom have fused even more; when wisdom speaks, it is the wisdom of Torah (Sir. 6:37; 24:22). This will have important implications for the early church, when the place of God's unique wisdom finds its fulfillment in Jesus, rather than in the law itself.

How Is Wisdom Different in Christ?

Wisdom is radically reconfigured in Christ. All preconceptions of what it means to be wise, including those of secular philosophers and religious theologians, as well as those of ordinary people, are subject to revision. There are two types of wisdom, which overlap in some ways, and yet are fundamentally different from God's wisdom in Jesus and the gospel. Since these will come up in our study, a brief look at them will be helpful.

Philosophical Wisdom. The word "philosophy" originally meant "love of wisdom." There has always been a contested relationship between philosophy and theology. At its best, philosophy has been a servant to the faith; at its worst, it has been an enemy.

Contemporary philosophers still refer to Aristotle (384–22 B.C.) for his classic treatment of wisdom. Aristotle argued that happiness came from moral virtues, and that moral virtues depended on five intellectual virtues.¹⁵ Three of these intellectual virtues related to the contemplative life (knowledge, intuition, and wisdom); the greatest was wisdom (*sophia*). The other two intellectual virtues related to practical life (technical skill and prudence); prudence can best be translated as "practical wisdom" (*phronēsis*). Both terms for wisdom (*sophia* and *phronēsis*) are used in the New Testament with reference to God's unique wisdom in Christ.

In part, we can agree with Aristotle. Certainly moral and intellectual virtues are important, and there is much that the church needs to learn about intellectual virtues. But intellectual virtues, as understood by Aristotle or any other human philosopher, are

15. See his *Nicomachean Ethics*, especially book 6.3–7 and book 10.6–8.

not at the heart of the church's wisdom. The things that philosophical wisdom misses, as Augustine discovered in his journey through Greek philosophy, are Christ and the gospel.¹⁶

God's wisdom in Christ is not merely an idea or a theoretical construction. It is grounded in historical events whereby God uniquely reveals himself. He lovingly does this so that our broken world might be set right and that we may enter into a joyful life of communion with him and with one another. While philosophical wisdom is an abstraction, God's wisdom in Christ is particular, historical, and counterintuitive to human reason. It involves the incarnation of God's Son, his death on the cross, the triumph of the resurrection, the sending of his Spirit, and the promise of a glorious re-creation of the world. It is an invitation to people everywhere to know and enjoy the triune God of Scripture in all this particularity. This is an offense to the wisdom of human philosophy.

First-Century Jewish Wisdom Speculation. There is a second kind of talk about wisdom, one that is more distinctly religious and more directly related to the gospel's historical context. In our study, a debate will surface about the relation of Jesus to personified Wisdom—or the literary figure known as “Lady Wisdom” (also referred to as “Dame Wisdom” or “Sophia”). The Old Testament wisdom literature occasionally personifies Wisdom in this way (e.g., Prov. 1:20; 8:1). Along with a variety of other Old Testament motifs, such as God's Word and the law, this personification of Wisdom is part of the conceptual background for God's revelation in Jesus. The Jewish literature mentioned above, written around the time of Christ but not included in the Bible, also contains references to Wisdom in this personified sense (e.g., Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon). We will interact with some of this background in our study.

However, some scholars have given this extrabiblical literature too much explanatory value in understanding the New Testament's portrayal of Christ. They argue that the exalted

16. Carol Harrison, “Augustine, Wisdom and Classical Culture,” in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* ed. Stephen C. Barton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 137.

picture of Jesus found in the New Testament was largely the result of the early church's reflection on Lady Wisdom as a divine figure. The earliest church supposedly came to think of the human Jesus as divine because it gradually came to associate him with this first-century figure. We reject this approach for the following reasons:¹⁷

1. While early church fathers, after the close of the New Testament canon, sometimes identified Jesus with the Old Testament personification of Wisdom, the New Testament itself never makes this identification.¹⁸
2. Wisdom personified is a way of talking about an attribute of God, even in the intertestamental writings; but the New Testament teaches that Jesus is an actual person—namely, God's Son, who is included in the identity of God.
3. There are references to God's creation of Lady Wisdom in Jewish literature.¹⁹ The New Testament portrays Jesus in his deity as eternal. It should be noted that the heretic Arius argued on the basis of the creation of Sophia that Jesus was not fully God. This was rightly rejected by the church.
4. While Lady Wisdom is described as playing a "saving" role in Israel, this never involves salvation from sin. To argue that personified Wisdom deepened the New Testament's understanding of the saving role of Jesus is to read the redemptive work of Christ into the earlier Jewish literature. The redemptive work of Christ is central to the New Testament's message about Jesus; it is absent in any substantive sense in the narratives about Lady Wisdom.²⁰

17. Several of these reasons will be revisited and amplified during the course of this study. For a more detailed treatment of this issue, see Daniel Ebert, "Wisdom in New Testament Christology, with Special Reference to Hebrews 1:1–4" (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1998).

18. Some argue that the identification is implied in the Gospels of Matthew and John. This is debatable; it certainly is not an explicit identification. We will also see that in 1 Corinthians 1 Jesus is identified with wisdom as the gospel and not as personified Wisdom.

19. See Prov. 8:22; Sir. 24:9.

20. A typical example of this overreading of Wisdom's salvific role can be found in Aidan O'Boyle, *Towards a Contemporary Wisdom Christology: Some Catholic Christologies in German, English and French, 1965–1995*, vol. 98 (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università

5. Finally, the existence of a well-developed story line about a Sophia in Jewish literature is highly suspect. Scholars tend to read back into these writings elements taken from the gospel story that are foreign to what the Jewish authors in their own contexts intended. In the Jewish literature, there is no actual personal existence of Wisdom, no incarnation, no redemptive work, and no second coming.²¹

The constellation of ideas related to Lady Wisdom fails to explain the story of Jesus. At best, the background Wisdom material provided language to express truths about Christ, especially in his revelatory and creative functions. These Christological concepts were already assumed by the earliest church on other grounds. Our study rejects a Christology in which “Dame Wisdom” plays a leading role.²² Yet there *is* a wisdom Christology, one that finds in Jesus God’s fullest revelation for the church and the world.

True wisdom, rooted in the nature and life of the triune God, is revealed by Christ and the gospel. Something new and definitive is made known in Jesus; yet at the same time, this Christological wisdom is the oldest wisdom, for it is “the wisdom of God.” All other conceptions, whether philosophical or religious, are judged by this wisdom.

Use of Terms. The term “wisdom” (not capitalized) will refer to the virtue of wisdom (related to other virtues such as understanding, insight, knowledge, and prudence). In the person and work of Jesus, this wisdom is revealed to have a particular shape and content; for example, it is radically self-denying and oriented

Gregoriana, 2003), 36, 392. The argument is usually based on Wisdom 10:1–11:1. O’Boyle writes, “The theme of unity between Sophia and God comes to significant climax in Wisdom 10 in which she is presented as Savior” (35).

21. For an example of this composite narrative of Lady Wisdom, with bibliography of other scholarly “profiles,” see O’Boyle, *Towards a Contemporary Wisdom Christology*, 46–47 and n93.

22. For a helpful resource that takes a similar position, see Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), especially Appendix A: “Christ and Personified Wisdom,” 595–630, and also 102–5; 186–87; 317–25.

toward the service of others. When we speak of wisdom in this sense (i.e., in relation to Christ and the gospel), we will refer to it as “Christological wisdom.”

The term “Wisdom” (capitalized) will refer to the personification or figurative portrayal of wisdom.²³ Literary personification occurs elsewhere in Scripture: for example, when justice dwells in the desert (Isa. 32:16), or when righteousness and peace kiss (Ps. 85:10). “Wisdom” may refer either to the straightforward personification of the virtue of wisdom or to the more fully developed Lady Wisdom.

One other term merits some clarification. New Testament scholars often speak of God’s revelation in Christ as “eschatological.” There is a growing recognition that in certain streams of first-century Judaism an eschatological wisdom was anticipated. We use the term “eschatological” in this study to refer to the dawning of the messianic age when Christ came into the world. Our life in Christ is eschatological in that we are living “between the times” of the Lord’s first coming and the consummation of all things at his second coming. This Christian view of time shapes everything for the body of Christ, whose members now live defined by Christ and the wisdom found in him, even as we wait for his return.

Why Are We Studying These Particular New Testament Passages?

Understanding Christology, not just as doctrine but also as wisdom, is vital for Christian discipleship. A study of various Christological passages shows that this was the apostolic pattern. New Testament Christology was developed in applied contexts to help the church be faithful to God’s revelation in his Son.

This study is necessarily selective. We have mainly chosen texts that illustrate how the apostolic doctrine of Christ was applied in the early church as wisdom for God’s people.

Most of these passages share the following characteristics:

23. For consistency, we will capitalize “Wisdom” in all expressions such as “Wisdom personified,” “the Wisdom figure,” “Lady Wisdom,” etc.

- They contain important themes about Christ, especially his identity as God’s Son, as well as his roles in creation, the revelation of God, and redemption.
- They are confessional in nature; that is, they point to truths about Christ that were a part of the early church’s basic beliefs about Jesus. While in one sense the entire New Testament is a confessing witness to Christ and the gospel, these texts are especially confession-like.²⁴
- They all have doctrinal elements that are appropriately called creedal. Some of them appear hymnlike, or poetic, in their careful literary structure.
- All the texts are rhetorically significant: in other words, each passage plays an important role in the message of its book.
- Finally, all these texts have been discussed in New Testament scholarship with regard to Christ as wisdom.²⁵

Our study will be divided into two parts. Part 1 begins with two passages from the Gospels (Matt. 11; John 1), where Jesus and the apostle John invite us to find wisdom and salvation in Christ. Part 2, the major portion of our study, examines a series of passages where God’s wisdom in Christ is used richly to address particular challenges in the life of the church (1 Cor. 2; Phil. 2; Col. 1; Heb. 1).

A Warning for the Journey

A final note before we begin. Wisdom in Scripture is always set off against its nemesis—folly. Both voices call to us. This serves as a reminder that reflecting on the doctrine of Christ is never risk-free. One is always in danger of misinterpreting

24. A text that we do not treat at length, but that illustrates the confessional nature of this material, is 1 Timothy 3:16. It begins, “Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness . . .”

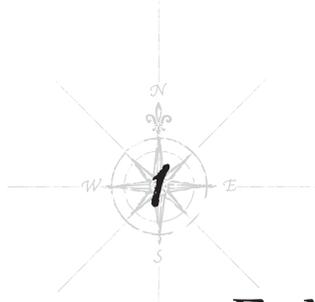
25. Other concentrated Christological texts could easily have been added, especially for their unusual literary structure and apparent confessional nature: e.g., Gal. 4:4–6; Eph. 2:14–16; 1 Tim. 3:16; 2 Tim. 2:11–13; Titus 3:4–7; and 1 Peter 1:17–21; 2:21–25; 3:17–22.

the biblical material or, having interpreted well, of denying the confession in life. The only way to avoid the first danger is to ask the Spirit of Christ, in keeping with the Lord's promise, to lead us into all truth (John 16:13). The only way to avoid the second is to be children of Christ's kingdom whose lives are characterized by repentance and faith. One of my earliest Bible teachers taught me that the most important question in the world was what I thought of Christ. May the Lord help us to answer that question in a way that pleases him.



Wisdom's Invitation

Come to me,
all who labor and are heavy laden,
and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you,
and learn from me,
for I am gentle and lowly in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls.
(Matt. 11:28–29)



An Invitation to Follow Jesus (Matthew 11:25–30)

At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Introduction

What if we could slip into a gathering where Jesus was praying? Or what if we could listen to him teach? What if we saw Jesus turn to us and invite us to be his disciples? Matthew paints just such a scene for us.

The passage displays a rich and concentrated Christology. It is a Christology of action as Jesus responds to the unrepentant cities (11:1–24), prays to the Lord of heaven and earth (11:25–26), declares his unique relationship to the Father (11:27), and then invites those listening to be his disciples and enter into rest (11:28).

Before we rush in, however, we should pause, for Jesus' invitation is a dangerous one. He is offering an alternative wisdom, one that is hidden from the "wise" of this world (11:25; cf. 1 Cor. 1:18–31). It is a wisdom that, if rejected, brings awful judgment (11:22–24). It is a wisdom that requires repentance (11:20–21) and a humble, childlike faith (11:25; cf. Matt. 18:3–4; 19:14). It demands that we come radically teachable. This wisdom is also dangerous because if we accept the invitation, everything must change as we leave an old life behind and begin, through Jesus, to participate in the very life of the triune God.

As we consider this passage from the life of Jesus, a number of questions will guide us:

- What Is the Context of Matthew 11:25–30?
- What Is the Wisdom in Matthew 11:25–30?
- Is There a Wisdom Motif Elsewhere in Matthew?
- What Is the Text's Literary Background?
- How Can We Summarize Wisdom's Invitation?
- How Is This Wisdom for Us?

What Is the Context of Matthew 11:25–30?

It will help us understand this incident if we look briefly at its context and the theology of Matthew's Gospel. The chapter begins by explaining that Jesus had gone to preach in the cities (11:1). The narrative then describes how the people had rejected both John and Jesus (11:2–19). Jesus responded by teaching that these cities of Israel would experience a more severe judgment than would Tyre, Sidon, and even Sodom (11:20–24). Our section then begins with the words, "At that time Jesus declared" (11:25).

Matthew's message focuses on God's saving revelation, which centers in Jesus, the Son of God. Highlights of this theme begin with Matthew 1:23, "'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel' (which means, God

with us).” Another theological high point is Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus’ response to Peter uncovers the nature of divine knowledge: “flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 16:16–17). These themes are repeated in the transfiguration scene. On that occasion, while Jesus was speaking to three of his disciples, “a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him’” (Matt. 17:5). The Father reveals the Son through the angelic message, through Peter, and through his own voice on the mountain.

It is in the context of this revelatory theme that Matthew 11:27 must be understood: “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” One German scholar called this text a Johannine thunderbolt, because in the midst of Matthew it sounds so much like the Gospel of John, with its high Christology and intimate relationship between the Father and the Son.¹ But the theology of the Father revealing himself in the Son, as we have seen, is thoroughly Matthean as well.

The structure of Matthew 11:25–30 can be laid out in three divisions:

1. Jesus’ prayer: wisdom from the Father, vv. 25–26.
2. Jesus’ claim: wisdom mediated through the Son, v. 27.
3. Jesus’ invitation: wisdom offered by the Son, vv. 28–30.

As we investigate the wisdom of God in Christ, we must always keep these three lessons in mind: first, knowing God’s wisdom depends on the Father’s initiative; second, this wisdom is mediated through his Son; and third, some will respond in faith, while others will inevitably reject God’s wisdom.

1. This epithet, “Johannine thunderbolt,” can be traced back to a remark by K. A. von Hase in a work whose English translation would be *The History of Jesus* (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Hartel, 1876), 422.

What Is the Wisdom in Matthew 11:25–30?

“Wisdom” is referred to indirectly in this passage as “these things” (11:25), “all things” (11:27), and the things that can be “learned” from Jesus (11:29). Two characteristics of this wisdom are immediately clear from the passage and from the context of Matthew’s Gospel: (1) the wisdom is supernaturally revealed by the Father, and (2) the wisdom concerns what the Father is doing in the Son. Whatever else can be said about this divine wisdom, it originates with the Father and focuses on the Son. What the “wise and understanding” in the normal human sense cannot grasp, the Father supernaturally “reveals” (11:25). This revelation involves the teachings of Jesus about the kingdom (11:1), his mighty works (11:2, 20), and the identity of Jesus, including his unique relationship to the Father (11:27). God the Father has “handed over” this wisdom to the Son, and the Son dispenses it to his disciples (11:27–30). Any valid interpretation of the invitation to “wisdom” in Matthew must be consistent with these basic ideas. By the end of our study we will see how comprehensive this revealed wisdom is: it is found not only in Jesus’ explicit teachings, but also in his self-sacrifice on the cross and in his life as a model for his disciples, the church. We will now look at wisdom elsewhere in Matthew before considering the literary and Old Testament background for the invitation to wisdom in Matthew 11:25–30.

Is There a Wisdom Motif Elsewhere in Matthew?

The “Lady Wisdom” Question

Many scholars have suggested that Matthew reflects on the identity of Jesus in light of personified Wisdom (“Lady Wisdom”). The personification of God’s attribute of wisdom is found in the Old Testament (e.g., Prov. 8) and later developed in the literature between the Old and New Testaments. Such an approach to

Matthew tends to get overstated.² At any rate, it is insufficient to explain the wisdom wrapped up in Jesus' invitation.

Matthew is not uninterested in the question of Jesus' relation to God's wisdom. He surely is interested. The question is whether or not Matthew reflects on Jesus' identity in light of a well-developed Wisdom figure as found in the literature of the Second Temple period. While the case for identifying Jesus with "Lady Wisdom" in Matthew's Gospel is a stretch, a brief look at the arguments helps us to focus on what Matthew *is* saying about Jesus.³

Wisdom Justified by Her Deeds (Matthew 11:16-19)

Earlier in Matthew 11 we find these interesting words: "wisdom is justified by her deeds" (v. 19). Does Matthew here refer to Jesus as Lady Wisdom? In the context, Jesus is rebuking the people for their failure to respond to God's revelation. John came as an ascetic, and the people said he had a demon (11:18). Jesus came entering fully into social life, and the people said he was a glutton, a drunkard, and a friend of sinners (11:19). The verse ends with: "Yet [or and] wisdom is justified by her deeds." What does "wisdom" refer to here? The section begins with John the Baptist questioning Jesus' identity when John hears of "the *deeds* of the Christ" (11:2-3). The section ends with Jesus declaring that "wisdom is justified by her *deeds*." Is Matthew drawing a parallel between "the deeds of the Christ" (v. 2) and the deeds of wisdom (v. 19), identifying Jesus explicitly with wisdom or even with Sophia, the personified Wisdom figure? The distance between verse 2 and verse 19 makes an intentional verbal echo unlikely.

The phrase itself is somewhat enigmatic. What did Jesus mean when he said that "wisdom is justified by her deeds"? There

2. E.g., Celia Deutsch, "Wisdom in Matthew: Transformation of a Symbol," *Novum Testamentum* 32, 1 (1990): 13-47. See further on the Lady Wisdom question in this book's introduction.

3. See the judicious article "Wisdom," by Daniel Treier, in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 844-47.

are two credible ways of interpreting this text; either one is more convincing than the “Lady Wisdom” theory. First, it might be that these are not Jesus’ words, but the quoted sarcastic words of those who are rejecting Jesus. Matthew 11:19 might be punctuated this way: “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners! And wisdom is justified by her deeds.’” In other words, Jesus and John are accused of violating the wisdom of the day (John’s extreme asceticism and Jesus’ implied drunkenness), so that neither of them is wise. This would make sense in light of Jesus’ statement later, that the Father had hidden the things of Christ from the “wise and understanding” of this world (11:25). The critics completely misunderstood what God was doing in John and Jesus.

If the punctuation is left in the traditional form, then Jesus is making a final comment on the people’s poor response to him and to John: “Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.” His point would simply be that both his own conduct and John’s will be vindicated when understood in light of God’s saving activity, that is, in light of the wisdom of the gospel. In this sense, the “deeds” of Christ and the “deeds” of wisdom *are* consonant. This may be the correct interpretation. Either way, it does not explicitly identify Jesus with the Wisdom figure. Under either interpretation, one thing is clear: the world’s wisdom and what God is doing in Christ are very different understandings of wisdom.

A Wisdom Greater than Solomon’s (Matthew 12:41–42)

The word “wisdom” occurs in Matthew in only two other places. Both are instructive. In chapter 12, Jesus is again rebuking the people for their unbelief and lack of repentance:

The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth

to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. (Matt. 12:41–42)

It is a mistake to read this as if Jesus were identifying himself as the incarnation of Lady Wisdom. Jonah was known for his preaching; Solomon was known for his wisdom. People responded positively to them. Now something greater than either of these Old Testament figures has arrived and the people are not responding. This is Jesus' indictment. There is a parallel in Matthew 12:6 where Jesus says, "I tell you, something greater than the temple is here." The something greater, of course, is God's revelation in his Son and the promised messianic kingdom.

Matthew's wisdom is wrapped up with God's final revelation in the person and work of Jesus. We should not be unduly distracted by a supposed antecedent Wisdom figure. The focus is on judgment for lack of repentance and faith in the Messiah. If there is a typology at work, it is the typology of Jonah that is related to the resurrection (12:40) and the typology of Solomon related to the messianic king (cf. 12:23). Thus the eschatological focus: something greater is here! What this tells us is that God's wisdom has a Christological shape: the attention is fully on what God is now doing in his Son.

There is something else here that will be explicitly identified later in the New Testament as true wisdom; it relates to Solomon, Jonah, and the temple. Solomon's wisdom attracted the Gentile Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10; 2 Chron. 9). The preaching of Jonah caused the Gentile city of Nineveh to repent (Jonah 4). The temple was intended to be "a house of prayer for all peoples" (Isa. 56:7; cf. Mark 11:17). Jesus is greater than all these because the door to the Gentiles is thrown wide open in the gospel. By the end of Matthew this will become clear, as Jesus gives the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (28:19). Paul will forcefully identify this inclusion of the Gentiles in the purposes of God as an essential component of Christological wisdom (Rom. 16:25–27; Eph. 2:8–10; Col. 1:27–28).