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Wisdom Christology: How Jesus Becomes God's Wisdom for Us

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Wisdom Christology: How Jesus Becomes God's Wisdom for Us

Description

The *Explorations in Biblical Theology* series addresses the need for quality literature that attracts believing readers to good theology and builds there up in their faith. Each title in the series combines solid content with accessibility and readability—a valuable addition to the library of any college student, thoughtful lay reader, seminarian, or pastor.

What is true wisdom? While contemporary culture locates it in self-absorption, the first-century apostles revealed how wisdom is located supremely in Jesus Christ. Daniel Ebert explains how Old Testament wisdom motifs are not only appropriated in New Testament Christology but also far surpassed in God's Son.

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Wisdom Christology

Explorations in Biblical Theology

*Election and Free Will: God's Gracious Choice
and Our Responsibility*

*Anointed with the Spirit and Power:
The Holy Spirit's Empowering Presence*

The Nearness of God: His Presence with His People

The Elder: Today's Ministry Rooted in All of Scripture

Our Secure Salvation: Preservation and Apostasy

Robert A. Peterson, series editor

Wisdom Christology

How Jesus Becomes God's Wisdom for Us

Daniel J. Ebert IV



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I dedicate this book to my wife,

Sue

“She is far more precious than jewels. . . .

She opens her hand to the poor
and reaches out her hands to the needy.

She opens her mouth with *wisdom* . . .

She looks well to the ways of her household . . .

Her children rise up and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her . . .

A woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.”

(Prov. 31:10–30)

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Series Introduction

BELIEVERS TODAY need high-quality literature that attracts them to good theology and builds them up in their faith. Currently, readers may find several sets of lengthy—and rather technical—books on Reformed theology, as well as some that are helpful and semipopular. *Explorations in Biblical Theology* takes a more mid-range approach, seeking to offer readers the substantial content of the more lengthy books, while striving for the readability of the semipopular books.

This series includes two types of books: (1) some treating biblical themes and (2) others treating the theology of specific biblical books. The volumes dealing with biblical themes seek to cover the whole range of Christian theology, from the doctrine of God to last things. Representative early offerings in the series focus on the empowering by the Holy Spirit, justification, the presence of God, preservation and apostasy, and substitutionary atonement. Examples of works dealing with the theology of specific biblical books are volumes on the theology of 1 and 2 Samuel, Psalms, and Isaiah in the Old Testament, and books on the theology of Mark, Romans, and James in the New Testament.

Explorations in Biblical Theology is written for college seniors, seminarians, pastors, and thoughtful lay readers. These volumes are intended to be accessible and not obscured by excessive references to Hebrew, Greek, or theological jargon.

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the Bible or open up the theology of the specific book they treat. Writers desire not merely to dispense the Bible's good information, but also to apply that information to real needs today.

Explorations in Biblical Theology is committed to being warm and winsome, with a focus on applying God's truth to life. Authors aim to treat those with whom they disagree as they themselves would want to be treated. The motives for the rejection of error are not to fight, hurt, or wound, but to protect, help, and heal. The authors of this series are godly, capable scholars with a commitment to Reformed theology and a burden to minister that theology clearly to God's people.

Robert A. Peterson
Series Editor

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I WANT TO THANK those who helped bring this book to fruition.

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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 . . .”

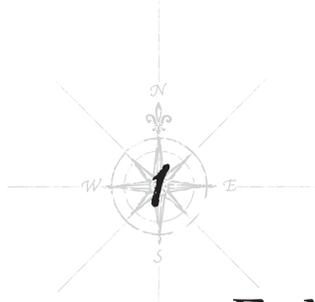
25. Other concentrated Christological texts could easily have been added, especially for their unusual literary structure and apparent confessional nature: e.g., Gal. 4:4–6; Eph. 2:14–16; 1 Tim. 3:16; 2 Tim. 2:11–13; Titus 3:4–7; and 1 Peter 1:17–21; 2:21–25; 3:17–22.

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).

In the first century, Gentiles were excluded from the inner precincts of the temple (Acts 21:28). But when Jesus said, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28), his invitation was pregnant with promise for all people.

Where Did Jesus Get This Wisdom? (Matthew 13:53–58)

The noun “wisdom” also occurs when Jesus is preaching about the kingdom at Nazareth, and is met with unbelief:

Coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household.” And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief. (Matt. 13:53–58)

The people in Jesus’ hometown are confused about the true identity and wisdom of Jesus. They recognize him as a sage, but do not understand his true identity. They ask, perhaps sarcastically, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?” (13:54). Their response illustrates the prophecy of Isaiah that Jesus had referred to earlier: “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive” (13:14). What they cannot see and understand is what many prophets and righteous people had longed to see—the arrival of the messianic kingdom (13:17). These “things” had been hidden from the so-called “wise and understanding” (11:25).

“Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?” This is the right question. Later, in writing to the Corinthians, Paul will give the answer: he connects both “wisdom” and “power” with the identity of Jesus. For those whom God has

called, both Jews and Gentiles, Jesus is “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). As we will see, both wisdom and power are counterintuitive in the New Testament: wisdom is not found among the wise of this world, but in the gospel; and power is not raw power, but a power manifest in weakness.

Wisdom Sends Messengers (Matthew 23:34–36)

There is another passage in Matthew where an interesting identification of Jesus with Wisdom is possible (23:34–39). It contains two sayings. With regard to the first saying, the point can be seen only by comparing Matthew’s account with Luke’s (Matt. 23:34–36; Luke 11:49). After a long list of “woes” to the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus declares:

Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. (Matt. 23:34–36)

Luke identifies the speaker of these words as divine Wisdom: “Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets’” (Luke 11:49). Some have argued that Lady Wisdom was responsible for sending the prophets in the wisdom literature. In the figurative language of Proverbs 9, Wisdom sends out her young women to call the simple to turn from their foolish ways (9:3–6). In the Wisdom of Solomon, one of the apocryphal works, Wisdom produces friends of God and prophets and causes Israel to prosper through the prophets.⁴ Was Luke thinking of Lady Wisdom when he wrote his text? This is certainly possible, but there is nothing else in Luke’s Gospel to suggest that he had an interest in Sophia.

4. See also Wisd. 7:27; 11:1.

This may have just been his way of speaking of God's wisdom in sending messengers.⁵

If Matthew was aware of Luke's wording, then he identifies Jesus with God's wisdom. But even if this is the case (and it would require Matthew to assume his readers knew Luke's wording), we should interpret it in light of what we have already seen in Matthew's Gospel. God in his wisdom hides the things of the kingdom from the unbelieving and unrepentant, from the wise and understanding of this world, but he has handed over all things to the Son. The Son, in his unique relationship with the Father, then reveals (or hides) the truth according to his will (Matt. 11:25–26). Again, this passage in Matthew reminds us of the rejection and judgment that frequently attend the invitation of wisdom and the proclamation of the gospel.⁶

Wisdom Laments (Matthew 23:37–39)

The second saying in this passage has also been read as a “lament of Lady Wisdom”:⁷

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” (Matt. 23:37–39)

If the preceding saying (Matt. 23:34–36) is not Jesus speaking as Lady Wisdom, then there is less likelihood that this saying (vv. 37–39) is to be understood in that light. While it is true that female characteristics are associated with Wisdom in the literature, it is never the figure of a hen caring for her chicks. It is the Lord in Deuteronomy 32:11 who like a mother eagle stirs

5. Cf. NIV translation of Luke 11:49, “God in his wisdom said, ‘I will send them prophets.’”

6. See Prov. 1:22–32; 8:33, 36.

7. E.g., Deutsch, “Wisdom in Matthew,” 13–47.

up her nest and hovers over her chicks and spreads her wings to catch them. In Psalm 17:8 David prays for the Lord to hide him in the shadow of his wings. This is where the children of men can find refuge (Pss. 36:7; 57:1; 63:7; 91:4). Such images may well be in the background of Jesus' prayer. The imagery suits Yahweh himself. Here, then, is another example of Matthew's high Christology, as well as the Lord's compassion for an unbelieving people. The suggestion of a reference to Sophia is unnecessary.

Summary of Jesus and Wisdom in Matthew

When these "wisdom" passages in Matthew are considered together, they paint a picture that portrays Jesus in messianic and eschatological terms. They emphasize the forward movement in redemptive history ("something greater . . . is here"): Jesus identifies himself, in a typologically suggestive way, in relation to the temple (12:6), Jonah (12:41), and Solomon (12:42). Jesus' arrival and message for all people demand a proper response. When attention is turned to the future, Jesus stands in a position of divine authority, sending authorized messengers (23:34-36). Finally, when he sorrows over Jerusalem, Jesus speaks in terms that suggest identification with God (23:37-39).

Matthew's focus is on the Son's role as the ultimate revealer of God. Matthew identifies Jesus as the promised manifestation of the Lord, whose conduct, along with that of the Lord's forerunner, will be vindicated (11:16-19). It is this Jesus, explicitly identified as God's Son and qualified to reveal the Father, who invites us to find rest in him (11:25-30) and receive his wisdom.

What Is the Text's Literary Background?

Several background texts help to shed light on Jesus and his relationship to wisdom in Matthew 11:25-30. We will first look at a text from the Apocrypha, Sirach 51, and then several Old Testament texts.

The Apocryphal Book of Sirach

Sirach, although not considered canonical by the Jews, was influential at the time of Christ. It was published in the 1611 edition of the King James Version for its historical value, but it was not considered to be Scripture. Sirach 51:23–26 reads as follows:

Come aside to me, you untutored, and take up lodging in the house of instruction; How long will you be deprived of wisdom's food, how long will you endure such bitter thirst? I open my mouth and speak of her: gain, at no cost, wisdom for yourselves. Submit your neck to her yoke, that your mind may accept her teaching. For she is close to those who seek her, and the one who is in earnest finds her.⁸

The parallels between Matthew 11:25–30 and the description of wisdom in Sirach 51 are eye-catching. Most of them can be traced to common roots in the Old Testament. See, for example, “Come to me . . . learn from me,” in such passages as Proverbs 1:24; 8:1–6; 9:5.

Perhaps the most interesting parallel in Sirach is related to Jesus' designation of the yoke as “my yoke.” In Sirach 51:26 the yoke is described as belonging to wisdom: “submit your neck to *her* yoke” (cf. Sir. 6:25). What is important for our purposes is the way Sirach celebrates the law (Torah) under the guise of “wisdom.”⁹ Sirach 6 concludes with the words, “Reflect on the precepts of the LORD, let his commandments be your constant meditation; Then he will enlighten your mind, and the wisdom you desire he will grant” (v. 37; cf. Sir. 24:22). If there is a literary echo here in Matthew, it is one more of contrast than of identification. Jesus is not identifying himself with the wisdom of Torah as understood by much of the tradition of his day, but rather he is identifying himself as the law's fulfillment. “Take my yoke,

8. All quotes of the Apocrypha are from the *New American Bible*.

9. See James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 155.

rather than that of Wisdom/Torah.” Here is welcome relief, not the burden of a works-oriented rendering of Old Testament law, but rather the light yoke of gospel rest. It is the “burden” of Jesus (Matt. 11:30) and not the “burden” of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 23:4).¹⁰

There is another contrast between the invitation of Jesus and the teaching of Sirach that should be an encouragement to us. In Sirach, wisdom was largely restricted to the upper class and those who had leisure:

The scribe’s profession increases his wisdom; whoever is free from toil can become a wise man. How can he become learned who guides the plow, who thrills in wielding the goad like a lance, Who guides the ox and urges on the bullock, and whose every concern is for cattle? (Sir. 38:24–25)

Jesus, on the other hand, in the gospel invites all of us, even those who labor, to find rest and wisdom in him. This truly was a countercultural message.

Some Old Testament Background

A number of Old Testament texts shed further light on Matthew 11:29–30. Let us look at a few examples. We begin with the prophet Jeremiah:

Thus says the LORD: “Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. But they said, ‘We will not walk in it.’ I set watchmen over you, saying, ‘Pay attention to the sound of the trumpet!’ But they said, ‘We will not pay attention.’” (Jer. 6:16–19)

These words were spoken on the eve of the exile, when God was about to judge Israel. The Lord called on his people to return to

10. Cf. Acts 15:10, where Peter refers to the first-century interpretation of the law as “a yoke . . . that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear.”

his word so that they might find rest. Note carefully the rejection motif in Jeremiah. The people said, "We will not walk in it. . . . We will not pay attention." Surely this would have echoed in the ears of the Jews in Jesus' day. Now Jesus, as God's final and full self-disclosure, and in a similar context of rejection by God's people, was offering rest.

We find a similar and even more explicitly messianic passage in Isaiah 28:1–16:

"Ah, . . . the drunkards of Ephraim, to whom will he teach knowledge, and to whom will he explain the message? Those who are weaned from the milk, those taken from the breast? . . . This is rest; give rest to the weary; and this is repose"; yet they would not hear. Therefore hear the word of the LORD, you scoffers . . . therefore thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: 'Whoever believes will not be in haste.'"

Again we have the motif of rejection, the Lord's message, children as recipients, the promise of rest for the weary, and the messianic prophecy of a sure foundation.

What these background texts indicate is that Jesus is being presented as the culmination of God's word to his people, the word that brings rest. He is the fulfillment of the former covenant and the true Torah-Wisdom (Sirach); he is the good way (Jeremiah); he is the promised, precious cornerstone (Isaiah). Exodus 33:14 reads, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." In calling people to himself for rest, Jesus not only is taking the place of Wisdom and Torah, but is claiming to be the revelation of God. In Matthew's words of annunciation, Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. While the focus in our text is on the Son, in the fuller context of Matthew's good news, God is revealing himself in his Trinitarian life through the saving work of both the Son and the Spirit.¹¹

11. See the helpful discussion of the role of both the Word and the Spirit in Treier, "Wisdom," 845.

How Can We Summarize Wisdom's Invitation?

We are now in a better position to summarize this glimpse into the life and teachings of Christ. In his prayer, Jesus—who alone knows the Father—teaches us about the Father, and tells us that the Father's ways are discriminating. Although he is the omnipotent Lord of heaven and earth, he chooses to reveal his wisdom to "little children." Jesus is the supreme example of true humanity, and this includes his own childhood. Although the preexistent Son of God, he was also the incarnate Son and the second Adam. In his childhood we find him in the temple, listening and asking questions (Luke 2:46), and we find him obedient and increasing in wisdom (Luke 2:52a). His childlike desire, which is a pattern for us, was toward his Father (Luke 2:52b).

It is not to the so-called "wise and understanding" of the world that God reveals his ways. The apostle Paul echoes this truth: "in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him" (1 Cor. 1:21). The reception of God's wisdom ultimately depends on the Father's "good pleasure" (Matt. 11:26; 1 Cor. 1:21), which is oriented toward the childlike, the poor, and the weary, rather than the self-sufficient and worldly-wise. Jesus thanks the Father for this.

Jesus then makes the astounding claim that this divine wisdom is mediated through his own person. This is not a power move. Three lines of thought help to keep things in focus. First, the claim is in keeping with God's messianic work through Jesus as God's incarnate Son. This claim will eventually lead Jesus to the cross. Second, the claim is in keeping with the Savior's intimate participation in the Godhead (the mutual indwelling of Father and Son, who each "know" the other). This claim will lead Jesus to invite all to enter into the fellowship of this marvelous divine life. Finally, the Son's claim is consistent with the wisdom of God revealed in Matthew 11:25–26, particularly in its orientation toward the lowly; for Jesus, we are told, is "gentle and lowly in heart" (v. 30). This, as we will see when we get to Philippians 2, is in a counterintuitive way "godlike." So far from being a worldly

“power move,” Jesus’ claim is one of divine self-sacrifice, which is both others-oriented and humble. Is it any wonder that the worldly-wise do not understand?

What made it particularly difficult for first-century Judaism was the shift in perspective on the law. With the gospel, the principle of interpretation shifts from the law as wisdom to Christ as wisdom (Christ being the fulfillment of the Torah). Here we see the disorientation of religious misinterpretations of Scripture, and the reconfiguration of Scripture around Christ: the former wisdom brings bondage; the latter wisdom brings rest. John will refer to this hermeneutical shift in his prologue, which we will study in the next chapter, when he says, “The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

It may be difficult for us to imagine the impact this forward movement in God’s self-revelation had in the first century with regard to the law of Moses. It would raise huge questions for the early church. For example, how does this shift affect Israel, whose basic identity markers were the stipulations of the law (e.g., circumcision, dietary laws, and holy days) and whose righteousness was tied so tightly to the law’s regulations? And what about Gentiles who now become a part of God’s people? How do they relate to the law? It is the apostle Paul who works out the implications of the wisdom of Christ specifically in relationship to the law.

Nothing shaped the identity of Israel, and marked her off from the surrounding Gentiles, like the Mosaic law—they understood the law as their unique wisdom. But what was God’s intent in the law? In Romans 10, Paul argues that his kinsmen in Judaism had a zeal for God, but that it was not according to true “knowledge” or wisdom (Rom. 10:1). Paul helps the church at Rome to see that God’s revelation in Christ was prefigured in the revelation of the law. In Romans 10:5–10, Paul interprets Deuteronomy 30, which described the provision of God’s law for his people, as fulfilled in Christ. Now the wisdom of God in Christ has brought the law to its true end or culmination: righteousness by faith and

eschatological salvation (Rom. 10:4). This fulfillment is found in the gospel (Rom. 10:8–10).

In Galatians 4, the apostle addressed Gentile Christians who felt pressured to submit to the law's burdensome yoke. Should these Christians succumb to a pattern of life determined more by the law than by Christ? Now that Christ had come, what should a life of wisdom look like? Paul's answer is to retell the gospel story, which comes in the form of a Christologically rich confession: God sent his preexistent Son into the world and, through the incarnation and cross, liberates people from the law's condemnation (Gal. 4:4–6). God's wisdom in Christ and the gospel not only releases believers from bondage, but also brings them into a life of adoption. God has sent the Spirit of his Son into the lives of Christians so that they, like Jesus, can know God as "Abba, Father." This life of intimacy with God, in the transforming power of the Spirit, is the new way of wisdom. It would be folly to return to the yoke of the law (Gal. 5:1, 3).

In this light we come to Jesus' grand invitation: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Jesus, who as the promised messianic king and as the Son of God is in the position of ultimate rights and power, turns graciously to his audience and offers an open invitation to all the tired and burdened to come freely and enjoy rest. *This* is the wisdom of God! Here is the bondage and tutelage that will bring true rest. Here is the yoke and the burden that are easy and light, and wrapped up in the wisdom of Jesus. It is to this wisdom, then, that we are invited, that we might "learn of him."

How Is This Wisdom for Us?

Let's not miss how often God's revelation in Christ is set in a context of rejection. This has two immediate applications. First, we should not be surprised or alarmed when people, or societies at large, reject the gospel, although it should grieve us as it grieved Jesus. Second, we must examine ourselves to make sure we are

among those who have “ears to hear.” In a society that honors the rich, the powerful, the intellectual elite, and the famous, we must pay close attention so that we are not distracted and fail to hear God’s Word. Even in our theology, we must be careful that what we think is wisdom is not actually a misunderstanding of the gospel and its implications for our lives. May we be found among the poor, the little children, and those who labor and are heavy laden.

If Jesus’ invitation to wisdom resonates in our hearts, it is only because of God the Father’s “gracious will” (Matt. 11:26) and the Son’s sovereign favor (Matt. 11:27). Yet how generous is the Savior’s invitation! Immediately after pointing out his exclusive rights as the revealer of the Father, Jesus turns to the crowd and says, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden” (Matt. 11:28). The only qualification is that we not be self-sufficient and self-satisfied, but rather teachable. Jesus is not exploitive of his divine rights, as we will see in Philippians 2, but is incredibly others-oriented and generous. He is gentle and lowly in heart. If we receive his invitation to wisdom, he will teach us to be like him as well.

In this path of wisdom we receive the rest that is salvation. God’s creation rest (Gen. 2:1–3; Ex. 20:11; 31:12–17) was intended as a picture of salvation rest (Heb. 4:3–4). The rest promised to the Israelites in the land of Canaan (Deut. 12:9) also pointed to the rest that comes by faith and obedience to God’s Word (Ps. 95; Heb. 3:7–11; 4:8–9). The Sabbath day was another picture of God’s rest. It included the rest of the seventh day, but also pointed to the rest of salvation that would come with Christ (Ex. 20:8–11; Heb. 4:9).

This promised salvation rest is found when we enter into relationship with Jesus. He offers to give us this rest when we come to him with this childlike trust. He also tells us that we will find this rest as we enter his school of wisdom and learn from him. This rest is not merely for the individual, but for “the people of God” (Heb. 4:9). As Jesus calls people to himself and to his school of discipleship, he calls a new people into being, the community

that will be his body, the church. This community includes the marginalized and the lowly. It includes both the Gentiles and the Jews. How precious that this new community so graciously includes all of us!

The school of wisdom is the school of Christian discipleship. The ethical implications are huge. While Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden light, they are still a yoke and burden. The entrance into salvation comes by the work of the Spirit of Christ in our hearts, as we respond by grace through faith to the gospel call (Eph. 2:8-9). Now we enter a difficult path—one that leads to sacrificial love and the way of the cross. Here we learn “the cost of discipleship.”¹² Discipleship “means to drop in behind him, to be ready to go to the cross as he did, to write oneself off in terms of any kind of importance, privilege or right, and to spend one's time only in the service of the needs of others.”¹³

The Lord's greatest commandments remind us of the “learning outcomes”: we are to love God, and we are to love others (Matt. 22:37-40). The core values of this school are classically summarized in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7). Here the “wise” build their lives on obedience to the transformative words of Jesus (Matt. 7:24). According to the Great Commission, the curriculum of Christian discipleship includes learning everything that Jesus teaches (Matt. 28:20).

This invitation to wisdom requires that we be insatiable, like little children who are inquisitive, filled with wonder, and eager to learn. We must not assume that we already know the ways of Jesus, the ways of God. Neither our self-satisfied theological constructs nor our cherished ecclesiastical traditions should ever replace God's self-revelation in the Son. We must constantly ask, “What does it mean for me to follow Jesus in this situation?” and “What does it mean for us to be the church in the world today?” To properly answer these questions, we must return again and

12. This is the title of a book by Bonhoeffer that is still worth reading; see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

13. Ernest Best, *Disciples and Discipleship: Studies in the Gospel according to Mark* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 13.

again to the feet of Jesus and learn from him. Later in our study, we will see the writers of the New Testament asking and answering these very questions for the early church. These “case studies” in Christian discipleship can equip us to follow the same pattern.

Finally, we must not underestimate the invitation and the depth of this wisdom. We are being invited to participate in the divine life of the triune God. Only the Father knows the Son, and only the Son knows the Father, *and* any to whom the Son chooses to reveal the Father. The Son is inviting us into the wisdom of God: the intimate, experiential, personal knowledge shared by the Father, Son, and Spirit. This is the ultimate theological context of Jesus’ invitation: “Come . . . learn from me.”

In our next chapter, we will consider the invitation to God’s wisdom in Christ as it is presented to us by John, the disciple Jesus loved. The introduction to his Gospel will take us even deeper into the meaning of this unique wisdom.