

Proverbs: Metaphors and Personified Wisdom, Part 1

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Session 6

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Personified Wisdom, Metaphor Theory, Embodiment Revolution, George Lakoff, Bruce Waltke, Proverbs, Lady Wisdom, Metaphorical Acquisition, Christology, Reification

Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Knut Heim explores the embodiment revolution in modern metaphor theory and its application to the personification of wisdom in Proverbs chapters 1 through 9. Challenging traditional views that reduce metaphors to decorative language or treat wisdom as an independent heavenly entity, the speaker demonstrates that human thought and language are fundamentally grounded in sensory-motor and embodied experience. By examining biblical texts where wisdom appears as an authoritative prophet, an indispensable patroness, and a prospective bride, the lecture reveals that acquiring wisdom is an intense, relational, and romantic pursuit requiring total personal commitment to God as the ultimate source of wisdom.

Outline

I. Introduction to Metaphors and Personified Wisdom (Part 1)

- A. Scope and focus of Lecture 6 and Lecture 7
 - 1. Dual aspects: Modern Metaphor Theory and Biblical Personification
 - 2. Focus on Proverbs 1–9 where wisdom acts as a female human figure (Lady Wisdom)
- B. Structure of the investigation
 - 1. Lecture 6: Metaphor Theory I and Personified Wisdom I
 - 2. Lecture 7: Metaphor Theory II and Personified Wisdom II

II. The Embodiment Revolution in Modern Metaphor Theory

- A. Traditional Western paradigm of thought and language
 - 1. Mind viewed as abstract, unemotionally rational, and detached from the body
 - 2. Language viewed as a privileged logical symbol system transparently expressing abstract concepts
- B. The Cognitive and Empirical Paradigm Shift (George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, Benjamin Bergen)
 - 1. Mind and body inextricably linked; thought carried out by neural structures governing vision, action, and emotion
 - 2. Sensory-motor and emotional systems provide meaning to language

3. Language, morality, political ideologies, mathematics, and theology are thoroughly embodied

C. Historical evolution of Metaphor Studies (1979–2008)

1. Pre-1980 traditional views: metaphors treated as words (not thoughts), novel ornamentations, deviant usages, dead clichés, or simple similarity matches
2. Publication of Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) and *More Than Cool Reason* (1989 with Max Turner)
3. Recognition of conceptual metaphor systems as conventional, automatic, and foundational to abstract reasoning

D. Three major errors in traditional metaphor theory

1. Misguided exclusive focus on novel/bold metaphors
2. Dismissal of 'dead' metaphors, which actually form the backbone of human thought and communication
3. Over-prioritizing reconstructed meaning over the actual metaphorical expression (e.g., Richards' tenor and vehicle)

III. Personified Wisdom and Scholarly Interpretations

A. Bruce Waltke's analysis of Personified Wisdom in Proverbs

1. Wisdom as Solomon's teaching in the prologue (Proverbs 1:8–8:36)
2. Major persona/guises: guide (6:22), sister/bride (7:4), hostess (9:1–6), and public preacher at the city gate (1:20–33, 8:1–36)
3. Interpenetration of three character components: prophetic, sapiential, and divine
4. Wisdom characterized as a heavenly mediatrix foreshadowing Jesus Christ

B. Critical evaluation of Waltke's view ('Three Cracks in the Painting')

1. First Crack: Claiming wisdom's origin is from God's 'very being' lacks direct textual support in Proverbs
2. Second Crack: Tension between wisdom as a heavenly mediatrix and the actual mediated material consisting of earthly proverbs
3. Third Crack: Complex relationship with New Testament Christology; while New Testament writers were influenced by Jewish wisdom traditions, they do not cite or build high Christology directly from Proverbs 8:22–31

IV. Textual Exegesis of Personified Wisdom Passages in Proverbs

A. Proverbs 1:20–33 — Lady Wisdom as a Woman with Attitude

1. Public appeal and reproof at the city gate
2. Female human attributes: spirit, hands, emotional exasperation, and laughter at scorners
3. Emotional and rhetorical impact: calls for an inner stance of loving openness and dread of rejecting wisdom

B. Proverbs 2:1–3 — The Interaction of Personification and Reification

1. Protasis (if-clause) equating father's teaching with wisdom, insight, and understanding
2. Personification: crying out for insight and making ears attentive to evoke a two-way personal relationship
3. Reification: seeking wisdom like silver and hidden treasures to highlight necessary human effort
4. Apodosis: God as the ultimate dispenser of wisdom and grantor of knowledge

C. Proverbs 3:13–20 — Wisdom as a Generous Patroness and Creation Virtue

1. Extended beatitude (macharism) pronouncing the seeker happy
2. Relational value: offering long life, riches, honor, and peace beyond mere commercial wealth
3. Literary reification into a 'tree of life' (v. 18) and identification as God's own attribute used in creation (vv. 19–20)

D. Proverbs 4:5–9, 11, 13 — Courting Lady Wisdom through Metaphorical Purchase

1. Reversal of traditional patriarchal roles: Lady Wisdom acts as dominant protector, patroness, and guardian
2. Semantic analysis of the Hebrew verb *qanah* ('to acquire'): denotes establishing a husband-wife relationship involving a bride price (e.g., Ruth 4)
3. Metaphorical application: paying a 'bride price' means giving one's total devotion, attention, and obedience to win Wisdom
4. Paradigm of the pursuit: acquiring wisdom as an intense, demanding, romantic, and relational pursuit of God