

## Proverbs 8:22-31 and the Eternality of God the Son

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Proverbs 8:22-31 is a very challenging text and has always been debated. How you interpret that passage depends a lot on how you understand a few Hebrew words that are somewhat ambiguous, especially in 8:22-23. "The Lord possessed me" has been translated in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) as "The Lord created me..." Obviously a major difference theologically, but the Hebrew word has a sufficiently broad range of meaning so that a case can be made for either one.

In addition to the interpretive challenges of that particular text, there is the important task of reading this passage in a way that is consistent with the immediate context (the book of Proverbs) and the whole Bible. In the context of Proverbs, this passage is spoken by Lady Wisdom, who is contrasted with the harlot Folly. Solomon's fatherly advice to his son is to stay far away from the seductive temptations of the adulteress and pursue the godly way of life offered by the noble Lady Wisdom. Wisdom is often portrayed as feminine because the woman is the glory of the man. Godly wisdom is what makes a man glorious like God. The end of the book of Proverbs (ch. 31) shows the "happy ending" to the story where the young man has grown up and taken a noble woman like Lady Wisdom as his bride. This happy ending, of course, points us ahead to the happy ending of the whole Bible, which culminates with the marriage supper of the Lamb.

In ch. 8 Lady Wisdom calls to all men who are simple to come and learn wisdom from her in order to receive the blessings of life. Prov. 8:22-31 emphasizes that Lady Wisdom has always been with the Lord and was instrumental in the creation of the world. This affirms what we learn about wisdom from Ex. 31:3, which is the first time this word for wisdom is used in the Bible. As with the craftsmen Bezalel and Oholiab, God's wisdom is a gift of the Spirit that equips us to live skillfully and make things beautiful (in their case, the Tabernacle). The message of Proverbs is that a wise person lives a beautiful, skillful life. God created the wondrous world by wisdom, and we are called to learn godly wisdom so that our lives will be similarly skillful and glorious.

Of course, the whole Bible is about Jesus in some way (Lk. 24:27, 44), and Jesus is the fullness of God's wisdom revealed to us (1 Cor. 1:24; Col. 2:3). How do we understand the relationship between Lady Wisdom and Jesus? I'm not sure the best way to work out all the details of that, but we know they're connected in some way even if they're not identical. Col. 1:15-17 seems like a pretty clear reference to Prov. 8 if we remember that "firstborn of all creation" describes Jesus' preeminent status, not His supposed origin as the first of God's creatures. "Firstborn" is a position of rank, dignity, and power (Gen. 49:3). It's a reference to Jesus as the embodiment of God's son, Israel (Ex. 4:22). It's a statement about Jesus as the greater son of David who rules not only in Israel but over all the kings of the whole world (Ps. 89:27).

Should we read Prov. 8 as a direct statement about the nature of the pre-incarnate second Person of the Trinity? I'm not sure we should, but Prov. 8 fills out our understanding of Jesus as the wisdom of God in very important ways. Prov. 8 was not intended to make a clear statement on the intricate details of Trinitarian theology and the nature of Jesus, but we can certainly see important connections when we read it in the context of the whole Bible. We always let Scripture interpret Scripture, and we always let the clearer passages influence our interpretation of passages that are less clear. This is why the church fathers at the Council of Nicea condemned the teachings of Arius. He used Prov. 8 to support his case that Jesus was the first and most glorious of God's creatures, but that's not the only way to interpret the passage and there are just too many other passages that clearly teach the eternity of Jesus and his equal divinity with the Father.