

FOUR KINDS OF FOOLS

The purpose of this article is not to give anyone a basis to criticise or abuse someone else. Jesus had something to say about calling another person a fool (Mt 5:22). The point is for each of us to check on how God sees us. In the book of Proverbs Solomon used four words in Hebrew for fool, each with a slightly different meaning. They serve as a foil to the seven words in Proverbs for Wisdom. Proverbs also gives the ultimate remedy for folly.

In ordinary usage the word “fool” is a silly person, anyone whose conduct others disapprove of, a person without much common sense, a person who does not go about his work in an organised way, a person who has a low IQ, not much academic prowess, or who likes to clown around. We would probably use the word “fool” for the vandals who set fire to the “dig tree”, who paint graffiti on the walls of buildings, who deliberately light bushfires, and who put viruses into other people’s computers. They get no benefit out of their acts themselves, just the almost incomprehensible pleasure of having caused appreciable damage.

Proverbs is a very practical book, and has things to say that come close to this common meaning of “fool” when it talks about mockers. “Do not warn a mocker or he will hate you. Warn a wise person and he will love you” (Prv 9:8). It also comes close to the common idea of a fool when it talks about lazy people. “I passed by a lazy man’s field, the vineyard belonging to a man without sense. Look! It was all-overgrown with thistles. The ground was covered with weeds, and its stone fence had been torn down! When I observed this, I took it to heart. I saw it and learned my lesson. ‘Just a little sleep, just a little slumber, just a little nap.’ Then your poverty will come upon you like a drifter, and your need will come upon you like a bandit” (Prv 24:30-32).

In Proverbs, however, the accent is on moral and spiritual folly. Some people who are brilliant and shrewd in the academic and business world may be fools according to God’s standards. Many so-called scholars deny that there is a God on the basis of their reason, and regard Christians as fools. However, God dismisses such reason and concludes that anyone who says “There is no God” is the real fool (Ps 14:1, Hebrew: *nabal*, see below).

The least hardened of the various kinds of fools are “gullible people.” “A gullible person believes anything” (Prv 14:15). The Hebrew for this person is *peti*. *KJV* almost always translates “simple.” They are naïve, inexperienced, drift along aimlessly, and are caught easily when they are tempted. However, there is hope that they may learn.

The next category is a step down. If a gullible person does not learn to be wiser, he qualifies for the title “fool.” As this is the ordinary and most common variety, the word “fool” is most appropriate for them. The Hebrew is *kesil*, and the word is used about fifty times in Proverbs. They actually enjoy their folly. For example, “A fool does not delight in understanding but only in expressing his own opinion” (Prv 18:2). He loves to hear himself talk. However, his chief quality is spiritual stupidity. “The wisdom of a sensible person guides his way of life, but the stupidity of fools misleads them” (Prv 14:8). They rarely learn from their mistakes. “As a dog goes back to his vomit, so a fool repeats his stupidity” (Prv 26:11). The whole section Prv 26:1-12 has a good deal to say about them. There are warnings about how to deal with such persons. “Do not answer a fool with his own type of stupidity, or you will be just like him. Answer a fool with his own kind of stupidity, or else he will think that he is wise” (Prv 26:4-5).

The third step down is the “stubborn fool.” The Hebrew word is *ewil*. The word occurs about twenty times in Proverbs. The *KJV* blurs the difference by just using “fool.” However, these are more hardened and persistent. “A stubborn fool despises his father’s discipline, but whoever appreciates a warning shows good sense” (Prv 15:5). Although he still has the chief characteristics of the common variety of fool, he goes a step further by ridiculing what God says about his sin and his guilt. “Stubborn fools make fun of guilt, but there is forgiveness among the upright.” They are in danger of going a step lower, to the bottom degree.

The lowest level of fool is the one for which Hebrew uses the word “*nabal*.” The *KJV* again loses the distinction by using the translation “fool.” He is the godless fool. In 1 Samuel 25 there was a man who had the name “Nabal.” Why should any parents want to give their baby boy such a name? Nabal refused to supply provisions for David’s men, who had been protecting his property. His rejection of God and His instruction seriously affected his perception of his duty. “Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants nowadays who are breaking loose from their masters. Should I take my bread, my water, and my meat, which I have slaughtered for my shearers and give it to men when I do not know where they are from?” (1 Sm 25:10-11). His wife Abigail, whom David married after Nabal died, told David, “Please, my master should pay no attention to this worthless fellow, Nabal. He is like his name. His name is ‘Nabal’, and godless folly goes with him.”

In Proverbs a *nabal* is the worst kind of fool. The word occurs only three times in Proverbs. Such people have closed their minds to God and decidedly rejected Him. The conduct of such people causes great trouble to those who are affected by them while they satisfy their needs and after they think their needs have been met. “Three things cause the earth to tremble, even four it cannot bear up under: a slave when he becomes king, a godless fool when he is filled with food, a woman who is unloved when she gets married, and a maid when she replaces her mistress” (Prv 30:21-23).

These four (the gullible person, the fool, the stubborn fool, and the godless fool) are foils for those who are wise. Besides the words for “wisdom”, Hebrews uses such synonyms as “discipline”, “understanding” “insight”, and “priceless wisdom” for what wise people have.

Wisdom in Proverbs is chiefly an abstract term. However, sometimes Wisdom is personified. In Proverbs 9 Wisdom is contrasted with another woman, Stupidity.

In addition, we are told that God is wise. Wisdom is one of His qualities. “Wisdom will come into your heart to save you” (Prv 2:10-12).

Wisdom is described in far different way in Proverbs 8. God speaks in the first person in 8:4-21. He is the highest good, holy, more valuable than anything else, and indispensable for kings. Then there is a special section, 8:22-31, where Wisdom reaches its highest point. He speaks as a divine Person, the Son of God.

In the fourth century a fierce debate raged over 8:22-31. Verse 22 had been translated in the Greek version, the *Septuagint*, as “The Lord created Me as the first of His ways, for His works. Before the age He established Me in the beginning, before He made the earth, and before He made the oceans.” People saw that this passage was different from others in Proverbs and correctly referred it to God the Son. From this wrong translation, however, it can easily be understood why Arius called the Son a “creature”, whom God made before the rest of His creatures, and as the instrument through which He created everything else. For Arius, this Wisdom was not God, but at best an intermediary being. There had been a “time” when He did not exist.

The Creed confesses “begotten, not made,” and “by whom all things were made.” The *Septuagint* should have translated. not “created” in Prv 8:22 but “acquired” or “possessed.” in much the same way we speak in a family context of a father “having” a son. This Wisdom in Prv 8:22-31 is a relative of the Father, a distinct divine Person. Here Wisdom is not an abstract idea in picture language. Here Wisdom is not even one of God’s attributes, but God Himself, the Son.

He is the answer to all kinds of spiritual and moral folly. Paul wrote that the crucified Christ is “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24). He wrote: “...the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge have been hidden.” (Col 2:2-3).

The Son’s role in creation is described in NT passages that are also reminiscent of Genesis 1:1, like John 1:1-3 and Hebrews 1:2-3. Colossians 1:15-20 shows His double relationship, to creation, and to the church, using terms from Genesis like “beginning” and “image.”

As we see Christ in the whole Old Testament, we see Him also in passages like Prv 8:22-23: “The LORD already possessed Me long ago, when His way began, before any of His works. From everlasting I was appointed, from the first, before the earth began.” The Son was the wise “Master Craftsman” (Prv 8:30), who was at the Father’s side during Creation before He became incarnate. He is not only the Mediator in creation (John 1:3) and the One who reveals the Father (John 1:18), but also the Saviour or Redeemer. Through Him we are truly wise.

[Reference: *God’s Word to the Nations, Proverbs* (NET Publishing, Cleveland. 1991, pages 74-114.)