

# WISE WORDS



# WISE WORDS

Family Stories That Bring the Proverbs to Life

Peter Leithart

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*To Noel*

*“An excellent wife, who can find?  
For her worth is far above jewels.”*



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# A PREFACE TO PARENTS

## (Don't Read This Unless You Must)

WRITING A PREFACE is the literary equivalent of parental doting. New parents assume their obsession with their own child is universally shared. To the enormous irritation of everyone else, they—or rather, we—exult in every colicky grimace, interpret every incoherent coo as a portent of eloquence, analyze every awkward kick and twist to calculate the chances of a future Olympic medal—all as if to say, “Look what we did! Look what we did!” Unfortunately, writers are vulnerable to the same vice. The following pages are written with the bold assumption that you are as interested in how this book came to be written as I am in telling you.

My intention in *Wise Words* was to write stories that would appeal to children as stories; that would challenge parents who read to their children; that would illustrate biblical proverbs; and that would borrow imagery, plots, characters, settings, and themes from the Bible. Whether my stories appeal to children—other than my own, of course, who are deeply prejudiced—or challenge adults is, I suppose, for children and adults to judge.

At considerable risk of sounding pretentious, however, I will say a few words about my other goals. I hesitate to expose the foundations on which these stories are built. Every enterprise functions best when there is a division of labor; in literature, it is the reader's job to discover, not the author's. Besides, exposing

foundations can cause stories to come crashing down. Given the likelihood that my point may be obscure, I reluctantly offer some guidelines for reading *Wise Words*. If you are the type of reader who does not want someone else to do your work for you, you have my permission to stop reading here and skip to the first story.

I am, by both temperament and training, a theologian rather than a storyteller, and my aim in writing these stories was as much theological as literary. Explaining that assertion requires a brief digression. In the Grimm brothers' story "The Goose-Girl," a maidservant forces her mistress to change places with her, and the maid marries the prince herself. In the course of the story, the old king has occasion to ask the maid what punishment would be appropriate for a maid who takes her mistress's place and marries her mistress's fiancé, and the girl replies ingenuously, "She deserves nothing better than to be stripped naked and put in a barrel that is studded with sharp nails, and two white horses should be harnessed to it to drag her up and down the street to her death." Unsurprisingly, the king answers, "That woman is you, and you have pronounced your own punishment."<sup>1</sup>

For myself, the maid's extraordinary combination of stupefying dullness and an impressive talent for designing punishments is not the most striking thing about this scene. Rather, this scene, repeated in other folk tales, is remarkably similar to Nathan's confrontation of David in 2 Samuel 12. Of course, Nathan had the sense to veil his meaning until the appropriate moment. Still, the parallel between the biblical event and the folk literary theme is undeniable.

Nor is this the only literary feature common to Scripture and folk tales. When three brothers are introduced at the beginning of a story, anyone with even minimal exposure to literature knows that

<sup>1</sup> See Max Luthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature* (Bloomington.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1982), 45–46.

the youngest one, no matter how oafish he initially appears, will turn out to be the most clever of all. Replacement of the heir by a younger brother is a common theme in Scripture as well, in Genesis particularly. The Grimm brothers' version of Cinderella ends with doves poking out the eyes of the two evil sisters (see Prov. 30:17). Folk heroes commonly battle dragons and just as commonly kill them with blows to the head (see Gen. 3:15). Having destroyed the dragon, the hero rescues a beautiful maiden (see Rev. 12). The Greek story of Donta recalls the exploits of Samson. Donta, a great warrior, possesses the rare ability to produce fighting men by clicking his teeth together. After one unsuccessful attempt, a beautiful princess extracts the secret of Donta's power, which she promptly relays to Donta's enemies.<sup>2</sup>

Whether or not direct connections between folk literature and Scriptural events exist we will never know. When I first noticed these analogies, I thought it might be intriguing to attempt some stories that would self-consciously employ biblical narrative techniques and themes. Such stories would, I hoped, be entertaining and might even illuminate the Bible.

The Bible forms the background to *Wise Words* in two ways. First, this collection constitutes, in my own mind at least, an imaginative commentary on the book of Proverbs. In general, *Wise Words* follows what I have elsewhere called "the dramatic structure of Proverbs."<sup>3</sup> In the first eight chapters of Proverbs, two women are presented: Dame Folly and Lady Wisdom. The Prince, Solomon's son, must decide which he will embrace as his bride. At the end of the book, we learn that the Prince has resisted the temptations of Dame Folly. Proverbs 31 describes the superhuman labors of the "excellent wife," and we know the Prince has chosen well, for

<sup>2</sup> See Luthi, *The European Folktale; Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales* (Bloomington.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> *Biblical Horizons*, No. 43 (November 1992). Available from Biblical Horizons, P.O. Box 1096, Niceville, Florida, 32588-1096.

he has made Lady Wisdom his queen. *Wise Words* is constructed according to this blueprint.

Second, each story draws on Biblical stories and themes to illustrate the proverb that serves as its moral. Within these pages you will find a number of Biblical characters, including Adam and Eve (several times), Jacob and Esau, Nebuchadnezzar, a kind of reverse Joseph, David, Ezekiel, and others. The church appears in various guises, as she does in Scripture. Plots hinge on deaths and resurrections, rescues and battles, baptisms and ascensions of various sorts. Commands, when transgressed, have appropriately deadly consequences. Gardens, feasts, throne rooms, deserts, and mountains—all archetypal settings in Scripture—form the landscape in which the characters live and move and have their being.

Most of the stories splice together pieces of various biblical events into one narrative. Esau at a certain point turns into Nebuchadnezzar, Jacob into David, and always the First and Last Adams are lurking just beneath the surface. These last are by far the most prominent characters in my collection, since Adam was the prototypical fool while Jesus is the Wisdom of God. Interweaving and overlapping of characters and plots occurs within Scripture itself, where Esau the hunter reminds us of Nimrod, the men of Gibeah act like Sodomites, Saul at first lives like Gideon but dies like Abimelech, David wanders in the wilderness like Israel, and Elijah, like Moses, flees to the Mount of the Lord to meet with God.

A more extended illustration of my method may help you better understand how these stories are constructed. “King Jacob of the Green Garland” is, at a basic level, a straightforward illustration of its moral. Eric’s throne is insecure because of his injustice and cruelty, while Jacob’s is established by the kindness and love he shows to his subjects. The plot weaves together threads from a number of Biblical events. Eric is an Adam, who because of pride

## *Preface*

loses his throne and must flee from his garden into the wilderness. Eric is “the Red” because he is like Esau, who despised his birthright and persecuted his righteous brother. Similarly, the real Esau was an Adam who sold his inheritance for food.

After his fall, Eric becomes, like Nebuchadnezzar, a beast in the wilderness. As Eric dies, he acknowledges his sins, and passes the kingship to his brother Jacob, the faithful heir. The king dies, but a new king rises to take his place. Jacob is the type of the Last Adam, who wins the throne, returns to his garden, and gives gifts to men. Later, he delivers the final blow to his enemy, William the Black, and thereafter rules his kingdom forever. The green garland crown signifies wisdom and justice (Proverbs 4:9); Jacob has become a tree of life to his people.

Perhaps I am plagued with the typical writer’s disease of “reading too much into things.” Perhaps I have even read too much into my own stories, though I do not think so. If, after reading my dotting preface, your enthusiasm for the actual stories has waned, well, at least I warned you. I will not blame you if you are less impressed with my children than I am. This preface is offered with the hope that these comments will deepen your appreciation for my stories, and if they bring both pleasure and illumination to you and your children, I will be satisfied that I have achieved my primary objective.



# 1

## THE THREE PRINCES

ONCE UPON A TIME, there was a king who had three sons. Their names were Alexander, Julius, and Joseph. The king's name, of course, was Lothar.

King Lothar lived with his wife, Queen Emma, and his sons in a white castle on top of the highest mountain in that part of the world. From the west tower of the castle Lothar could view his entire kingdom, something he often did after supper in the cool quiet of twilight. His kingdom was as peaceful as the evening, and his people were rich and happy. King Lothar was happy too.

But Lothar had a problem. He was getting old, and he could not decide which of his sons should become king after him. In many kingdoms, this would not be a problem at all, because the oldest son takes the throne when his father dies. In Lothar's kingdom, though, the custom was different. The reigning king was allowed to give the crown to any son he wished.

Alexander was the oldest of Lothar's three sons. Alexander was the most handsome and graceful man in the whole kingdom, sleek as a leopard. When he was very small, he liked to climb onto his father's throne. He would put the crown on his head and gaze at himself in a mirror for hours. When he danced at the royal balls, everyone stared in amazement.

Many of the people wanted Alexander to be king. Visitors

would come from all over the world, they thought, just to see the handsome King Alexander. And their kingdom would be known from one end of the earth to the other.

Julius was next oldest, and he was the strongest man in the kingdom. When he entered battle, Julius seemed transformed from a man into a terrifying beast that crushed and trampled his enemies. Julius did not want to rule only the small kingdom of his father. He wanted to conquer other lands. Deep down, his desire was to rule the world.

Many people hoped Julius would be king. He would protect them from their enemies, they thought. And they were sure he could make their small kingdom into a great empire, maybe even the greatest in the world.

Joseph was the youngest. He was neither especially handsome nor especially strong. He spent most days taking care of his father's sheep and goats in the hills around the castle.

Instead of going with Julius to battle in the springtime, Joseph would stay home to help the farmers plant their fields. Instead of spending winter dancing at the royal balls, as Alexander did, Joseph helped repair homes or dig animals out of snowdrifts.

No one could remember whether or not Joseph had ever been in a battle or if he had ever fought with anyone. Most of the people of the land thought Joseph would look pretty silly wearing a crown. No one thought Joseph would make a very good king—no one, that is, except Queen Emma. Joseph was her favorite. She wanted him to be king, and she told Lothar so day and night.

Lothar wanted Alexander to become king, but Alexander was rather proud. Julius made a good warrior, but Lothar was not sure he was smart enough to be a good king. But Joseph? Not Joseph, Lothar thought. Still, Lothar did not want to make Emma unhappy. So, he kept putting things off—unsure, as even kings sometimes are, about how he could please everyone and hoping that somehow things would just work out.

Lothar's problem was finally solved by his old friend, Alfred.

"Why don't you have a contest?" Alfred asked late one afternoon between mouthfuls of cheese and bread.

"Yes, yes!" King Lothar was so excited he almost tipped over his wine. "We could assemble all the young maidens of the kingdom. They would choose the next king."

"But then Alexander would be sure to win," Alfred replied, glaring at Lothar. "No, no. Your Highness. If you let the maidens of the kingdom choose the next king, everyone will know you arranged for Alexander to be king. You must think of a fair contest, one that each of your sons will have a chance to win."

Lothar and Alfred fell silent. A moment later, a toothless smile spread across Alfred's wrinkled face. "I've got it! We could have them race. Yes! That would be an excellent contest. They could run around the castle three times, swim the moat, and then climb the wall to the west tower. The winner would be king."

Lothar's face turned as red as his beard. "You always did want Julius to be king, didn't you?"

"Sire, I . . ." Alfred stopped. He knew King Lothar was right. Julius would certainly win any contest of strength. A race would not be a fair contest.

Lothar and Alfred spent the rest of that afternoon and most of that night eating and drinking and trying to think of a fair contest for the three princes. By the time the sun rose the next morning, they had at last settled on a plan.

Later that very day, King Lothar called the gentlemen and ladies to his castle to hear his announcement. The three princes stood in the center of the great hall, dressed in their finest clothes.

King Lothar rose from his throne and began to speak. "As you all know, I must choose who shall become king when I die. This is a most important decision. If I select the right man, the kingdom will remain strong and rich and happy. If I make a bad choice, the kingdom will be doomed to weakness and misery.

“Alfred and I have decided that a contest will determine who will be king. The contest is this: Each of my sons will search for the most wonderful, most royal creature in the world. It must be a creature that represents what it means to be a king, and one that will be most useful to a king. I and twelve of the gentlemen of the kingdom will judge who has found the most wonderful and royal creature.”

So the next day, Alexander, Julius, and Joseph set off to find the most wonderful creature in the world.

A month later, Alexander returned. The lords and ladies of the kingdom assembled before Lothar’s throne in the great hall to find out what Alexander had brought with him. When all was quiet, Alexander clapped his hands, and two servants carried in a cage, covered with a golden cloth.

Alexander began to speak. “I have travelled many miles this past month. I travelled east to Asia, and there I found the most beautiful and royal creature in the world. See for yourselves its magnificent glory.”

With that, Alexander pulled away the golden cloth. Inside the cage was a large peacock. The lords and ladies gasped. Several ladies screamed. One fainted out of wonder. It truly was the most beautiful creature they had ever seen. Its breast was deep blue like the evening sky. Its tail was covered with bright yellow eyes. It seemed to be wearing a delicate jewelled crown.

Alexander let the peacock out of its cage. It strutted about the great hall and screeched so loudly that everyone clapped his hands to his ears.

“With this creature at my side,” Alexander said, “I will become the greatest king in the world. I will make the whole kingdom as beautiful as this peacock. Kings will come from over the Southern Sea to see my beautiful bird and my beautiful kingdom. The peacock will be the symbol of my rule.”

King Lothar and the twelve gentlemen agreed that Alexander

had found a wonderful and royal creature indeed. "But we must wait for the others," Lothar said.

At the end of the second month, Julius returned. The next morning, the lords and ladies gathered in the great hall to find out what Julius had brought back with him. Julius swaggered into the room with his head high. He raised his hand to quiet the people and then began to speak in a loud voice. "I travelled many miles in these two months. I walked through deserts and jungles. I sailed across oceans. I went south to Africa, and there I found the most powerful and royal creature in the world."

Julius clapped his hands, and a servant entered the room, leading a great lion on a strong rope. The lion roared so loudly that the walls of the great hall shook. The lords and ladies were amazed. Several of the ladies screamed. One fainted out of fear.

"You are right to be afraid," Julius said. "He is strong and fierce. With this lion at my side, I will become the most feared king on earth. I will hunt and tear my enemies as a lion does its prey. This lion will be the symbol of my rule."

While he was still speaking, Alexander's peacock strutted into the room. The lion crouched, staring at the peacock, and then slowly circled it. Then the lion leaped at the peacock and ate it in one bite. The lords and ladies were silent. The lion roared again.

Surely Julius had found the more wonderful and royal creature. King Lothar and the twelve gentlemen were very pleased. "But we must wait for Joseph," Lothar said. The next month seemed to take forever, as everyone waited and waited for Joseph to return. In every shop, around every dinner table, at every street corner, they talked of nothing but the princes' contest.

The people of the kingdom were certain that Julius would win. How could Joseph possibly find a more wonderful and royal creature than Julius's great lion? The butcher told the milkmaid Joseph would probably bring a lamb, which would make a nice snack for Julius's lion. Soon everyone was telling the butcher's joke. When

Queen Emma heard it, though, she didn't laugh.

Finally, at the end of the third month, Joseph returned. With great excitement, the lords and ladies gathered before Lothar's throne in the great hall. The common people gathered outside straining to see and hear what would happen. Joseph entered, wearing a dusty shepherd's cloak. He waited for the people to quiet, and then he began to speak.

"I have not spent the past three months travelling. I went just over the mountain, to a place I had often been before. From there I brought back the most wise and royal creature in the world."

Joseph disappeared into the crowd, and when he returned he was leading a pretty young girl by the hand. Like Joseph, she was dressed in a simple shepherd's cloak. The lords and ladies gasped. Several ladies screamed. One fainted out of disappointment. Before his mother could cover his mouth, a little boy had cried out, "It's Sophia the shepherd-girl! He kept us waiting three months for her?"

Joseph waited again for the crowd to become quiet. "This is not what you expected, I know. But she is indeed the wisest and most royal creature in the world. She will be my counselor, my friend, my love, the mother of the kings who shall come after me. With her at my side, I shall become the wisest, most just king on earth. Sophia shall be the symbol of my reign."

Just then, Julius's lion strode proudly into the room and began to circle Joseph and Sophia. Joseph backed away, leaving Sophia to face the lion alone. The lords and ladies held their breath.

The lion lunged toward Sophia and roared, but Sophia stood unmoved. Without a word, she put out a small hand to stroke the lion's forehead. The lion jerked away, circled, and then came near again. Sophia touched him lightly on the head, spoke softly in his ear, and gently smoothed his mane.

Minutes later, the lion lay down on the floor, yawned, and closed his eyes. Sophia caressed his head until he was fast asleep.

Then she walked over to Joseph and kissed him.

King Lothar was amazed. Queen Emma was very happy. All of the twelve gentlemen agreed that Joseph's was truly the most wonderful and royal creature. Even Alexander and Julius agreed that Joseph had won the contest.

Eight days later, Joseph and Sophia were married. Joseph wore a long purple robe and Sophia, a flowing white dress with jewels of every kind woven into the cloth. And, when King Lothar died, Joseph became king and ruled wisely and justly ever after, with the lovely Sophia at his side.

#### MORAL

*The beginning of wisdom is: Acquire wisdom; and with all your acquiring, get understanding. Prize her, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her. She will place on your head a garland of grace; she will present you with a crown of beauty. (Prov. 4:7-9)*



## 2

# SIMON AND THE FRUIT VENDOR

THERE WAS ONCE a young man named Simon who wanted, as all young men do at one time or another, at least in fairy tales, to go into the world to make his fortune. Early one morning, Simon gathered his few belongings and went to say goodbye to his father.

“Father, I am leaving home to go into the world to make my fortune,” he said. Simon used precisely these words because he, like you, had been reading fairy tales all his life.

His father looked out the window, smiling sadly as if remembering some event of the distant past. He drew a deep breath, then spoke. “Very well, son. But stay a moment while I tell you some things I have learned. You may find them useful. You are going to the city?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Then, I must tell you that there are some very dishonest fellows in the city. If anyone tempts you to follow evil, do not go with him. Do you promise?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Let your eyes look directly ahead of you. Watch where your feet are walking. Do not turn to the right or left. Then you will prosper. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Father.” Simon looked out the window. How late it was getting, and he was still not on the road!

“And there are dishonest women as well. Be careful whom you choose as your companions. Do you swear?”

“I do, Father,” the young man said, though he was only half listening. He waited for his father to say more. After a moment, he asked, “Is that all, Father?”

“That is all.”

“Then I shall be going.” Simon kissed his father, picked up his pack, and left.

The city was a three-day walk to the north. On the first day, Simon passed an old man driving an ox cart.

“Going to the city?” asked the old man. When Simon nodded, the old man said, “Hop on the wagon. I’m going there myself. I’m selling pies at the fair.” There was something strangely frightening about the old man’s crackling voice.

Remembering his father’s words, the young man kept his eyes fixed on the road in front of him. “No. No, thank you. I shall walk.” Without stopping, he walked straight past the ox cart and on toward the city.

The second day, Simon passed a group of men gathered at the side of the road. One, who had a black bag over his shoulder, called to him as he walked by, asking if he were headed for the city.

Simon stopped in the road. “Yes, I am. Why do you ask?”

“We’re going to the city too. To make some money.” Another of the men snickered and the speaker slapped him with the back of his hand. “We need at least one more to work with us, he added, glaring at his companions.

Simon cast a sideways glance. “What kind of work?”

This time the man with the bag over his shoulder snickered, and his fellows joined in. “Aren’t you the curious one? I can’t tell you much. Only that you’ll make money—a lot of money.”

Simon remembered his father’s words, which for a few moments he had completely forgotten. Looking straight ahead, he answered, “No. No, thank you. I must go to the city myself.” He walked

straight past the gang of thieves—for that is what they were—and on toward the city.

The sun was beginning to go down when Simon arrived at the gate of the city on the third day of his journey. At the gate were two young women, selling goods from wagons and shouting to everyone who passed by. The young man stopped to see what they were selling.

The first young woman, tall and slender as a tree, wore a ragged dress, gray as dry earth. Small animals and birds huddled at her feet, as if seeking shade in her shadow. Her face was smeared with mud, and she had dirt under her fingernails, as if she had been digging in a garden. “Fruit! Fruit for sale!” she cried when she saw Simon.

“What kind of fruit do you have?” he asked politely.

“I have every fruit you can imagine. It is the most delicious fruit you will ever eat. Come, buy my fruit.”

Simon peered into the wagon. The apples and pears looked old and bruised. The grapes were shriveled like raisins, the plums like prunes.

As he looked at the fruit, Simon realized the second young woman had come up behind him.

“My!” he heard her say. “What a handsome man you are!”

The boy blushed and looked at the ground. When he looked up, he saw before him the most beautiful face he had ever seen. Her skin was smoother than oil, her hair black as a raven. She was wearing a purple dress, as a princess might. At that very moment, the boy forgot his father’s instructions.

“What are you selling?” he stammered.

“Gold, silver, jewels.” Her words were as sweet and thick as brown honey. “Come, look. And buy.”

The boy peered into her wagon. It was filled with trinkets and jewelry that sparkled so brightly in the late afternoon sun that he had to cover his eyes.