

# Simpletons, Fools, and Mockers

BY JONATHAN R. WILSON

In three characters delineated in Proverbs—the simple, the fool, and the mocker—we can see an ancient account of the descent into the folly of pornography in our times. Yet biblical wisdom offers hope for redemption along the way, and wisdom incarnate in Jesus Christ extends that hope even further.

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**M**any years ago, an ancient Israelite teacher described in his day the same seduction and destruction of many in our day. Proverbs 7:6-27, by narrating an event in the life of one of the “simple ones,” illuminates for us how Folly seduces and destroys lives:

For at the window of my house  
I looked out through my lattice,  
and I saw among the simple ones,  
I observed among the youths,  
a young man without sense,  
passing along the street near her corner,  
taking the road to her house  
in the twilight, in the evening,  
at the time of night and darkness.

Then a woman comes toward him,  
decked out like a prostitute, wily of heart.  
She is loud and wayward;  
her feet do not stay at home;

now in the street, now in the squares,  
and at every corner she lies in wait.  
She seizes and kisses him,  
and with impudent face she says to him:  
"I had to offer sacrifices,  
and today I have paid my vows;  
so now I have come out to meet you,  
to seek you eagerly, and I have found you!  
I have decked my couch with coverings,  
colored spreads of Egyptian linen;  
I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon.  
Come, let us take our fill of love until morning;  
let us delight ourselves with love.  
For my husband is not at home;  
he has gone on a long journey.  
He took a bag of money with him;  
he will not come home until full moon."

With much seductive speech she persuades him;  
with her smooth talk she compels him.  
Right away he follows her,  
and goes like an ox to the slaughter,  
or bounds like a stag toward the trap  
until an arrow pierces its entrails.  
He is like a bird rushing into a snare,  
not knowing that it will cost him his life.

And now, my children, listen to me,  
and be attentive to the words of my mouth.  
Do not let your hearts turn aside to her ways;  
do not stray into her paths,  
for many are those she has laid low,  
and numerous are her victims.  
Her house is the way to Sheol,  
going down to the chambers of death.

Following the instruction of Proverbs, we may gain insight into the destruction worked in our day by the Folly of Pornography (capitalized here to represent its status as an idol, as Jesus uses "Mammon" in the New Testament). This insight is not an exhaustive description of Pornography. Nor is this an exhaustive account of why people are seduced by pornographic Folly. But Proverbs does provide a powerful biblical description of what is at stake in the competing invitations of Folly (9:13-18) and Wisdom (9:1-6).

The book of Proverbs often makes its teaching concrete and vivid through the use of characters: the wise and the righteous, of course; but

also the sluggard, the wayward, the greedy, the poor, and the rich. Some of these have clear value, good or bad, assigned to them on the scale of Israelite common wisdom. Others may be devalued by society, but valued by Yahweh. (See, for example, the poor in 19:4 and 19:17.)

Three proverbial characters that illuminate the teaching of the wise and our own topic are the simple (*peti*), the fool (*kesil*), and the mocker (*lets*; I prefer the power of the NIV “mocker” to the NRSV “scoffer”). Proverbs does not observe a rigid distinction among these three, but the distinction and characterization is sufficient to be instructive. All three appear together in Proverbs 1:22:

“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?  
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing  
and fools hate knowledge?”

In these three—the simple, the fool, and the scoffer—we can see an ancient account of the descent into the folly of pornography in our times.

The simple are those who lack sense (7:7), are naive (14:15) and have no perception of consequences (22:3). In everyday terms, the “simple ones” are goofy. Most of the time in Proverbs the simple are not wicked. They have not rejected the way of wisdom. Yet they lack the ability to perceive the way of wisdom. They lack judgment; they need prudence. Though the simple are not condemned by proverbial wisdom, their waywardness, if not corrected, will destroy them (1:32). Since they cannot judge between good and evil, folly and wisdom, they fall prey to the wicked.

This is the very process so vividly narrated in Proverbs 7. The naive, unperceiving, goofy, simple person believes the seductress. Lacking judgment and foresight, he willingly and eagerly rushes to his own destruction. But there is a hint, or perhaps more than a hint of some previous moral lapse by the simple. After all, he is walking on the road to *her* house, in the evening. The repetition in verse 9 reinforces the impression that the simple one may not be quite so naive. Perhaps he told himself that he was just going for a walk. Perhaps he told himself he would just try out this street. Perhaps he told himself that he would just listen and observe, just take a quick look. And in his simple, imprudent way, he walks into his own destruction. As Folly calls out in another passage (9:16-18):

“You who are simple, turn in here!”  
And to those without sense she says,  
“Stolen water is sweet,  
And bread eaten in secret is pleasant.”  
But they do not know that the dead are there,  
that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.

The simple are vulnerable to folly; indeed, they are on their way to

destruction if they do not turn to embrace wisdom. But the simple are also at a crossroad. If they leave their “simple ways” and turn to wisdom, then they will live. The instruction of wisdom is vital to the simple being saved from destruction (1:4; 9:6).

If the simple do not turn back to wisdom, then in the next step further along the path of folly, the simple ones become fools. While the simpleton is at the crossroad, vulnerable from lack of judgment and on the way to destruction if wisdom does not intervene, the fool is beyond the crossroad and well along the way of folly, having rejected the way of

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wisdom. The fool delights in ignorance (1:7, 22), scorns the advice of others (15:5; 23:9), trusts his own insight (18:2; 28:26), and lacks self-control (14:16). In contrast to the simple, whose desires are not yet formed, the fool cultivates a taste for ignorance and evil. His heart is not vulnerable; it is committed—to folly.

The fool does not casually wander onto the street where the prostitute lives; the fool deliberately arrives there with a clear plan in mind—indeed, he has been there before, when he was one of the simple ones. And he had such a good time that he is back for more. The fool is not lacking in foresight, he uses his foresight to plot evil.

But the “foresight” of the fool falls short of true vision, because he has mistaken the way of folly as a way of life. Here we can only make sense of the fool if we understand with biblical wisdom that there are only two ways: the way of wisdom and the way of folly. These are not two ways to live; rather, “wisdom” is the only way to life and “folly” is only the way to death. Folly, however, masquerades as a way of life filled with pleasures: its “stolen water is sweet” (9:17).

The book of Proverbs holds out little hope for the fool (27:22):

Crush a fool in a mortar with a pestle  
along with crushed grain,  
but the folly will not be driven out.

Having made his choice, the direction of his heart’s desire has been set. He has been seduced by folly and has developed a taste for the counterfeit pleasures of the way of death. As folly sucks life out of the fool, he reaches the point where his only company is other fools.

At this point, the fool moves inexorably to become the third character in the way of folly, the mocker (NIV) or scoffer (NRSV). The mocker is not only committed to the way of folly, but he has also embraced folly as the

way of wisdom. “*This is the way of wisdom and life,*” the mocker says, as he cheats, lies, steals, and bribes his way through life. He is lazy in all aspects of his life except pursuing folly. To this pursuit he devotes all of his energies, because he has become convinced that this is the way to live.

The mocker is the simple one who has walked down the path of folly to the point that he now regards the way of wisdom as folly. “Look at

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**The simple one, who has a bent toward folly, follows that natural bent. He becomes a fool whose heart is directed toward folly. The fool becomes the mocker who calls what is evil, “good,” and mocks those in the way of wisdom. And in our day, one name for “Folly” is “Pornography.”**

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those people who refuse the bribe and tell the truth and care for the poor and fear Yahweh. What fools they are. Don’t they know how the world works? They’re missing out on all the good things in life.” Those are, in effect, the words by which the mocker “lives.”

The fool delights in folly, the mocker delights in others’ folly. The fool is committed to the way of

folly, the mocker is committed to drawing others into the way of folly. The mocker is the fool who was seduced by folly, and now has become the one who seduces others in the way of folly. The mocker celebrates folly and eagerly “bears witness” to folly. The mocker testifies that folly, which he calls “wisdom,” is the way to live. He joins with Folly to invite the simple into her trap. Not recognizing in his folly that he is already dead, he draws others into the same death trap, all the time mocking those who bear witness to the way of life (9:7-8).

This, then, is the history of sin as it is embodied in the way of folly. The simple one, who has a bent toward folly, follows that natural bent. He becomes a fool whose heart is set on folly, whose purpose and energy is directed toward folly. The fool becomes the mocker who calls what is good, “evil,” and what is evil, “good.” He perceives death as life and mocks those in the way of wisdom as those who don’t know how to live.

Today, one of the specific names of “Folly” is “Pornography.” The teaching of biblical wisdom for our day should be clear. The simple one of ancient days is the person today who lingers over his computer screen late at night, just “curious,” just “browsing,” just checking out something that he’s heard about. He’s the one today browsing at the newsstand where certain magazines aren’t wrapped in plastic, “just taking a peek.” He’s the one taking a quick look at the “adult” section of the video store or checking out the “uncut, unedited version” of a theatrical release. He’s the one

surfing cable channels late at night, “just checking out what’s on.”

The simple in every culture have a bent toward folly. If not turned toward wisdom, the simple will perish from lack of judgment. Their naiveté will kill them. And our culture does very little to warn them of their danger. Instead, we enable the seduction and destruction of the simple by the Folly of Pornography.

As a result, we live largely in a society of fools. The number of proverbs addressed to fools makes it clear that they make up a majority of those who live in the way of folly. Almost no one remains simple for long and few “progress” to the status of mocker. So there are many fools. The fool in today’s pornographic culture is the one who has hidden downloaded images on his computer, who has an adult I.D. for access to pornographic websites. The fool keeps a stash of magazines to peruse at leisure. The fool subscribes to cable channels devoted to pornographic images. The fool is in the process of being consumed—eaten alive—by his folly and he eagerly rushes toward it, “like an ox to the slaughter, like a stag toward the trap until an arrow pierces its entrails, like a bird rushing into a snare, not knowing that it will cost him his life.” The fool has committed his heart to folly, the direction of his desires has been established. His life is planned around his pursuit of pornographic Folly. And like the Pit, the eye is never satisfied, never filled.

So the fool deludes himself as he is being consumed, “This is the way to live.” Thus, in some cases, the fool becomes the mocker. In today’s pornographic culture, the mocker is the purveyor of pornographic images. He is the one who introduces others to the deadly “pleasures” of pornography. He may be in the business of pornography or he may be the neighbor inviting others into his home to watch a video. The mocker makes fun of those who oppose his pursuits: “They are intolerant, puritans, censors. They don’t know what healthy sexuality looks like. They want to deny others’ legitimate, harmless pleasures. They want to take away my freedom of speech and freedom of expression. They want to destroy my life, just because they don’t know how to live.”

Thus, the history of pornographic Folly according to biblical wisdom moves from the simple to the fool to the mocker. Is there hope for redemption along the way? Yes, biblical wisdom holds out some hope, and wisdom incarnate in Jesus Christ extends that hope even further.

For biblical wisdom, the best hope lies in calling the simple into the way of wisdom. Although the simple have a natural bent toward folly, biblical wisdom recognizes that this is the crucial stage in anyone’s life. Here, we must be passionate in countering the seductive voice of Folly with the clear, pure voice of Wisdom. We must be deeply convicted by biblical wisdom that there are not different ways to live, different lifestyle choices to make. Rather, there are only two ways, one leading to death and one lead-

ing to life. Are we intolerant? Yes, we are intolerant of everything that destroys human life. One biblical name for all that destroys life is “Folly.” And in our day, one name for “Folly” is “Pornography.”

The book of Proverbs, our primary guide in this study, holds very little hope for fools. Once the simple have taken that fateful, deliberate step into the way of folly, little, if anything, can be done to restore them (27:22). And this is even more true of the mocker. But, staying with another insight from Proverbs, this doesn’t mean that we should simply ignore the fool or the mocker, having given up on them. For Proverbs, the instruction and correction of the fool and mocker have little effect in their lives, but it does instruct the simple. We need, following this teaching, to expose the consumption of the fool and the mocker by pornographic Folly so that some of the simple may learn, gain prudence, and turn to wisdom (1:4; 19:25).

How do the simple learn wisdom? It begins, famously, with the fear of Yahweh (1:7; 9:10). I noted earlier that the simple lack foresight; they cannot imagine the consequences of their behavior. In the absence of foresight and prudence, the first step is simply to fear Yahweh, to recognize that Yahweh is the Creator of life and to live is to follow the way of Yahweh.

Learning wisdom continues with heeding the teaching of the wise—perhaps one’s parents and other elders in the community. The teachers of wisdom need to learn from Proverbs the skills necessary to counter the seductive words and promises of Folly. The book of Proverbs represents an enormous effort on the part of the followers of the way of Wisdom to persuade and command the simple. Each saying is a gem labored over and polished to the perfection proper to its literary form. We must expend the same effort in our instruction today.

Finally, the way of Wisdom is the way of the Spirit of wisdom. Here the incarnate wisdom of God extends the hope for wisdom even to the fool and the mocker. The promise of the new covenant is that God will change our hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Even hearts deformed by folly and producing mockery may be transformed. The simple, the fool, the mocker—each one can be “born again,” not in the facile sense of popular culture, but in the death-denying, life-giving power of the Wisdom of God. Those being consumed by pornographic Folly may be wakened from their drugged captivity to death and set on the way of Wisdom that is life.



**JONATHAN R. WILSON**

*is Professor of Religious Studies at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California.*