

“Fool”

A Dictionary of the Bible, Vol. II: 43-44. [1899]

A. In O.T. The words translated by “fool,” “folly,” “foolishness,” are the following: 1. נבלה, נבל (opp. חכם in Deuteronomy 32:6, see Driver, *ad loc.*, and on 22:21, 32:15, 21). 2. כסל, כסיל, כסלות, כסילות, כסלה (the root כסל means possibly “to be thick, plump, sluggish”). 3. אולת, אולית, אול (root-conception possibly the same as in the preceding). 4. הוללות, מהולל (from a root suggesting the idea of wild frantic folly). 5. תפל, תפלה (from a root “to be insipid”), only in Job 1:22, 24:12, Jeremiah 23:13. 6. תהלה (supposed by Dillmann to be connected with Eth. *tahala*, “to err”), Job 4:18.

All these terms denote something distinct from imbecility on the one hand and insanity on the other hand. It is in the forms under 4 only that the notions of “folly” and “madness” come together (cf. Job 12:17, Isaiah 44:25 with 1 Samuel 21:13, Jeremiah 25:16). As a rule, different words (derivatives from שונע) are used for “madman” and “madness.” The OT idea of “folly” can be best understood from the antithesis it forms to “wisdom.” Wisdom is not a theoretical or abstractly scientific apprehension of things, but such a practical immediate insight into their reality and manner of action as enables one to use them to advantage. Correspondingly, a fool is not one who is deficient in the power of logical thought, but one who lacks the natural discernment and tact required for success in life. Both wisdom and folly are teleological conceptions, and rest on the principle of adjustment to a higher law for some practical purpose. This general idea is, however, applied with considerable variety as to particular shades of meaning.

(a) In the widest sense folly is lack of common-sense in ordinary affairs (Genesis 31:28, 1 Samuel 25:25 [נבלה, נבל], 26:21 [הסכיל], 2 Samuel 15:31 [סכל]). Here the element of unreasonableness and inexpediency is most prominent.

(b) A moral and religious element enters into the conception where it expresses flagrantly sinful conduct such as offends against the fundamental principles of natural law and usage. In this sense fools are great sinners – impious, reprobate people. But the original idea is retained in so far as the thought of sudden divine retribution lies in the background, it being considered the height of folly, by violating the elementary rules of religion and morality, to expose one’s self to the untimely end which frequently befalls the fool (Joshua 7:15, 2 Samuel 3:33, [cf. Driver, *in loco*], Job 2:10, 30:8, 5:2-3 [all נבלה, נבל], Psalm 107:17 [אול]). A profounder and more spiritualized turn is given to this idea in some of the psalms, where it is applied to sin as such (Psalm 38:5, 69:5 [אולת], cf. 2 Samuel 24:10 [נסכל]). This whole usage, with its identification of what is sensible and right, bespeaks a high development of the popular moral sense in Israel.

(c) A special usage connected with the foregoing characterizes as folly sexual sins of various kinds (Genesis 34:7, Deuteronomy 22:21, Judges 19:22-24, 20:6, 10, Jeremiah 29:23). The standing phrase is “folly in Israel,” “which ought not to be done,” the implication being that such offences go against all reason in undermining the foundations of society as well as destroying the holiness of Israel. נבל and נבלה are regularly used in this meaning; a synonym is זמה “lewdness”; cf. further the sense of נבלות in Hosea 2:12, and of the verb in passages like Jeremiah 14:21, Micah 7:6, Nahum 3:6; further, נבלה in Job 42:8.

(d) Inasmuch as in the Mosaic law a special norm has been given for the wise guidance of Israel's life, disregard of this law is equivalent to foolishness. Apostate Israel is "a foolish (נבל) people and unwise" (Deuteronomy 32:6); the Gentiles, not possessed of such a revelation, are "a foolish nation," "a no-people" (Deuteronomy 32:21; cf. Deuteronomy 4:6, Jeremiah 4:22 [נסבל]). The heathen diviners stand revealed as fools when the divinely-guided course of history foretold to Israel mocks their prognostications (Isaiah 19:11, 13, 44:25, Ezekiel 13:3). Especially the higher classes among Israel might be expected to have profited by this wisdom (Jeremiah 5:4).

(e) A more specialized meaning is assumed by the term "fool" in the so-called Hokhma-literature of the OT (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and some psalms and prophetic passages). Here also foolishness is the opposite of wisdom. But wisdom has developed, out of the unreflecting instinctive gift of seeing right and doing right, into the conscious art of successfully ordering the whole of individual life and conduct in harmony with the teleological principles of the divine government of the world, especially as embodied in the revealed law. Hence wisdom and folly are here introduced as personifications; and the divine wisdom, as the archetypal source of every teleological arrangement, is distinguished from human wisdom. Wisdom in this sense is "practical virtuosity in the entire domain of ethics" (Riehm); it is equivalent to methodically applied religion and morality, as appears from the frequent interchange between it and the terms denoting piety and righteousness. Folly, as its contrast, is presented under two aspects, being either confined to a simple disregard of the rules of wisdom, or proceeding to open denial of the principle of divine government on which these rules are based. In the former character the fool is elaborately depicted in Proverbs. While wisdom consists primarily in circumspect behavior, self-control, self-restraint, and teachableness, the fool is he who lets his undisciplined nature have free play - the self-reliant, self-pleased, arrogant, indocile, hasty with words, contentious, envious, quick to anger, intemperate, credulous, sluggish, given to pursuit of vain things, unable to conceal his own folly and shame. As easily seduced, he is called פתי "simple," as unreceptive of instruction either by counsel or experience פסיל, as by nature stupid בער, as insensible to the claims of God or man נבל; cf. the definition of נבל in Isaiah 32:6 (in Proverbs נבל occurs only 17:7, 21, 30:22, אויל 19 times, כסיל 49 times).

Folly, in the most advanced sense of a systematically conceived and applied theory of life opposed to that of wisdom, is equivalent to practical atheism. The fool (נבל) is he who has said in his heart, "There is no God"; by which, not a theoretical denial of the divine existence, but a practical negation of God's moral government is meant (Psalm 14:1, 53:1, 39:8, Isaiah 9:17). Synonymous with נבל in this meaning is לץ "mockers."

B. In NT. Analogies for most of the above meaning may be found in NT, usually with a somewhat larger admixture of the intellectual element.

(a) Foolishness appears as the lack of common-sense perception of the reality of things natural and spiritual, or as the imprudent ordering of one's life in regard to salvation; ἀφρων, μωρος, ἀνοητος (Matthew 7:26, 23:17, 25:2 ff., Luke 11:40, 12:20, 24:25, Galatians 3:1, 3).

(b) The OT נבל as a moral reprobate reappears in the μωρε of Matthew 5:22, a term of opprobrium distinguished by its ethical import from the Aramaic Πακα, occurring in the same verse and

expressing merely intellectual imbecility.

(c) Of the natural foolishness belonging to the heathen mind, the only remedy for which lies in the wisdom supplied by revelation, we read in Romans 2:20, Titus 3:3. The counterpart of the OT idea of the law as an institution for the wise guidance of Israel is furnished by St. Paul, who represents the gospel as a teleological arrangement in which the highest wisdom is manifested and recognized by the believer (Romans 11:33). Inasmuch, however, as the Gentile mind sustains a radically wrong relation to the moral world, it fails to see this marvelous adaptation and decries the gospel as foolishness. Even the converted Greek is under temptation to justify its reasonableness from the worldly point of view by such a presentation as will materially alter its character. Hence the sharp antithesis, 1 Corinthians 1:21-25, 2:14, 3:18-23, 4:10, the wisdom of the world is foolishness to God, the foolishness of Christ crucified is the wisdom of God.

(d) In Romans 16:19, Ephesians 5:15, 17 we are reminded of the Hokhma usage. The fool under whose mask St. Paul speaks 2 Corinthians 11:16 ff. corresponds in a formal sense to the boasting fool of Proverbs.

Literature: Bruch, *Weisheitslehre der Hebräer*; Cheyne, *Job and Solomon*; Cremer, *Wörterb. der NT Gr.*, 8.vv. σοφος, σοφια; Delitzsch, *Proverbs* (Introduction); Kuyper, *Encycl.* 2:65-71; Oehler, *Theol. of OT*, part 3; Riehm, *Alttest. Theologie*, 350-359; Siegfried, *Philo von Alexandrien*; Smend, *Lehrb. der alttest. Religionsgeschichte*, 508-525.