


Double vindication, collective rebuke: Examining (Divine?) wisdom in Matthew 11:19 and Luke 7:35



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This biblical theological investigation into the parallel narratives of Matthew 11:2–19 and Luke 7:18–35 seeks to identify wisdom (σοφία) in the concluding vindication of the wisdom statement of each pericope. The presence of a Wisdom Christology in these Gospels has led to significant scholarly debate as to whether σοφία in one or both of these texts refers to Jesus as Wisdom Incarnate, or to a more generic expression of personified Divine Wisdom. This study has attempted to prevent automatically reading theological and Christological patterns which are debated in the Gospels on the whole into the individual pericopes in question by engaging the exegetical details of the statements in their literary contexts, especially in relation to previous research that does not seem to have been sufficiently taken into account. This investigation argues that when the vindication of wisdom statements in these pericopes are read in the context of the parables of rebuke, especially when apparently peculiar language is understood in light of the socio-cultural context, the evidence points to an identification of Divine, rather than Christological Wisdom. Additionally, the texts' portrayals of wisdom's vindication are contrasted with the dangerously puerile conduct of the 'child judges' in the parables and the equally misguided verdicts of 'this generation', offering a biblical theological glimpse into the human difficulties of adequately discerning and engaging with God and his Wisdom at work.

Contribution: By taking into account previously neglected observations regarding the socio-cultural background of the language used in Matthew 11:2–19 and Luke 7:18–35 and by relating Divine Wisdom to the difficulties of human perception and response in ways other investigations have not, this article has made a modest contribution to the interpretation of these episodes and to the biblical theology of wisdom.

Keywords: biblical theology; hermeneutics; attributes of God; wisdom of God; New Testament studies; Synoptic Gospels; Matthew 11:2–19; Luke 7:18–35.

Introduction

The parallel narratives containing John's seemingly doubtful question and Jesus' challenging answers in Matthew 11:2–19 and Luke 7:18–35 have long attracted the attention from both casual readers of the Gospels as well as from biblical scholars. Readers, on the one hand, are typically intrigued by the apparent insecurity behind the Baptist's question and by the quizzical nature of Christ's responses. Scholars, on the other hand, have long debated a host of questions. A great deal of scholarly attention has been dedicated to investigating the sources used by the respective authors and their impact on the historical reliability of the episodes, as well as the interpretation of Jesus' statements and the concluding parable of rebuke. Merely summarising the variety of perspectives on issues of source criticism and historicity, to say nothing of the hermeneutical complexities of the episodes themselves, would likely require its own article or chapter in a collected work.¹

Therefore, it is imperative that any serious investigation of these texts select a relatively narrow focus. As this article began as a presentation in a research group dedicated to biblical theological investigations of the wisdom of God, the vindication of wisdom statements that conclude the episodes in Matthew 11:19b and Luke 7:35 have long represented the primary focus of the present investigation. These statements function as conclusions to both the larger episodes (Mt 11:2–19 & Lk 7:18–35) and, especially, to the parables of rebuke and their exemplifications in Matthew 11:16b–19a and Luke 7:32–34. Thus, the present project offers an interpretation of the vindication of wisdom statements in light of the parables to which they relate and, in a more general sense, to the episodes in their entirety.

1. For a summary of source and historicity issues in Luke 7:18–35, see Bock (1994:658–661). While numerous commentators posit their view of the sources behind Matthew 11:2–19, the present author has not encountered a summary of views on the Matthean pericope analogous to that provided by Bock.

Note: Special Collection: Biblical Theological investigations into the attribute of Gods wisdom.

While narrow, this focus has itself generated significant scholarly buzz as debate over the presence of an intertextual Wisdom Christology in the Synoptic Gospels (see e.g. Deutsch 1996; Johnson 1992; Suggs 1970; Witherington III 1994) has drawn particular attention to these wisdom statements and the parables of rebuke that provide their immediate context. These investigations have largely concluded in favour of a Wisdom Christology, that is, the theological presentation of Jesus as the incarnation of Old Testament personified Wisdom. The studies noted above, after working to establish the presence of this Wisdom Christology in the gospel as a whole, often continue to read the references to wisdom in Matthew 11:19b and Luke 7:35 as logical expressions of such a conclusion.

This article's approach is based on a degree of misgiving with such methodology, at least regarding Matthew 11:19b and Luke 7:35. Does the presence of a Wisdom Christology in the Gospel automatically require interpreting *every* unqualified reference (i.e., without an accompanying genitive to identify wisdom, such as τὴν σοφίαν Σολομῶνος in Mt 12:42) to σοφία [wisdom] as a Christological reference? The present author posits that it does not. It is, in the present author's view, essential to determine the degree to which the exegetical details of any reference to σοφία in the Synoptic Gospels support, contradict, or are ambiguous regarding the identity of wisdom in that particular pericope, without automatically reading general patterns or identifications into particular narratives.

These methodological misgivings regarding some examinations of Matthew 11:19b and Luke 7:35 are, in no small part, motivated by the structure of the narratives. The episodes consistently maintain a focus on John's ministry in relation to Jesus' ministry and the relation of both to the 'present generation'. If the narrative structure were to begin with John's query, proceed to Jesus' clarification of his role, and end with an exclusive focus on Jesus' ministry, the present author would be far more comfortable identifying the unqualified σοφία of Matthew 11:19b and Luke 7:35 with Jesus as Wisdom Incarnate. Such a structure, however, does not play out in either episode.

These misgivings are compounded by the hermeneutical difficulties associated with the parables of rebuke and their relation to the ministries of John and Jesus. Despite its age, an intriguing article by Wendy Cotter (1987) highlights the socio-cultural background of a series of linguistic peculiarities in the text, with significant relevance to the interpretation of the parables of rebuke (while the article focuses on Lk 7:31–35, its observations are equally relevant to Mt 11:16–19). Curiously, Cotter's observations seem to have been largely ignored in the Wisdom Christology debate referenced above. As the interpretation of the parable and its relation to the ministries of John and Jesus provides essential context for the vindication of wisdom statements, such socio-cultural factors are of no small significance, in understanding the identity of unqualified σοφία in Matthew 11:19b and Luke 7:35.

The aim of this article is to re-examine the identity of σοφία in Matthew 11:19b and Luke 7:35 by relating the exegetical details of the statements to the parables and their exemplification in the ministries of John and Jesus, that is, the immediate context of the statements in light of their socio-cultural context. Additionally, each statement will also be considered in light of the overall structure of the larger episode, that is, Matthew 11:2–19 and Luke 7:18–35. By considering previously neglected observations regarding the socio-cultural background of the language used, this article seeks to make a modest contribution to the interpretation of these episodes and to the biblical theology of wisdom.

Parallel but distinct: The details of Matthew 11:19b and Luke 7:35

Overall, the structures and language of Matthew 11:2–19 and Luke 7:18–35 are closely parallel, demonstrating a common origin (widely attributed to Q; see e.g. the discussions in Bock 1994:659, 665; Davies & Allison 1991:235–236). Nonetheless, both feature distinctive details and turns of phrase.² This dynamic of synoptic parallel and distinctive detail is particularly evident in the vindication of wisdom statements in Matthew 11:19b and Luke 7:35³:

Matthew 11:19b

Even so, wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

καὶ ἐδικαιώθη ἡ σοφία ἀπὸ τῶν ἔργων αὐτῆς.

Luke 7:35

Even so, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.

καὶ ἐδικαιώθη ἡ σοφία ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν τέκνων αὐτῆς.

As is common in the Synoptic Gospels, a variety of textual variants demonstrate a tendency towards mutual harmonisation of the texts. The readings presented above are well attested⁴ and enjoy strong scholarly consensus (Metzger 1994:24; Omanson 2006:16).

According to these readings, Matthew and Luke agree in using articular σοφία as well as the personal pronoun αὐτός in relation to head nouns that are elsewhere indicative of human activity.⁵ These constructions strongly favour a reference to personified Wisdom, which in Old Testament and Apocryphal traditions is often presented as an expression or extension of Divine Wisdom (see, among others, Fox 1997:624–631; Witherington III 1994:11–16, 36–52). While the semantics and syntax of the statements diminish the likelihood of a general, ambiguous, or undefined reference to wisdom, they do not allow for a linear distinction between Jesus as the Christological incarnation of

2. See Matthew 11:12–15 and Luke 7:29–30, which interestingly occur at the same junction within the narrative, that is, at the end of Jesus' second answer; likewise, the statement in Matthew 11:16 is featured in Luke 16:16.

3. Unless otherwise indicated, the Greek text presented in this article is taken from *The Greek New Testament*, 5th ed. (UBSS) (eds. Aland et al. 2014) and all English renderings of Scripture represent the author's translation.

4. τῶν ἔργων αὐτῆς in Matthew 11:19b occurs in κ , B*, W, among others; πάντων τῶν τέκνων αὐτῆς in Luke 7:35 is attested by B, W, f13, among others.

5. In Matthew 11:19b, ἔργων = works, deeds; in Luke 7:35, τέκνων = children.

God's Wisdom and a more general reference to the tradition of personified Divine Wisdom. Such a distinction, then, will require an investigation of the contexts of the statements.

Paradoxical parables: Interpreting σοφία in light of Matthew 11:16–19a and Luke 7:31–34

The fact that both vindication of wisdom statements begin with *καὶ* emphasises continuity and correlation with the preceding literary units, that is, Matthew 11:16–19a and Luke 7:31–34.⁶ While both statements can also be viewed as concluding statements to the larger narrative episode (i.e. to Mt 11:2–19 & Lk 7:18–35), especially in light of the *inclusio* in Matthew (a feature that will be considered in detail in the next section of the article), the use of *καὶ* connects both statements more closely to the preceding literary unit than to the episode as a whole.

It is therefore fitting that both statements first be examined in light of this literary unit. Both Gospels arrange the episodes in nearly identical structures:

- Opening rhetorical question(s): Matthew 11:16a and Luke 7:31
- The parable of collective rebuke: Matthew 11:16b–17 and Luke 7:32
- Exemplification of the rebuke in the ministries of John and Jesus: Matthew 11:18–19a and Luke 7:33–34
- Vindication of wisdom statement: Matthew 11:19b and Luke 7:35

The Gospels differ slightly in the opening rhetorical question, with Matthew opting for one and Luke for two:

Matthew 11:16a

To what, then, shall I compare this generation?

Τίτι δὲ ὁμοίωσω τὴν γενεάν ταύτην;

Luke 7:31

To what, therefore, shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like?

Τίτι οὖν ὁμοίωσω τοὺς ἀνθρώπους τῆς γενεᾶς ταύτης καὶ τίτι εἰσὶν ὁμοιοί;

It seems that Matthew avoids double introductions such as that in Luke 7:31 (cf. for example Mt 13:31 with Mk 4:30 & Lk 13:18). The sense of the questions, however, is quite similar. The parables of rebuke in Matthew 11:16b–17 and Luke 7:32 are likewise very similar:

Matthew 11:16b–17

It is like children sitting in the agorae, those who address the others, saying: 'We played the flute for you, but you did not dance. We sang a lament, but you did not mourn.'

ὁμοία ἐστὶν παιδίους καθήμενοις ἐν ταῖς ἀγοραῖς ἃ προσφωνοῦντα τοῖς ἑτέροις λέγουσιν, Ἡὐλήσαμεν ὑμῖν καὶ οὐκ ὠρχήσασθε, ἐθρηνήσαμεν καὶ οὐκ ἐκόψασθε.

6. Both of which begin with discourse markers that often indicate the beginning of a new development or literary unit, namely *δέ* in Matthew 11:16 and *οὖν* in Luke 7:31 (for an overview of the function of discourse markers in the New Testament, see Runge 2010:17–56).

Luke 7:32

They are like children who sit in the agora and address one another, those who say: 'We played the flute for you, but you did not dance. We sang a lament, but you did not weep.'

ὁμοιοί εἰσιν παιδίους τοῖς ἐν ἀγορᾷ καθημένοις καὶ προσφωνοῦσιν ἀλλήλοις ἃ λέγει, Ἡὐλήσαμεν ὑμῖν καὶ οὐκ ὠρχήσασθε, ἐθρηνήσαμεν καὶ οὐκ ἐκλάυσασθε.

Minor differences in phrasing aside, the two parables are virtually identical. Interpretations of the parable, on the other hand, vary widely. Most scholars view the parable as a depiction of children 'at play'.⁷ Even within this view of the parable, there are significant differences of interpretation regarding the roles in the parable that are to be assigned to the present generation, John, and Jesus.

A significant number of scholars see John and Jesus as the 'children' who select the tune and 'this generation' as the 'others' who refuse to respond adequately (see, among others, Fitzmyer 1981:680; France 2007:433–434; Verseput 1986:112–115; Zeller 1977:252–257). Considering the differing ministries and lifestyles of John and Jesus, both in the portrayals of the Gospels and in the exemplifications in Matthew 11:18–19a and Luke 7:33–34, those in favour of this interpretation typically assign the 'playing of the flute' to Jesus and the 'singing of the lament' to John. While this interpretation neatly integrates the contrasting ministries of John and Jesus into the parable itself, it is rather at odds with the syntax of the opening question(s). The object of *ὁμοίω* [to compare or liken] in both Gospels clearly refers to the present generation (*τὴν γενεάν ταύτην* in Mt 11:16 and *τοὺς ἀνθρώπους τῆς γενεᾶς ταύτης* in Lk 7:31). To take *ὁμοία ἐστὶν παιδίους* (Mt 11:16) or *ὁμοιοί εἰσιν παιδίους* (Lk 7:32) to refer to Jesus and John, rather than to the present generation, seems to significantly stretch the syntax.

Other scholars reverse the roles assigned above, with 'this generation' in the role of the 'children' selecting the tune and John and Jesus as the uncooperative 'others' (see, among others, Bock 1994:680–682; Davies & Allison 1991:261–262; Green 1997:302–303; Marshall 1978:301). This interpretation aligns more closely with the most natural syntactical sense of *ὁμοίω*/*ὁμοιος* and the relative pronouns, although it must be admitted that it ruins the 'tidy alignment' of Jesus' ministry with the joyful tune and John's asceticism with the lament.

Both interpretations require likening John and Jesus to 'children' alongside 'this generation'; still other scholars have pointed out that the parable functions as a rebuke without the necessity of assigning roles to John or Jesus (see, among others, Danker 1988:168; Hendriksen 1978:400; Neale 1991:138). According to this more simplistic understanding, both the 'children' and the 'others' serve to characterise the puerile and uncooperative attitudes of 'this generation.' The present author likewise sees no syntactical difficulty between this interpretation and *ὁμοίω*/*ὁμοιος* and the relative pronouns.

7. Hence, perhaps, the English Standard Version's decision to translate *τοῖς ἑτέροις* in Matthew 11:16 as 'their playmates'.

An interesting variation on this last interpretation has drawn into question the image of the parable itself. According to Cotter (1987), the vocabulary of the parable is, in fact, incongruous with the image of ‘children at play’, or, at least, at a ‘musical game’. The present author agrees, based on the analysis of several linguistic peculiarities common to both narratives. Firstly, the seated posture (καθήμενοις) of the children is curiously specific. The participle could, in fact, be eliminated from both texts with little or no impact on the sense of ‘children at play’. Yet both Gospels preserve it.

The location connected to this posture, that is, the agora (ἐν ταῖς ἀγοραῖς in Mt 11:16; τοῖς ἐν ἀγορᾷ in Lk 7:32), is likewise curious. If the ‘children’ are, in fact, ‘at play at a musical game’, why not specify a street or field? Like the seated posture, this detail could be dropped from the parable and have minor impact on the image represented. Again, both Gospels preserve this detail, albeit with minor differences in syntax.

The verb of address (a participial form of προσφωνέω in both narratives), on the other hand, is an essential feature of the parable that cannot be easily dropped. Here, it is the unanimous choice of the verb that draws attention. If the authorial intention were to depict children raising their voices in the noisy environment of the agora, as is typically transmitted in recent English translations, it would be customary to use the Greek verb προσκαλέω [‘call out to’]. Yet both authors maintain the more formal προσφωνέω [‘address’]; Cotter (1987:297) even goes so far as to demonstrate Luke’s preference for this ‘more dignified’ verb when Jesus selected the twelve (Lk 6:13), in contrast with the Markan and Matthean use of προσκαλέω on the same occasion (Mk 3:13 & Mt 10:1).

All three linguistic peculiarities, which make little sense in a general image of children ‘at play’, are far more characteristic of the 1st-century courtroom. To ‘be seated’ was the posture of a judge; both LSJ (the lexicon of Liddell et al. 1996:853) and Montanari et al. (eds. 2015:1004) note that the term οἱ καθήμενοι (literally ‘the seated ones’) can refer to ‘the judges’ or ‘the court’, citing examples in Plato, Thucydides, and Demosthenes. In fact, both Matthew and Luke use κάθημαι in a judicial context.⁸

Likewise, the Greek term ἀγορά (‘agora’, like its Roman equivalent, ‘forum’) served as far more than a marketplace in a 1st-century city, although it also served this function. It was, in fact, the location of many civic functions, including court proceedings. Acts 16:19 indicates the ἀγορά of Philippi as the location of Paul and Silas’ hearing before city officials (... εἰς τὴν ἀγορὰν ἐπὶ τοὺς ἄρχοντας), and Montanari et al. (eds. 2015:18) note Lucian’s use of ἀγορά with a judicial sense. Cotter (1987:298) cites additional examples from Strabo and Josephus and demonstrates how the βῆμα ([‘seat of judgement’], referred to above in Mt 27:19) was in the ἀγορά of ancient cities such as Athens and Corinth.

Finally, the choice of προσφωνέω over προσκαλέω would make far more sense in the formal environment of the courtroom

8. Matthew of Pilate in Matthew 27:19 – καθήμενου δὲ αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τοῦ βήματος; Luke of Paul addressing Ananias in Acts 23:3 – καὶ οὐ κάθη κρινῶν με κατὰ τὸν νόμον ...

than in the context of a buzzing marketplace. In Acts 21:40, the recently arrested Paul is given permission by the commander of the Jerusalem garrison to ‘address’ the people, with Luke opting to use προσφωνέω (προσεφώνησεν τῇ Ἑβραϊδὶ διαλέκτῳ). It could be argued that one or another of these lexical peculiarities might be coincidental. The concentration of these terms in the parable’s opening description and the fact that both authors are unanimous in maintaining these peculiarities, even where they have adjusted the syntax, however, is noteworthy. Additionally, the superfluidity of these peculiarities to the image of ‘children at play’ makes Cotter’s arguments (1987:293–304) even more compelling.

If, as the present author believes, the environment depicted by the parable is that of a courtroom, it becomes an even more biting critique. The ‘children’ of ‘this generation’ are clever enough to put on airs of formality and are self-assured enough to sit in the location of judgement but are only capable of levelling laughable accusations at one another. After all, what competent judge would hear arguments in a case of ‘musically incongruous response’? The gravity of the courtroom setting heightens the critique; children ‘playing pretend’ at a musical game can be forgiven for a certain caprice and petulance. The same cannot be said of a judge whose verdicts hold enormous consequences for the accused!

If this interpretation is decisive, however, it must also make sense of the application or exemplification of the parable’s message in the ministries of John and Jesus, which is presented immediately afterward:

Matthew 11:18–19a

For John came, neither eating nor drinking, and they say: ‘He has a demon!’ The Son of Man has come, eating and drinking, and they say: ‘Look at this guy! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and of sinners!’

ἦλθεν γὰρ Ἰωάννης μὴτε ἐσθίων μὴτε πίνων, καὶ λέγουσιν, Δαιμόνιον ἔχει. ἦλθεν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐσθίων καὶ πίνων, καὶ λέγουσιν, Ἰδοὺ ἄνθρωπος φάγος καὶ οἰνοπότης, τελωνῶν φίλος καὶ ἁμαρτωλῶν.

Luke 7:33–34

For John the Baptist has come, eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say: ‘He has a demon!’ The Son of Man has come, eating and drinking, and you say: ‘Look at this guy! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and of sinners!’

ἐλήλυθεν γὰρ Ἰωάννης ὁ βαπτιστὴς μὴ ἐσθίων ἄρτον μὴτε πίνων οἶνον, καὶ λέγετε, Δαιμόνιον ἔχει. ἐλήλυθεν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐσθίων καὶ πίνων, καὶ λέγετε, Ἰδοὺ ἄνθρωπος φάγος καὶ οἰνοπότης, φίλος τελωνῶν καὶ ἁμαρτωλῶν.

These examples from John and Jesus’ ministries display the same capricious, irresponsible judgement that was metaphorically critiqued in the preceding parables. The unsubstantiated verdicts described leave the accused without viable options. It would make sense, for example for Jesus to eat and drink after noting the heady accusations levelled at John’s asceticism. Yet, according to the Gospels, Jesus was then himself the object of harsh criticism. When those ‘sitting in the seat of judgement’ apply such dubious criteria, it is implicit that the authors of the Gospels consider the only

just verdict to be the ‘double vindication’ of the two defendants and a harsh reprimand of the ‘puerile judges.’

What is to be made, then, of the vindication of wisdom statements in light of this immediate context? While all three interpretations of the parable attribute a degree of folly to ‘this generation’, the courtroom context, defended by the present author, ‘raises the stakes’ of this foolishness. The situation described is not, in fact, a ‘meaningless game’. It represents the perversion of justice and the condemnation of innocent defendants, who are presented by the Gospels as agents of God’s plan. Folly indeed!

The vindication of wisdom statements, then, should be understood to contrast with and, perhaps, even correct this folly. The courtroom context for which this article argues, is also relevant to a sensitive interpretation of the verb δικαιώω (‘justify’ or ‘vindicate’, used in both vindication of wisdom statements), as the present author has defended elsewhere (Watson 2024:121–146). Δικαιώω can refer to either the subjective verdicts rendered by human beings or to the more theologically decisive verdicts rendered by divine or transcendent beings (see eds. Bauer et al. 2000:249). In the syntactical construction of Matthew 11:19b and Luke 7:35, σοφία clearly occupies the role of the vindicated defendant rather than the judge.

It is at this junction that the differences between the prepositional clauses in each Gospel are of particular hermeneutical relevance. Matthew 11:19b’s ἀπὸ τῶν ἔργων αὐτῆς [by her deeds] provides a foundation or basis for the verdict, without specifying an agent who emits the verdict. Luke 7:35, on the other hand, supplies the agent with ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν τέκνων αὐτῆς [by all her children], while leaving the foundation or basis for the verdict implicit. Both prepositional phrases interact with the literary context. Matthew’s use of ἔργα [deeds] here, hearkens back to the opening of the narrative in 11:2 (an *inclusio* that will be investigated further in the next section).

Meanwhile, Luke’s reference to the τέκνα of wisdom in 7:35 provides an interesting contrast with the παῖδιοι of ‘this generation’ in 7:32 (both τέκνα and παῖδιοι refer to ‘children’). For Luke, then, ‘this generation’ is not a single, homogeneous entity. It is, rather, composed of at least two groups characterised by their alignment *with* (τέκνα) or *against* (παῖδιοι) σοφία and its agents, such as John and Jesus. This is consistent with the narrative aside in Luke 7:29–30, where God and his plan are the object of contrasting verdicts from Jesus’ audience. Like the Matthean *inclusio*, this parallel will be investigated in the next section.

The vindications of σοφία in Matthew 11:19b and Luke 7:35, then, represent the ‘just verdict’ that has been denied to John and Jesus by the ‘perverse justice’ of the παῖδιοι of ‘this generation’. As the present author has argued above, this identification is consistent with an interpretation of the parable that situates John and Jesus as interacting with and as victims of, but not as members of, the παῖδιοι of ‘this generation’. It

should be noted that both John and Jesus are presented within the narrative arcs of the Gospels as agents of God’s purposes, who are the targets of unjust condemnation, not unlike the prophets of old. Thus, at this stage of the investigation, the author is inclined against an identification of σοφία (‘wisdom’) in Matthew 11:19b and Luke 7:35 that would highlight Jesus as Wisdom incarnate while excluding or minimising John.

Strategic repetitions: Structural clues to the identity of σοφία in Matthew 11:2–19 and Luke 7:18–35

This article, then, turns to investigating the vindication of wisdom statements within the broader literary context of the episodes as a whole, that is, Matthew 11:2–19 and Luke 7:18–35. As has already been mentioned, the presence of an *inclusio* in Matthew’s version of the narrative, namely in 11:2a and 11:19b, represents a final piece of evidence that must be considered before reaching a final conclusion as to the identity of σοφία in this pericope. The Matthean *inclusio* is marked by a strategic repetition of the term ἔργα [deeds]:

Matthew 11:2a

Now John, upon hearing of the deeds of the Christ while in prison,

Ὁ δὲ Ἰωάννης ἀκούσας ἐν τῷ δεσμοτηρίῳ τὰ ἔργα τοῦ Χριστοῦ

Matthew 11:19b

Even so, wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

καὶ ἐδικαιώθη ἡ σοφία ἀπὸ τῶν ἔργων αὐτῆς.

It is significant that both uses of ἔργα are qualified by a genitive. In 11:2a, the genitive is an explicit reference to Jesus by using the Christ-title (τοῦ Χριστοῦ). In 11:19b, on the other hand, the genitive is a personal pronoun (αὐτῆς), ostensibly referring back to σοφία. For many proponents of Wisdom Christology, the strategic repetition of the *inclusio* is seen as an explicit identification of Jesus as Wisdom incarnate.⁹

Such identification is not uncontested, however. France (2007:435) sees such a Christological conclusion as ‘perhaps too extravagant’, and, like Carson (1995:270–271), prefers to identify σοφία in 11.19b as Divine Wisdom, exemplified in the ministries of John and Jesus. It should be noted that the use of *inclusio* for structural and stylistic purposes is common in Matthew’s Gospel.¹⁰ It is, after all, entirely possible that the repetition of ἔργα is merely structural rather than Christological. Therefore, the key question to be answered is whether the repetition of ἔργα in 11.2 and 11.19b establishes a connection between Χριστός and σοφία that is sufficiently striking to overshadow the emphasis on *both* John and Jesus as vindicated doers of the deeds of σοφία in the immediate context and in the narrative as a whole.

9. Interestingly, there is agreement on this point in spite of disagreement as to whether Matthew has altered or preserved the reading in Q. Suggs (1970:36–58) and Dunn (1980:197–198) reach this conclusion while arguing that Matthew has altered Q. Deutsch (1996:49–54) and Witherington III (1994:145, 202, 231) agree on the Christological identification while positing that Matthew has preserved the more original reading and it is Luke who has deviated from Q.

10. See, for example, the Kingdom of the Heavens in Matthew 5:3, 10, the Law and the Prophets in 5:17, 7:12, and Jesus’ activities in 4:23, 9:35.

While it is impossible to categorically eliminate the possibility of Christological identification, the present author argues that the *inclusio* is, itself, insufficient to justify such an identification in the absence of more explicit rhetorical or literary devices that would push John to the background and pull Jesus alone into the spotlight. A structural overview of Matthew 11:2–19 highlights John’s presence throughout the three literary units (A, B, and C) of the episode, each marked by one or more questions and Jesus’ answer(s):

Unit A

A. 11.2–6 – John’s question, Jesus’ answer, exhortation

A.a 11.2a – The deeds of the Christ [τὰ ἔργα τοῦ Χριστοῦ] occasion John’s query

A.b 11.2b–3 – John’s query: are you the One-Who-is-to-Come?

A.c 11.4–5 – Jesus’ answer: who I am is visible in my deeds in light of OT precedent

A.d 11.6 – Exhortation: Blessed is the one who is not made to stumble by me!

Unit B

B. 11.7–15 – Rhetorical questions, eschatological clarification, John and the eras, exhortation

B.a 11.7–9 – Three rhetorical questions: two absurd possibilities and one partially correct possibility (John as more than a prophet)

B.b 11.10–11 – Eschatological clarification: John as the forerunner; nonetheless, the least in the Kingdom is greater

B.c 11.12 – John and the eras: from John until now, the Kingdom of the Heavens is overpowered by the forceful

B.c’ 11.13 – John and the eras: the Law and the Prophets prophesied until John

B.b’ 11.14 – Eschatological clarification: John as Elijah to come

B.a’ 11.15 – Exhortation: may the one with ears hear!

Unit C

C. 11.16–19 – Rhetorical question, parable of rebuke, exemplification, vindication

C.a 11.16a – Jesus’ rhetorical question: what is this generation like?

C.b 11.16b–17 – Parable of rebuke: this generation’s petulant accusations and baseless verdicts are like ‘bratty children assuming the role of judge’

C.c 11.18–19a – Exemplification of the parable: this generation’s folly is on display in their petulant rejection of John and Jesus on insufficient grounds

C.d 11.19b – Vindication: Wisdom is justified by her deeds [ἐδικαιώθη ἡ σοφία ἀπὸ τῶν ἔργων αὐτῆς]

The episode’s focus on Jesus’ eschatological role in unit A, occasioned by John’s question, is balanced by unit B’s focus on John’s eschatological role in relation to the Kingdom of Heaven. Unit C rounds out the narrative by describing the way both eschatological agents have been received by ‘this generation’. In light of the emphases of this rhetorical structure and the possibility that the *inclusio* is merely stylistic and structural (rather than explicitly theological), the present

author is inclined to agree with France’s verdict (2007:435): While it is unlikely that ‘Matthew would have found the identification with Wisdom unacceptable’, reading σοφία as a Christological identification is likely more theologically ‘extravagant’ than the context warrants.

Meanwhile, the Lukan vindication of wisdom hearkens back to the contrasting verdicts in Luke 7:29–30:

Luke 7:29–30

When they heard this, all the people and the tax collectors affirmed God’s uprightness,

Καὶ πᾶς ὁ λαὸς ἀκούσας καὶ οἱ τελῶναι ἐδικαίωσαν τὸν θεὸν
having been baptised with the baptism of John.

βαπτισθέντες τὸ βάπτισμα Ἰωάννου·

The Pharisees and the experts in the Law, meanwhile, refused to recognise God’s plan as valid for themselves,

οἱ δὲ Φαρισαῖοι καὶ οἱ νομικοὶ τὴν βουλήν τοῦ θεοῦ ἠθέτησαν εἰς ἑαυτούς,

not having been baptised by him.

μὴ βαπτισθέντες ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ.

Luke 7:35

Even so, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.

καὶ ἐδικαιώθη ἡ σοφία ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν τέκνων αὐτῆς

Luke 7:29–30 recalls the details of John’s ministry in 3:10–14, where the crowds [ὄχλοι], tax collectors [τελώναι], and soldiers [στρατεύομενοι] were singled out in the narrative for their positive responses to John’s fiery message of rebuke. Equally noteworthy at this junction of the narrative is the ‘deafening silence’ from the religious leaders. Luke 20:5–7 clarifies that this silence resulted from unbelief rather than from ignorance of John’s message. The characterisation of the Pharisees and experts in the Law in Luke 5:17–6:11 as ‘swift to accuse, but unable to substantiate’ fits with the parable of rebuke told in 7:32–33 (although the parable’s designation of ‘the people of this generation’ indicates a larger target group than merely the Pharisees and experts in the Law).

These characterisations suggest that both God and his plan in Luke 7:29–30 and the σοφία of Luke 7:35 act in ways that defy human expectations.¹¹ Thus, over the course of Luke’s Gospel, divinely commissioned agents like John and Jesus challenge diverse members of ‘this generation’ to reexamine their own presuppositions and realign themselves with God’s purposes. Especially in the programmatic episodes of the infancy narratives, those who are willing to do so consistently find joy and join in the realisation of the Divine plan (Watson 2021:32–94; 191–197). As occurs in Luke 7:29–30, the third Gospel frequently highlights how humility is required of those of higher social or religious status in order to discern God at work, while the socially marginalised are swift to receive mercy and, ironically, recognise God at work (see e.g. Lk 1:51–55; 2:34–35; 3:10–14; 5:17–6:11; 7:36–50).

11. For further defence of this position, see Watson (2024:132–135)

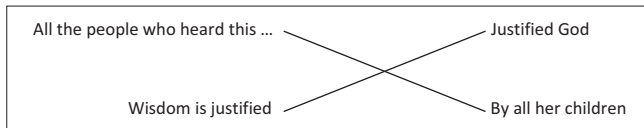


FIGURE 1: An illustration of the chiasmic relationship found in Luke 7 v. 29 and v. 35 (based on Green, J.B., 1997, *The Gospel of Luke*).

Particularly noteworthy is the repetition of δικαίω in reference to a divine or transcendent figure in both 7:29 [τὸν θεόν] and 7:35 [ἡ σοφία]. The fact that the Lukan vindication of wisdom statement in 7:35 features a collective agent (ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν τέκνων αὐτῆς, used with the passive voice verb ἐδικαίωθη) and that the active voice verb ἐδικαίωσαν in 7:29 has a collective subject has led Green (1997:304) to identify a chiasmic relationship in these verses (Figure 1).

This structure in 7:29 and 7:35 occurs in much closer rhetorical-literary proximity than the Matthean *inclusio* in 11:2 and 11:19b and suggests that the personified Wisdom of 7:35 be identified with God rather than be interpreted in a Christological sense.¹² John and Jesus are presented as distinct agents of the ‘plan of God’ ([τὴν βουλὴν τοῦ θεοῦ] – Lk 7:30) throughout the third Gospel. The present author therefore agrees with Bock (1994), Green (1997), and others in identifying σοφία in Luke 7:35 as Divine Wisdom, with John and Jesus as its agents who are tasked with leading the παιδίοι of ‘this generation’ to repentance to become τέκνα of this Divine Wisdom.

Conclusion

This article has argued in favour of identifying σοφία in Matthew 11:19b and Luke 7:35 as Divine Wisdom at work, as evidenced in the distinct ministries of John and Jesus. An identification of Jesus as Wisdom incarnate raises interesting possibilities (and, in the opinion of the present author, would be unlikely to shock the authors of these two Gospels). Nonetheless, the contextual emphasis on the ‘double vindication’ of John and Jesus and their role in providing ‘collective rebuke’ to a generation whose verdicts evidence a rejection of Wisdom, leads the present author to conclude that the exegetical details of Matthew 11:2–19 and Luke 7:18–35 do not support such an identification in these pericopes. Admittedly, this conclusion does not negate the possibility that Matthew or Luke construct a Wisdom Christology in their Gospels as a whole. The present author merely affirms the view that the evidence for such a construction in these two episodes runs against, rather than in harmony with, the thrust of the context.

This conclusion is largely based on the interpretation of the vindication of wisdom statements in light of the preceding parables of rebuke in Matthew 11:16b–17 and Luke 7:32. This article has argued in favour of an interpretation of the parables proposed by Cotter (1987), which seems to have been largely neglected by many arguments in favour of Wisdom Christology in these pericopes. This interpretation

¹²In favour of this argument, see Bock (1994:684) and Green (1997:304); for an opposing argument, see Levine and Witherington III (2018:208).

proposes that the metaphor of the parable is not, in fact, that of children ‘at play’, or at least not at a ‘musical game’, as has been defended by most recent interpreters. Rather, the correct environment communicated by the parable is that of a courtroom, where children have assumed the role of judge and made infantile accusations. In other words, if the children are to be considered ‘at play’, then they should be seen as ‘playing’ a very specific game with a dangerous degree of self-confidence and very little aptitude!

The article has likewise striven to demonstrate the compatibility of this interpretation with the parables’ exemplification in the ministries of John and Jesus (Mt 11:18–19a & Lk 7:33–34). Indeed, ‘this generation’ demonstrates the same type of caprice and ineptitude in judgement characterised in cutting fashion by the childish ‘judges’ of the parables. By rejecting John based on his fasting and abstention while also rejecting Jesus based on his eating and drinking, they leave the accused without a viable alternative and emit unjust verdicts.

By connecting the vindication of wisdom statements to the surrounding context, it becomes clear that both Matthew and Luke are portraying ‘this generation’ as being capable of discerning Wisdom’s identity through her deeds and those of her agents such as Jesus and John. In puerile fashion, they have rejected Divine Wisdom by emitting unsubstantiated verdicts. In contrast with these παιδίοι of ‘this generation’, the τέκνα of Wisdom recognise and validate the signs of God at work, even when his plan contradicts their expectations. These contrasting human responses to Divine Wisdom, expressed through the ministries of human agents, enrich the biblical theological understanding of this fascinating topic. They also offer an apropos warning to all who would ‘sit in the agora’ in the posture of judges to emit their own verdicts. Take particular care to avoid being a παιδίον of your own generation rather than a τέκνον of Wisdom!

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Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author’s contribution

M.W. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article represents a literary study in which the primary objects of study are ancient texts and their interpretation; at no point did the research process involve any form of experiment, interview, survey, or any other type of direct interaction with any type of live participant. M.W. has striven to show the highest respect for the work of other scholars by accurately citing their contributions to the body of knowledge. This study therefore represents low/no ethical risk.

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Data availability

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