

Wisdom literature and psalms religion essay



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Within the Hebrew Bible itself, the wisdom literature is exciting, because it deals directly with life. The life-death situation is expressed positively in the image of “ the tree of life.” Wisdom “ is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy”. (Proverbs 3) There are five books in the Hebrew Bible that deserve the title of wisdom literature; three primary (Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes) and two Apocrypha (Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom of Solomon). Within this literature is a distinct lack of what one would consider typically Jewish or Israelite as there is no mention of the promises of the patriarchs, the covenant and Sinai, the promise to David and so on.

Wisdom literature is not confined to the Bible. Every culture that has left a written patrimony has something similar to the wisdom literature (Socrates – “ the unexamined life is not worth living”, Plato – “ know thyself”, Aristotle – “ all men by nature desire to Know”). The fundamental desire for knowledge as such characterizes human nature. Wisdom literature includes various authors trying to understand human nature, themselves, and understanding God and God’s relation to us.

Within the Bible itself, Lady Wisdom remains an elusive figure despite considerable attention given to sapientia [hokmah], or ‘ wisdom’. She is the object of a quest in the first recorded petition for wisdom (Solomon in 1 Kings 3) and in the last wisdom book to be written (Wisdom of Solomon). What is striking about these biblical texts is that they embody not only the faith of Israel, but also the treasury of cultures and civilizations which have long vanished. As if by special design the voices of Egypt and Mesopotamia sound again and certain features common to the cultures of the ancient Near East

come to life in these pages which are rich in deep intuition. (Fides et Ratio 16) Wisdom is described in so many ways: She is “fear of the Lord,” instruction for moral formation, human experience, the mysteries of creation, Law, a mysterious divine call, and even a spouse.

Wisdom literature provides a biblical model for understanding divine revelation apart from the historical mode (salvation history) in which it is usually cast. Wisdom literature transcends all of this and is not tied to any specific happening. The openness of Israelite wisdom to the wisdom of Israel’s neighbors – the clearly international character of the wisdom movement, the actual borrowings from Egyptian wisdom, the controlling references to creatures and creation – provides a biblical basis for the possibility that the non-Israelite can also respond in saving faith to the creator, who is the God revealed in Israelite and Christian experience.

If God saw fit to recognize the wisdom of the pagan Egyptians in Proverbs, then we should be open to finding divinely inspired thoughts and wisdom in other cultures: through dialogue with other Christians (Ecumenism); dialogue with other non-Christians (Inter-religious); dialogue with regards to other faiths such as Animists and Buddhists (see *Ad Gentes* – encyclical on the Church’s respect for other faiths and the Church’s desire to bring the leaders of other religions in to the fullness of God’s revelation, spirit and God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ).

Within the genre of Wisdom, there are many definitions on the categories of the literature. Biblical Wisdom is focused on practicality. It is on how we ought to live here and now. In Job and Qoheleth we find practical discussion

spilling over into the broader meaning of life and the challenges of life.

Wisdom books along with the Wisdom literature of other cultures move with in an ambience of the religious, in general, but not overtaken by a religious outlook. Proper fear of the lord is an often theme in Wisdom. What you find in Wisdom often doesn't have a necessary connection to religion. For this reason, these books appeal to the agnostics of today. This Wisdom also appeals to agnostic writers who find something they can hold onto in Christianity or in religion in general. Something that they value and is essential or creedal in nature. Many of the Proverbs show this side; the interpretation may be Christian but keep a cross cultural appeal as their beauty.

Wisdom literature is also a good source of evangelization. For example, Paul goes in to the Areopagus (Acts 17) and the people start to mock him before he speaks. Paul uses some well-known verses of Greek authors and poets to bridge a common understanding and that have a bridge to the pagan audience. He succeeded in bridging the culture gap on their love of knowledge and love for wisdom and learning. In an increasingly secularized culture we will encounter these Pauline episodes more often. Wisdom literature is characterized by being called 'secularized' as it is often devoid of any specific Christian content. The non-religious nature of Wisdom literature is not necessarily bad. A tinge of secularity doesn't hurt in the study of theology and the practice of one's own faith.

With respect to Creation, Wisdom books move within a religious atmosphere but are not taken over by a religion. Creation is a work of God's hands and therefore intrinsically good and should be stewarded carefully. By properly

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understanding those points, we come to an understanding about ourselves as the crowning glory of creation. Humans are made in the image and likeness of God (imago dei). If forgotten, any statement on theology is foundationless. Many denominations believe Man is fallen, evil or corrupt. But we are inherently good and this is not oblivious to everyone. Wisdom by which many generations of cultures is elevated, affirmed, and ratified in the books of Wisdom and are given the stamp of Divine Inspiration.

Due to the straightforward nature of the Wisdom, we must be careful to not over analyze the literature or over analogize. Church Fathers interpret the books at the Literal and Sapiential meaning. So we too should not look too deeply in search of the obvious literal meaning as the Wisdom books wear their meaning on their sleeve.

Many parts of the Wisdom books are difficult to date. Poetry is difficult to date and uses play on words, vocabulary and sometimes antiquated terms to bring together literary elements that are difficult to pin down a specific time and place. For example in Job there is not a single identifiable historical reference in the book. We cannot locate it accurately in time. We study the vocabulary, but Job has one of the broadest ranges in the bible. All of the personalities are literary creations and cannot be attached to an actual person. The place names are intentionally made obscure [Job lived in the land of Uz]. A similar Wisdom text to that of Job is found in the Persian Shahnameh (The Epic of Kings) by Hakim Abol Qasem Ferdowsi Tousi. In this Persian Wisdom book, the theological emphasis regarding God being unfathomable and unchallengeable is similar to the teaching at the end of the book of Job. In Sirach the author tells us who he is in the preface and can

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accurately date. A similar Wisdom text to that of Sirach (and Proverbs) is found in Prologue of The Code of Hammurabi King of Babylon (from about 2250 BCE). The Psalms were written over a very broad period of time. Some were composed in the 10th century BCE and have their literary roots in earlier times. Job, Proverbs and Psalms express the heart of humanity; common things that people have experience of and understanding in.

Sophia or wisdom is the understanding of the cosmos as a whole in terms of its ultimate cause and principle. So the search for wisdom is our search for whatever it is that is “ first in itself” that is THE cause of the things that are “ first for us” in sense perception. In studying Wisdom we can come to see the importance of Creation in biblical thought and in Jewish/Christian faith. We can also come to see the interdependence and interrelatedness in the reality of the biblical world view. Nothing is profane in the Wisdom book. All is sacred somehow. Perhaps we will need to adjust our perspective in order to see and understand and perceive that inter-relatedness of all reality. In studying Wisdom today, we are seeking to look into the life and times of Jesus. Jesus frequently spoke in a manner of the Wisdom literature and we find He spoke of Solomon in his teachings of the Gospels. Studying the Wisdom literature will give us a broader appreciation of the Bible in general.

The Book of Job – describe how the main theme of this book is developed, how we read it in the light of Christian Revelation, and how its message may come into use in pastoral situation.

The Book of Job points us to (in the Christian era) the belief in the God revealed to us in the person Jesus Christ. This book can only be fully grasped

in the light of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ. Job is all about suffering and theodicy.

Job is steadfast, not patient in this reading. The scenes have been deliberately worked to set before the reader a picture of a living saint, one who has won divine approval for his lifestyle and who holds firmly to God despite cruel afflictions. In this book Satan is one of the “sons of God,” the members of the heavenly court who do the Lord’s bidding and serve as his counsel. (Murphy 36) The devil does not “make us do it”, but only “shows” us and we do the rest and the manner of which evil manifests itself in life varies. The office of Satan was responsible for putting a person to the test. A person whose job it is to prosecute or point out things persons do not want to see. “A Satan” is a person who God has commissioned and “Devil’s Advocate” is the actual title of “Promoter of the Faith”. For Ancient Israel, there was a dark side, to God that was simply accepted. This dark side resulted from the worldview that attributed to divine agency all that happens, evil as well as good.

In the first chapter of Job, his sons and daughters are taken away; livestock are also taken away from Job. The Satan goes back and asks God for further trial. In the next chapter, the Satan gives sores to Job and Job sits in ashes (a gesture of mourning/sadness). Job’s wife asks if he is still holding to his innocentness. Job still does not sin with his lips, but oscillates between despair and ardent faith. In the third chapter, Job gives his “perish the day on which I was born” plaintive speech of deep darkness. This is the dark night of the soul. This is the type of thought that goes through people’s minds before suicide. Only known to God is the moral culpability or

responsibility of the action by the suicide. But there is hope for the survivors on the Via Dolorosa. When we walk in this valley, we know that Christ walked there before us. Authentic hope is there. The Crucifixion cannot be taken for granted. We cannot presume that all the suffering we go through is for nothing and that the person is presumptuously in heaven. The taking of a life is wrong. God still loves the departed and there is the possibility of redemption but we must then walk the dolorosa. Job is a model of Virtue and of Patience and of Friendship with God. Job 4 begins 28 chapters of a cycle of speeches by Job's friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar).

The three friends have the outlook that associates earthly rewards with goodness and earthly punishment with evil. This is the "gospel of prosperity". In Job 5: 8-27, his friends give a fraudulent response to his state: God rewards good people and punishes bad people. Job acknowledges his guilt, but no sin that merits the suffering that is being visited upon him. In Job 13: 3, Job pushes back saying "If he should kill me, I will wait for him; I will defend my conduct before him. And this shall be my salvation that no impious man can come into his presence." In Job 13: 15-16, Job is saying that he has a clean conscience. He dares God to smite him. He has such confidence that God will respect a clean conscience and respect that he will defend himself. The cycle of speeches by the three friends begins to wrap up and Job's understanding of his plight begins to open up. He expresses an inchoate belief in some kind of resurrection (this is a pre-cursor to NT belief). In Job 29, he has an introspective moment and describes what it was like to have favor with God. He looks to the past with rose-colored glasses with all the "what if" statements. Through this questioning, his spirit begins to

change and moves closer to God. We must trust in God even though we may not see the reason as to why we are going through a trial.

In Job 29: 15, he says he was “ eyes to the blind and feet to the lame”. He was so devoted to helpless people that he perceived himself in their suffering. He intimately associated himself with the other’s plight that they became one (charity). The Theological Virtues: Faith, Hope, and Love are so called because we are imbued with these virtues (being gifts of grace) as they have God as their ultimate end.

Elihu’s (name meaning “ He is my God”) speeches follow with the theme “ arrogance with God will bring you punishment.” His friends realize Job is able to rebut them, but Job has not come to any conclusion on his own. But this does not lift his suffering. In Job 38: 1-40: 2 and 40: 6-41: 26, we see that God is always patiently listening. At the end, God speaks: How dare you question My ways. God never says that Job is in fact guilty of sin and that is why he is punishing him. He is angry with Job for Job’s method of dealing with the justice, righteousness and sovereign right to deal with His goodness.

Job did not give in to the facile explanations of his friends. He knew he did deserve what had happened, but he had not blasphemed, murdered, or done anything else of seriousness. He is just like most of us. When confronted with his friends trying to pawn off his suffering, he knew it was false. This is similar to the Deuteronomic line of thinking: Do wrong and be punished, do right and be blessed. Contemporary evangelical points focus on the ‘ being blessed’ or the “ book of prosperity”. Until tragedy or suffering strikes and then we see these preachers drift away and become disillusioned.

At the end of the speeches by God, Job realizes that he has nothing to oppose the wisdom of God. God's wisdom is entirely "other", beyond that which Job can attain. Job realizes he has no right to question God's Will. God's Will is always good, and beyond that "silence". He confides his very being to the Lord: I know my Creator lives. The mystery is not always solved. The suffering and questions may remain and this is alright.

If there is no mystery left, then that person has perpetrated a fraud on you. God walks with us (by Job) in times of suffering. In such situations, the simple answer never works. We must walk with the person. We deny the transcendence of God if we think we understand everything. We best understand God when we are in suffering with someone. To share in the suffering, we come to understand Him better. He has gone before us on this path of suffering.

Describe the progression of biblical thought on women that is found in the wisdom books and in the related passages which we have studied. Where do these views leave us with respect to our Christian views? You may wish to recall figures such as the wife of Job, Lady Wisdom or the "Ideal wife" from Proverbs, and others.

Perhaps the best way to sum up the book of Proverbs and possibly all of Wisdom literature is the line from Deuteronomy "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life." (Deut. 30: 19) This is the choice that is laid out before us and Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly are anthropomorphic language that helps express the allurements of each. The Proverbs are an expansion of the Decalogue. It is the practical 'how to' for everyday life and implementing the policies laid out in the Decalogue.

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Wisdom is often personified as feminine, perhaps in part because, in Hebrew, wisdom is a feminine noun. Grammar does not fully explain, however, Proverbs' interest in repeated and varied development of the female persona. The female imagery for Lady Wisdom is also closely connected to her negative counterpart in Proverbs, that embodiment of evil referred to as the "loose woman" (Lady Folly).

The part played by women in the Book of Proverbs is worthy of note. High praise is given to the 'virtuous woman' in Proverbs 31: 10-31 and also in a number of sayings scattered throughout the book. It is evident that monogamy is contemplated throughout as the regular married relationship (Prv 5: 18), whatever deviations might be permitted by the law for the hardness of men's hearts.

"He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the LORD," (Prv 18: 22) provided, of course, that she be a good wife. There is another kind of wife, whose shortcomings are denounced in righteous language: "A good wife is the crown of her husband, but she who brings shame is like rottenness in his bones." (Prv 12: 4) By contrast with the woman of virtue, the sage utters stern warnings against the foolish woman, the brawling and ill-tempered woman, and above all the 'strange woman' whose "house is the way to Sheol." (Prv 7: 27)

A variation on the feministic imagery is seen again in Proverbs 1: 20-33 and 8: 1-21, where she appears as a prophet, calling out for followers in the most public places: in the street and squares, at the busiest corner and the city gates (1: 21-22), on the heights and at the crossroads (8: 2). Her rhetoric

offers enticement and warning. To the one who chooses her way, she offers wealth and power. To those who ignore her counsel, she promises mockery when panic strikes and ultimately death (1: 26, 32). Lady Wisdom's vocabulary mirrors that of prophetic language. She "calls," (Prv 1: 24) is "refused," "stretches out her hand," (Prv 1: 28) needs to be "sought" and "found" (Prv 8: 17) [compare 2 Chr 15: 2, Is 6: 9-10, 65: 1-2; Hos 5: 6, Am 8: 12 [C. V. Camp]]. The prophets use such language to describe the relationship of Israel to God while Wisdom speaks of relationship with herself.

In all these moral precepts it is presumed that men and women are free agents, responsible for the way in which they exercise the power of choice. Yet there is no suggestion that it is possible to lead a moral life without having any regard to religious considerations. Disregard of God leads to moral ruin (Prv 22: 14), but "by the fear of the Lord a man avoids evil." (Prv 16: 6) Wisdom is to be embraced and is counterbalanced with Folly. Folly caused the Exile and shame. Wisdom will keep us out of it and on the right path.

The Jewish people did not have a clearly defined afterlife. The Sadducees did not believe in the Resurrection or the ideal of Sheol (abode of the dead). Because of this, the focus on passing on to the children is dominant of one's inheritance. Proverbs is filled with Father/Son and Mother/Son and Child language imagery. Look to those who have gone before you in this life. Imitate them and learn the lessons from them and pass them on to your children (and so forth). In literature today, books given to children have a point or lesson imparted. This is a sort of an attempt to pass on our wisdom to our children. The end of Proverbs 31 talks about the place of women in

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Israel. It talks about the 'ideal' woman and gives a description of one who is familiar to the post-Exilic reader.

In literature that is a little more recent, Julian of Norwich treats Christ as Mother. This is not a "feminist" notion. Julian's tradition comes from her identification of the second person of the Trinity with the traditional character of Wisdom and her understanding of the identity between Mother Church and the Mystical Body of Christ. For Julian, Christ is the Church, and the Church is the Mother. Christ is Wisdom, and Wisdom is the feminine. Julian never uses anything but masculine pronouns in referring to Christ. She also never characterizes Christ as "mother", but describes motherhood as preexisting in Christ. Earthly motherhood, she says is an imitation and reflection of Christ. It is not a characteristic of femininity that Christ shares, but a characteristic of Christ that women share. Wisdom has always been personified as feminine and in some instances to such a degree that Wisdom is characterized as the feminine aspect of God.

Lady Wisdom is a personification of a mental power that claims to have preceded creation and to exist in a daughter-like relationship to God. She transcends the mundane reality and human minds. The wisdom that Lady Wisdom signifies corresponds to the teachings of human sages.

In Proverbs, the voice of Wisdom and the voice of the teacher do not blend. The teacher, in this case a father, offers wise and lifesaving teachings to his son. The teacher is wise, but wisdom itself transcends any human wisdom. Being personified as a woman, she is a heavenly creature, residing in angelic proximity to God. (John Bright, History of Israel). At the same time, she is

traversing the streets and speaking to all. This image tells us that the various proverbs of the father and of Israel's sages speak with the same voice: that of Wisdom's own voice. The collection of wisdom literature tells us that in the observations of the sages of ancient Israel and of the wisdom taught in the home both echo transcendent wisdom.