



The Theology of Wisdom in Romans 1 and 2 *A Proposal*

W. C. BOUZARD, JR.

Christus Victor Lutheran Church, League City, Texas

Interpreters of Paul's Letter to the Romans have long stumbled over the presence of certain apparent anomalies in his juridical argument expounded in 1:18-3:20. Specifically, much interpretive ink has been spilt over the presence of what some have held to be an expression of "natural theology" in the apostle's thinking, especially in 1:19-21 and 2:14-15. These passages have become interpretive bones of contention not only because the presence of a "natural theology" would affect the meaning of the passage as a whole, but also because the supposition of a "natural theology" has a potential impact on realms of theological thought as various as soteriology, missiology, and ecclesiology.

Does Paul propose a "natural theology" in his argument? If so, what might be the philosophical or theological roots supporting his claim of a universal revelation of God which the world has rejected? It is the purpose of this presentation first to outline briefly the main lines of interpretive reasoning vis-à-vis these two questions and then to answer the latter question in terms of the following proposal: the source of the apostle's claim of a universal divine self-disclosure is to be found in the theology of Israel's wisdom literature.

I. THE PURSUIT OF NATURAL THEOLOGY IN ROMANS 1 AND 2

The dogmatic opinion expressed by the Roman Catholic Church holds that Romans 1:20 does in fact offer proof of the existence of a "natural theology." The First Vatican Council asserted on the basis of Romans 1:20:

The same Holy Mother Church holds and teaches that God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certitude by the natural light of human reason from created things.¹

¹"Dei Filius," *Documents of Vatican Council 1, 1869-1870* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1971) 41.

This position was reaffirmed in this century at the second Vatican Council in the document "Dei Verbum."² Until recently these dogmatic affirmations stood largely unchallenged and in fact were seemingly authenticated by a host of critical scholars who discerned the footprints of Greek philosophy in the pathway of the apostle's reasoning. Citing affinities with Greek thinkers including, variously, Aristotle, Plato, Anaxagoras, and the Hellenized Jew Philo, scholars have long drawn the conclusion that Paul's argument flowed directly out of that broad stream of Greek

philosophy which proposed a natural theology. The school of Stoic thought has particularly been singled out for comparison, for its propensity for rational proofs of the existence of God is well documented.

The problem with this understanding is two-fold. First of all, linguistic similarities with Greek philosophical thought or even the existence of a natural theology in Hellenism does not in and of itself constitute proof that Paul drew on these materials to formulate his argument. More saliently, a close reading of the text shows that Paul simply does not speak of a process of deductive reasoning from nature to nature's God in the manner of the Greek philosophers. Instead, as so many interpreters have pointed out, the apostle simply asserts the fact of God's revelation of himself, from the beginning, in all the things that have been made, quite apart from any concept of the exercise of natural reason. It is a revelation which has been rejected. Hence the affirmation of natural theology cannot be made on the basis of this passage; Paul proposes a revelation of a qualitatively different sort.

But in what sense can Paul claim this revelation? In the course of examining Pauline theology in the aggregate and Romans in particular, other scholars have answered this question by settling on another expression of first century Judaism as the foundation of Paul's theological framework: the perspective of Jewish apocalyptic.

The commentaries on Romans by Roy Harrisville and Ernst Käsemann are guided by the presupposition that the Apostle's thinking springs from a complicated tradition of Jewish apocalyptic or, more accurately, of a modified apocalyptic.³ The qualifier "modified" (Harrisville writes of a "fractured" apocalyptic) refers to the revision of the Jewish notion of God's revelation at "the end of days," a revelation which, in this view, Paul has already seen take place in the cross of Christ. Hence, God's "end of days" victory, a present triumph through the cross, remains a victory that is clear only to those willing to accept it by faith in the face of empirical evidence. Käsemann holds that because of this perspective, Paul can speak in the present tense of God's revelation. This is an eschatological revelation of God's final victory which is already present, though not yet recognized, and which comes to light now only in the vision of its opposite—the defeat of the cross. This same revelation brings to light the nature of the world before Christ and outside of him, namely, that it already

²"Dei Verbum," *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: Guild, 1966) 114.

³Roy A. Harrisville, *Romans* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980) 14; Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980) 34.

stands under the wrath of God, a wrath that can be seen in the world's lostness, bondage, and rejection. The view of the world under God's wrath is not a separate revelation but the same revelation which encounters the individual as "the reverse side" of one's encounter with the justifying righteousness of the gospel.

In applying this perspective to Romans 1: 18ff. Käsemann grants the possible influence of Hellenism and Hellenistic Judaism in Paul's vocabulary, but insists that Paul's basic framework is a radicalized apocalyptic which sees the works of creation as a claim and summons. The central doctrine of justification by faith inevitably led Paul to conclude that the world is in need of justification and that all humanity stands under the wrathful judgement of God. Humanity apprehends this wrath and its need for salvation as an existentially given feature of the cosmos

“in the things that have been made.” And, inasmuch as this apprehension is a universal phenomenon, the apostle feels free to borrow Greek vocabulary without adopting the rational constructions of a natural theology. Thus, in this view, Paul’s announcement of the world’s condemnation and his asseveration of a universal revelation through the cross event is *sui generis* to his “fractured” apocalyptic perspective.

Continuing along these lines, Käsemann warns against identification of Paul’s reference to law “written on (gentile) hearts” (2:14) with Greek thought or even with a traditional use of Old Testament materials. Pointing ahead to 2:15 he contends that the apostle’s true concern was with the unconditional obligation under which gentiles stood: their consciences vacillate precisely because as creatures standing before their Creator they are “by nature” aware of the transcendent claims of the divine will. This awareness is theirs because in their very creatureliness vis-à-vis the Creator an obligatory law imposes itself upon them; it is “written in their hearts.” Further, this law condemns them for, in their self-criticism, they anticipate the last judgement.⁴

The position of Käsemann and Harrisville is powerful and persuasive. It seems undeniably true that Paul’s thinking is deeply rooted in a modified Jewish apocalyptic. The theme of realized eschatology, the centrality of Christ’s cross, and the dark portrait of the world under God’s wrath are far too pervasive in the Pauline corpus to contend for long that Paul was ignorant or unaffected by that strain of Judaism. But is it reasonable to conclude that Paul, who in this argument as well as throughout the letter relied both directly and by inference on Old Testament materials to make his case, would begin his whole enterprise with a *sui generis* proposition of universal revelation which appears spontaneously and without prior theological or biblical precedent? One would hardly think so. Further mitigating against such a conclusion is the flow of Paul’s indictment itself. He does not lay the onus of guilt on humanity on the grounds that human beings have experienced the existential *absence* of God and then failed to respond in worship to a claim and summons that this absence generates. On the contrary, Paul states that in spite of a *positive* revelation of God’s presence, of God’s invisible nature in the things which have been made, humanity has nevertheless chosen to reject both the revelation and its giver. It is for this reason

⁴E. Käsemann, *Romans*, 63-66.

that they are without excuse, “for although they *knew* God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him” (1:21).

If, however, it is correct to conclude that Paul had in mind a positive revelation of God’s own self in the “things that have been made,” then we have come full circle back to the original question posed of these texts, namely, what is the theological foundation of this argument and of Paul’s assertion of a definite revelation which humanity has rejected? The answer to this question lies in the direction of the heretofore little explored way of Israel’s wisdom theology.

II. WISDOM AS THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

What is wisdom? The fact is, from the point of view of the wisdom writers, such a question is not entirely pertinent. Gerhard von Rad’s comment about understanding personified wisdom is appropriate to wisdom in general: “We are asking about ideas and looking for

definitions of terms where Israel spoke about facts and described an occurrence.”⁵ The sages prefer simile, metaphor, and delineation to definition of terms; they deal in the concrete rather than the abstract. Wisdom has to do with being wise, with acting wisely in the world—particularly in the details of day-to-day life. Most remarkable of all are those texts which speak of wisdom as an entity, immanent in creation, who calls humanity to herself for instruction and knowledge.

Two passages in particular come to mind in this connection, namely, the “Wisdom Hymn” of Job 28 and Proverbs 8. In the first of these the poet asks, “But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?” (Job 28:12). God only knows, for God has been concerned with Wisdom in the act of creation (Job 28:23, 24, 27). The writer implies that God created wisdom; at the very least, wisdom was subject to God’s ordering activity. Paradoxically, this wisdom is described as something to be found in the world, and yet it is separate from the works of creation (28:13, 14, 21, 22). It is in no single locale or object where it can be grasped, and yet it is immanently present in creation. Thus von Rad observes, “this ‘wisdom,’ this ‘understanding,’ must therefore signify something like the created ‘meaning’ implanted by God in creation, the divine mystery of creation.”⁶

The accuracy of this observation is seemingly endorsed by the didactic poem of Proverbs 8. In 8:22-31, personified Wisdom describes her mysterious origin and role in the creation of the world. Wisdom was present at creation and was in fact already established before the foundation of the earth (8:22-26). Beyond this, it becomes apparent that Wisdom had a role in God’s ordering of the chaos: Wisdom was apart of the creative process as God established the heavens (8:27a, 28a), set the limits of the sea (8: 27b, 28b), and laid the foundations of the earth (8:29); she stood “beside” God (8:30) and God apportioned her as he poured her out upon all his works (cf. Sir 1:9; Prov 3:19-20). This portrait of Wisdom is a cosmological one whereby God bestows something special

⁵Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972) 144-45.

⁶*Ibid.*, 148.

on creation, and which now, in some mysterious way, inhabits the world and participates in the ongoing ordering process. It is not clear from this or other texts whether or not this world order, who now is objectified in the person of Dame Wisdom, is an attribute of God or an attribute of the world. What is clear is that this thing which is immanent in the world, whether we render it as Wisdom, as do the texts, or

as “primeval order” or “mysterious order” or “world reason” or as the “ meaning” created in the world by God or as the “ glory” reflected back from the world, in every case it is spoken of (by the sages) in the form of a graphic personification.⁷

Further, the sage’s personification was no mere literary device. This “world reason” addresses humanity personally (Prov 1:20-21; 9:3; Wis 6:13), actively seeking those who look for her (Prov 8:17; Wis 6:14, 16), and proffering an invitation of love (Prov 1:20-21; 8:1-2; 9:1-6; Sir 5:2-3). She calls humanity to herself (Prov 8:5-6, 10,32-33), promising knowledge (Prov 8.10-11, 19), material benefits (Prov 8:18, 20-21), and prudence (Prov 8:5, 8-9), which will bring happiness

(Prov 8:34), security (Prov 1:33), and, remarkably, life and favor with God (Prov 1:33; 8:35 [36]; 9:6).

Wisdom's call cannot be separated from the knowledge of God. This is true because Israel's sages knew only one world of experience which was apperceived in such a fashion that rational perceptions and religious perceptions were not differentiated.⁸ It does not follow, however, that a summons from the "world reason" or Dame Wisdom is *de facto* a call from God because, although it remains unclear whether Dame Wisdom was conceived as an attribute of God's being which permeated creation or as an attribute of the created order itself, there can be no question that this personified "world reason" is described as one who is "other" than God and subject to God. God "establishes" wisdom and "searches it out" (Job 28:27); wisdom stands "beside" God (Prov 8:27-30); she is subject to God's creative ordering (Prov 8:22-23); God "poured her out" (Sir 1:9). She "came forth from the mouth of the Most High" (Sir 24:3) and is subject to his command (Sir 24:9).

At the same time, Wisdom is characterized by certain aspects which can only be dubbed as "divine" in nature. Wisdom is at once everywhere and nowhere present (Job 28; Sir 24:4-7); she was present at the beginning of creation as the first of God's works (Prov 8:22); she remains present in all God's works (Sir 1:9); her voice is heard everywhere (Prov 1:20-21; 8:1-2; 9:1-2) calling humanity into obedience to herself (Prov 1:24, 30; 8:5, 32ff.). She alone, of all God's creation, addresses humanity and offers soteriological benefits which otherwise are reserved for God alone, such as life, righteousness, and eternal satisfaction (Prov 1:33; 8:32, 35; 9:6; Sir 24:22).

This description of Wisdom leads to the unmistakable conclusion that in the person of Dame Wisdom we encounter a being who is other than God but who nevertheless addresses humanity in the form of a divine self-revelation, a revelation which comes not from a personal encounter with God but rather in

⁷Ibid., 157.

⁸Roland E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Creation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985) 6.

the depth dimension of the common human experience of the world and of life. This revelation in turn was encapsulated by the sages in the form of "sayings" or proverbs which included connections drawn between possession of or obedience to Wisdom and knowledge of God, connections evidenced in the variations of the formula, "Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom" (Job 28:28). Those who hate wisdom reject "the fear of the Lord" as a tenet of life (Prov 1:29) and, conversely, those who embrace wisdom embrace the first and "full measure" of her teachings, "the fear of the Lord" (Sir 1:14-20; Prov 8:13). Nevertheless, such observations remain rooted in the realm of common human experience quite apart from an encounter with a personal God. They are revealed by Dame Wisdom in the observation of human behavior, society, and most especially, of nature.

This does not mean, however, that there was no attempt to correlate the universal religious experience of wisdom with the specific traditions of Israel. Indeed the attempt at correlation is suggested by the use of the divine name in Proverbs: the God who created Wisdom as the first of his acts is the God of history, the God of Exodus and Sinai. Further correspondence can be seen in the book of Sirach—a watershed achievement in this regard—in which the

“primeval order,” Dame Wisdom, is specifically identified with the Torah of Israel. In Sirach 24 pre-existent Wisdom is portrayed as wandering about the creation seeking a resting place among the people and nations of whom she has “gotten a possession” in order to reveal herself. By the command of God she makes her dwelling among the people of Israel (24:8) and there reveals herself in the holy tabernacle of Jerusalem. The love call of Dame Wisdom, familiar from Proverbs 1 and 8, is now specifically (though not exclusively) identified with “the book of the covenant of the Most High” (24:19-23). Von Rad comments:

This is not simply a legitimatization of Torah. The question is not, “Where does Torah come from?,” but “To what extent is Torah a source of wisdom?” The answer is, “Because Torah is a self-presentation of primeval order, it is able to help men towards wisdom.”...It is the primeval order inherent in the whole world appearing in a new guise.⁹

Significantly, the final section of the poem (24:25-34) returns to the praise of Wisdom utilizing creation language drawn directly from the creation account of Genesis 2:10ff. Wisdom, like the four rivers of Eden, flows across the whole world, filling the earth with her benefits. But in Sirach, a fifth river has tellingly been added to the list—the Jordan of Israel, where Wisdom has particularly revealed herself.

III. THE CORRELATION OF WISDOM AND ROMANS

The above represents, albeit in an abbreviated fashion, some of the chief theological propositions in the wisdom tradition in relation to the question of natural theology. But now the question re-emerges: Does Paul’s argument in Romans 1 and 2 stand on an underlying foundation of wisdom theology? If so,

⁹G. von Rad, *Wisdom*, 246.

where might this foundation be seen in the argument itself? Points of contact can be detected on several important levels.

1. Already noted is the fact that a theology of creation and creation’s inherent order were constitutive elements of Old Testament sapiential thinking. Indeed, the sage’s detailed analysis of all aspects of existence, gleaned from acute observations of nature, human society and behavior, and the apparent relationship between God and humanity, were predicated on the conviction that a divinely ordained order does exist and that the structure of this order can be both observed and beneficially apprehended by any who care to do so. The sages were convinced that this order of creation, the underlying world reason, is transcendentally present in all the works of creation though not identical with the creation itself. But beyond this, as the sages turned their attention to the quality and character of this “world order,” they detected a voice, a real witness emanating from the world, which called human beings to herself and promised soteriological benefits for any who hearkened to her call. Von Rad comments:

In their attempt to illuminate the reality which surrounded men, they had, in the depths of creation, stumbled upon a phenomenon which was possessed of a highly

developed declaratory power. Creation not only exists, it also discharges truth.¹⁰

The truth thus discharged through this self-revelation of creation included a witness to a Being beyond itself who had created (or subjected) Wisdom, released her in the world, and who is identified by Wisdom as Yahweh, God of Israel (Job 28:28). Wisdom was emphatically not conceived of as God; yet she intervened between God and his people as a source of revelation of God's self and will. Further, the voice of Wisdom, the self-revelation of creation, did not function as some secret *gnosis* available only to the select few. On the contrary, she was everywhere present, everywhere evident, everywhere calling human beings to heed her revelation of herself and, through herself, God.

Bringing these observations to bear on Romans 1 and 2 one notes the great similarities between Paul's claim of the self-revelation of creation (1:19-21a) and the thinking of Israel's sages. Granted, Paul does not refer to Dame Wisdom explicitly. But the theological thought which gave definition to Dame Wisdom is evident in the apostle's assertion of God's revelation: through the structures which define all created reality is a transcendent "reason" which points to and reveals God. The gentiles are guilty because, in spite of the self-evident nature of this revelation, they have ignored its call and have elected to worship the objects wherein the revelation is embodied, the things of creation.

Paul would have found a kindred notion, though cast in negative terms, in Wisdom 13:1ff. Here the writer condemns gentiles (in this case the Egyptians) who are not to be excused (13:8; cf. Rom 1:20), for although they did not know God through his works (13:1) they should have known him and in fact were able to do so (13:5). The writer's point is not that the gentiles were unable to recognize the Creator behind the creature, but that, although they should have been able to do so, they did not.

¹⁰Ibid., 165.

2. To the sage's way of thinking, dire consequences were connected with ignoring Dame Wisdom's call and revelation. The most immediate result was that Wisdom withdrew herself, leaving those who had ignored her to suffer the inevitable consequences of their own folly (Prov 1:29-31; Wis 12:23). Again this idea has a striking parallel in Paul's thinking. The gentiles who have ignored the revelation of God are abandoned to follow the path of their own folly. Their "senseless minds were darkened." God withdraws himself, "giving them up" to the consequences of their behavior which, as in Proverbs, lead to death and destruction (Rom 1:21-31).

A noteworthy feature in Paul's description of the spiraling depravity of the gentiles is his reference to gentile idolatry and sexual immorality (Rom 1:22-27). Here too Paul has adopted a wisdom theme, for, in the eyes of the sages, the way of the fool inevitably led to idolatry (Wis 12:23-27; 13:1ff.) and from idolatry to fornication (Wis 14:12).

3. A third point of contact lies in the juxtaposition of the divine self-revelation of nature and the Torah of Israel. We have already seen how in Sirach's apologetic the figure of Dame Wisdom converged with the emphasis given to the Torah in Israel's historical traditions. For Sirach the divine "world reason" which manifests itself everywhere in the world is uniquely embodied in Israel's Torah. Indeed, if von Rad's reading is correct, Sirach understands the authority of Torah to rest in the fact that it is a revelation of the primeval order in a new guise.

Thus Sirach sees a superior divine revelation in Torah but, as his careful use of creation imagery shows (24:25ff.), he is unwilling to restrict the revealing activity of Wisdom exclusively to Torah.

Does this understanding of the Torah find any voice in Paul's argument? It would seem that the apostle's coordination of the concepts of a divine revelation to the gentiles and the revelation of God through Torah to the Jews would in itself point toward an affirmative answer to that question. More significant in this regard is the peculiar use which Paul makes of the concept of law in chapter 2. Having first made the claim that all individuals will be judged on the basis of his or her works (2:6-11), Paul further indicates that the basis of judgment is not restricted to a particular legal code (2:12-13). Even those who do not have the Torah of Israel are not excused for they are, by nature, "a law to themselves" and they have "law written on their hearts" (2:14-15). What "law" might this be? It is the primeval world order, Wisdom, who embodies herself in the Torah of Israel and thereby becomes directly accessible to the Jews and who is indirectly available to the gentiles as the universal law of created order. Jew and gentile are alike in that for each this perception of "what the law requires" is the result of revelation. For the Jew it is the revelation of Sinai, and for the gentile the revelation is "through the things that have been made" (1:20). For both, the law is and remains a revelation; they are without excuse.

But demonstrating points of convergence between Paul's thinking and the theology of wisdom as outlined above also illuminates one serious point of divergence: In contradistinction to the positive assessment of human capabilities in the wisdom tradition is Paul's dark vision of the world standing irrevocably under the wrath of God. If Paul's argument indeed stems from the theological tradition of wisdom, how can the differences in these perspectives be explained?

Here the position of Käsemann and Harrisville and their presupposition of a "modified" Jewish apocalyptic in Paul's thought prove helpful. Paul's dark vision of the human condition is indeed influenced by Jewish apocalyptic. This acknowledgement, however, does not preclude the possibility of wisdom's influence. Recent scholarship, querying after the origins of apocalyptic itself, has led many to question the previously held conclusion that the prophetic movement is the exclusive progenitor of Jewish apocalyptic. In his *Old Testament Theology* von Rad startled scholars with his assertion that the real matrix from which apocalyptic literature originated was not prophecy but wisdom.¹¹ Von Rad held that apocalyptic literature's deterministic and its non-confessional, eschatological, and pessimistic view of history contrasts sharply with the *heilsgeschichtliche* orientation of Israel's prophets for whom the historical activity of God was indeterminate. On the other hand, von Rad saw a close correspondence between apocalyptic's deterministic view of "successive ages" and wisdom's emphasis on the determinative nature of appropriate times, expressed in the late books of Ecclesiastes and Sirach. In his view, both apocalyptic and wisdom were preoccupied with the acquisitions of knowledge and especially that knowledge which would reveal the flow of predetermined history.

Although von Rad's proposal initially received little critical support (J. Crenshaw has called von Rad's thesis "idiosyncratic"¹²), it has nevertheless had the salubrious effect of precipitating a renewed investigation 'into the origins of apocalyptic. And, while most scholars are unwilling to deny the influence of the prophetic movement on apocalyptic literature, it cannot be denied that apocalyptic has been influenced, at least in some measure, by Israel's wisdom

tradition. Donn F. Morgan, for example, has suggested that the book of Daniel and other apocalyptic writings reflect the use of wisdom by apocalyptic circles.¹³ Simon De Vries has argued powerfully for an ideological kinship between apocalyptic and wisdom in their conception of time and history.¹⁴

Thus it appears that there exists a closer connection between the traditions of wisdom and apocalyptic than was earlier thought and that, in fact, apocalyptic grew out of an intellectual milieu in which the wisdom tradition was an influential and indeed a constitutive component. Wisdom surely was not the *only* feature in the origins of apocalyptic, but it was just as surely a feature, and an important one. And, if De Vries is correct, the origins of an apocalyptic perspective, which sought to identify ultimate meaning above or beyond history, can be attributed at least in part as a reaction to that strain of wisdom (represented by Qoheleth) which despaired of finding ultimate meaning within history.

Hence one may trace cautiously a line from wisdom's darker world-view through apocalyptic (wrought at least in part by wisdom) to the negative assess-

¹¹Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962-65) 2.301-308; cf. also the excursus "The Divine Determination of Times" in his *Wisdom*, 263-283, where von Rad again deals with the origin of apocalyptic.

¹²James L. Crenshaw, Review of *Wisdom in Israel* by G. von Rad, *Religious Studies Review* 2 (1976) 10.

¹³Donn F. Morgan, *Wisdom in the Old Testament* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 134ff.

¹⁴Simon J. De Vries, "Observations on Quantitative and Qualitative Time in Wisdom and Apocalyptic," *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays*, ed. by John J. Gammie et al. (Missoula: Scholars, 1977) 263-276.

ment of the human condition found in Romans. That this line does exist is evidenced by both the commonality of forms which comprise the complex literary genres of wisdom and apocalyptic as well as the ideological kinship shared by the two types of literature in their conception of time and history. Moreover, it is apparent that Paul's modified apocalyptic and the perspective of that facet of wisdom reflected by Qoheleth are not inimical and in fact converge: Qoheleth despaired of wisdom's quest for self-mastery and self-understanding in the face of human inability to effect any qualitative change in the condition of the world in which appropriate times for particular behavior remain divinely concealed. In the face of Christ's cross, Paul also felt the necessity of abandoning wisdom's quest for self-mastery and self-understanding. For Paul the cross of Christ put to death any hope of a qualitative change in the condition of the world save that hope offered "to faith, for faith" in the justifying grace of God apart from works of the law. God had indeed revealed himself in the "primeval order" of creation, as the wisdom tradition said, just as he had revealed himself in the Torah of Israel. And the result of revelation was the same in both instances: the revelation only served to heighten the awareness that Jew and gentile alike had "fallen short of the glory of God" (3:23).

IV. CONCLUSION

The comments above have attempted to substantiate the proposal that Romans 1 and 2 witness Paul's use of a theological inheritance passed on to him from Israel's wise men, the tradition of God's self-revelation through "the things which have been made."

It is now time to sum up. To do so we must return to the first question posed, namely,

does Paul in his opening chapters of Romans propose a “natural theology”? If by natural theology we mean an apprehension of God through the observation of nature or by virtue of unaided human reason, then the answer must be negative. Those who may wish to fabricate theological constructions and conclusions based on “natural theology” will have to search elsewhere for a biblical basis. The apprehension of God, of which the apostle speaks, is characterized by its revelatory nature and content: God’s self-expression powerfully breaks in on the world quite apart from human theo-philosophical reflection. That this is the case is evidenced by the apostle himself who speaks, not of a human deductive process, but of the action of a God who since the creation of the world has shown the world “his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity” (Rom 1:19-20). A search for the theological or philosophical roots supporting Paul’s claim has underscored the problems of locating God’s self-revelation in Greek philosophy and, to a lesser degree, in Jewish apocalyptic. On the other hand, an examination of Israel’s wisdom tradition has revealed several points of convergence: (1) the self-revelation of a transcendent “world reason” which points to and reveals God; (2) the disastrous consequences of ignoring the call of the “world reason,” consequences which lead inevitably to idolatry and sexual immorality; and (3) the juxtaposition of the “world reason,” revealed in the created order, and the Torah of Israel. We have further noted that Jewish apocalyptic, indisputably influential for Paul, was itself shaped by an

intellectual milieu in which the wisdom tradition was an important feature. Finally we have seen how, in Paul’s view, wisdom’s quest for self-mastery and self-understanding reached its terminus in the cross of Christ. The cruciform shadow of Calvary obliterates any hope for a qualitative change in the human condition and any program of self-justification.

Finally, however, it must be admitted that our understanding of the general thrust of Paul’s reasoning is not significantly altered by the proposal that it is seated in wisdom theology. The flow of the argument still stands. Those who read Paul’s words still hear the thunderous accusations and feel the truth of them. Perhaps the value of understanding the wisdom background for Paul’s argument rests simply in the fact that we not only feel the validity of the charges against us, but we understand them as well. It is not that we have simply failed to reason correctly, or to observe the mysteries of creation closely enough to see God. We have closed our eyes to a revelation of God’s self and walked in the path of the fool.

Israel’s sages, through Paul, have helped us see wisdom after all: “Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom.” And in holy fear we are driven into the loving arms of Christ.