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The Importance of the Biblical Wisdom Tradition to Our Scripture and Our Faith

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Dear reader, I want to begin by asking you some questions: What comes to mind when you hear the phrase "biblical wisdom tradition"? Do you think of particular books? Do you think of a tradition found beyond these books? Do you think only of the Hebrew Scriptures? Do you think the wisdom tradition is central or peripheral to Scripture? I have spent much of my teaching and writing career working on these questions, so what I want to share are a few reflections on these matters. I invite you along for the ride.

When I first began my journey with Scripture in the 1970s, it was always the story and history that were deemed important. I suspect this is still true for many, if not most, of us. The Bible tells a story that begins with creation, moves to the matriarchs and patriarchs, to slavery in Egypt and freedom with God leading Moses and the people through the waters of the Red Sea to Mount Sinai, where they receive the law. After wandering in the desert, the people are led to the promised land. We then move to the united and divided kingdoms, with the prophets speaking to the people about faith and justice. From there the people go into exile, then return, and rebuild the temple. Into this world, as the apex of history God

Sometimes the biblical wisdom tradition is presented as some type of outlier within the Bible, as an alternative to the general themes and tradition of the book. But an examination of the wisdom texts themselves, and of the New Testament accounts of Jesus's teachings, suggests that the wisdom tradition is actually very close to the core of what the Bible is all about.

sends Jesus as Savior and Lord. He was crucified, died, rose, and will come again. This is the story of Scripture.

So, where in the world does the wisdom tradition fit into this picture? There is no meaningful place in this picture for the wisdom books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. No place for the teaching and praying of the wisdom psalms (or any other psalms, for that matter). And a surprising part of the New Testament is missing as well—what Jesus taught through parables and beatitudes, as well as one of the central metaphors of who Jesus is: Wisdom.

Ironically, today what many believers want from Scripture is a book of wisdom. Folks want to open the Bible and find out how to live and what to think. They expect the Bible to tell them directly what is true, to be able to quote from its pages and declare, "It says right here in the Bible that . . . (fill in the blank), and thus we should . . . (fill in the blank), and there can be no argument about any of this because that is what the Bible says." Wisdom in this sense is fairly indistinguishable from fact and strict law.

My own reading of the wisdom tradition of Scripture is that it does not fit easily into either of these pictures, though it certainly overlaps with both. Wisdom stands at the edge, which also claims to be a principal gate to faith. We are invited by this tradition into discussions of history, ethics, law, and theology. More than anything, we are invited to find faith by asking questions. So, here we go.

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The Wisdom of Proverbs

First, let's consider the book of Proverbs, certainly the central and most traditional wisdom book of the Bible. Proverbs is filled with advice, to be sure, but this advice has an edge and an attitude. Consider some of the edges.

Although Proverbs is tilted toward addressing wealthier individuals, among the many proverbs that speak of the wealthy and the poor one finds a prophetic edge.[1] Take, for example, Proverbs 14:20–21:

> The poor are disliked even by their neighbors,
> but the rich have many friends.
> Those who despise their neighbors are sinners,
> but happy are those who are kind to the poor.

[1] See, for example, 10:15; 11:4; 13:7–8; 14:20–21; 15:16; 16:8; 18:11, 23; 19:1, 4, 7, 17; 22:2, 7, 22–23; 28:6, 11.

This "description" of the rich and poor has a variety of edges inviting us to think about fairness, friendship, neighbors, and privilege. Even the notion of kindness has an edge.

Two of my favorite edgy types of proverbs are the contradictions and the extended descriptions that verge on being parables. Proverbs 26:4–5 presents two pieces of advice that stand in contradiction with one another:

> Do not answer fools according to their folly,
> or you will be a fool yourself.
> Answer fools according to their folly,
> or they will be wise in their own eyes.

How, in these circumstances, can we say that the Bible tells us what exactly to do? Do we answer fools or not? Personal judgment that assesses any particular situation is demanded. And the underlying trap is unavoidable in that one cannot finally avoid dealing with or being a fool ourselves.

One of the most intriguing and unsettling of the various extended descriptions is found in Proverbs 23:29–35:

> Who has woe? Who has sorrow?
> Who has strife? Who has complaining?
> Who has wounds without cause?
> Who has redness of eyes?
> Those who linger late over wine,
> those who keep trying mixed wines.
> Do not look at wine when it is red,
> when it sparkles in the cup
> and goes down smoothly.
> At the last it bites like a serpent,
> and stings like an adder.
> Your eyes will see strange things,
> and your mind utter perverse things.
> You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea,
> like one who lies on the top of a mast.
> "They struck me," you will say, "but I was not hurt;
> they beat me, but I did not feel it.
> When shall I awake?
> I will seek another drink."

Think of what happens when you read this. Is this a true story? It is true as any remarkable parable is true. It paints a picture and invites you to recognize yourself, to understand consequences, to live within the telling. The advice is within the description and the recognition. The central extended description in Proverbs concerns the figure of Woman Wisdom. We will return to her anon.

So, what is the purpose of this proverbial wisdom? To give advice and to instill values, to be sure. But also, we come to realize this wisdom cannot be attained without thought, involvement, exploration, observation, imagination, struggle, and analysis of self and community. Stark clarity and blind obedience are not possible. We engage with these proverbs to become better people and for the good of society. They are true only insofar as we are engaged by their truth.

The Wisdom of Ecclesiastes

The edgiest of the wisdom books is surely Ecclesiastes. At its core is a radical skepticism, particularly about the pursuit of wisdom itself. Wisdom doesn't get you anywhere, so how in the world does the book help us to be wise?

What we know best from this book are three repeated themes. The first theme appears at the very beginning:

> Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,
> vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
> What do people gain from all the toil
> at which they toil under the sun? (1:2–3)

Everything is a mere puff of air—superficial, meaningless, absurd. This, says Qoheleth, "the Teacher," is the nature of all things. The claim that all is vanity or mist is pretty much a mantra throughout the book. Qoheleth uses the word thirty-seven, perhaps thirty-nine, times in the book. People don't really gain anything from their work, be it building things or creating a family or acquiring wealth or working for justice or the pursuit of wisdom itself. Qoheleth, the teacher, has a "tude":

> It is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind. (1:13–14)

The second passage from Ecclesiastes with which folks are familiar is from chapter 3:

> For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
> a time to be born, and a time to die;
> a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted . . . (vv. 1–2)

We tend to be comforted by this passage, knowing that there are good times and bad times, a rhythm of life. And many of us cannot hear this rhythm without considering it an anti-war song by Pete Seeger and sung by the Byrds in the 1960s that ends, "I swear it's not too late!"

But in such comfort and time-claiming protest, we fail to look at the end of the passage in verses 10–11:

> I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with, how God has made everything suitable for its [or perhaps "his"] time. And also God has put a sense of eternity into our human minds, so that we cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

Here is the edginess: There might indeed be a time for everything, but we humans cannot know what it is. God's ways are unknowable, so get over any sense that we might control these times.

The final repeated passage we know is that we should seize the day and "eat, drink, and be merry":

> This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. (5:18)[2]

We often hear this advice through the lens of the skeptic: insofar as nothing we do matters much, we might as well enjoy ourselves.

I have two rather conflicting thoughts about why this book is so crucial to our Scripture and our faith. My first thought centers on the importance of just such skepticism for faith. There is something remarkable about the honesty of Ecclesiastes. It is rather like lament without the tears—no sugar-coating, no false religious piety. In 1967, John Priest delivered a presidential address to the American Academy of Religion entitled "Humanism, Skepticism, and Pessimism in Israel."[3] There, Priest observed that skepticism holds a crucial place in religious thought and faith, that skepticism demands that religious convictions be tested in the laboratory of experience. Priest calls skepticism "the handmaid of religion," saying "skepticism without religion is impossible but also religion without skeptism is intolerable."[4] In this view, Ecclesiastes' faithful skepticism makes faith possible.

But I do have another view of what makes this book faithful that comes to me from the writings of Martin Luther.[5] When I first read Luther's commentary on Ecclesiastes, I assumed he would not like the book precisely because of its skepticism, its lack of a personal God of forgiveness and promise.[6] Much to my surprise, Luther found it a "very beautiful and useful book . . . which on many counts deserves to be in everyone's hands and to be familiar to everyone."[7] But for Luther the purpose and aim of the author was clear—that we be content with

[2] See also Eccl 2:24; 3:12, 22; 8:15; 9:7–9; 11:9–12:1.

[3] John Priest, "Humanism, Skepticism, and Pessimism in Israel," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 36, no. 4 (1968): 311–326.

[4] Priest, "Humanism, Skepticism, and Pessimism," 323, 326.

[5] I wrote about Luther's reading of Ecclesiastes more extensively in Diane Jacobson, "Luther and Post-Modern Culture Meet the Never-Ending Challenge of Ecclesiastes," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 50, no. 2 (2016):116–124.

[6] Martin Luther, "Notes on Ecclesiastes," *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 15:3–187.

[7] *LW* 15:4, 7.

the Word and work of God, take pleasure in the gifts that God has given, and not strive for that which one cannot have. Luther, like many moderns, sees the realistic portrayal of human life as the main truth of the book, but his reading of that portrayal sees it as optimistic rather than pessimistic. He shares with the modern reader a distaste for lying and hypocrisy. He agrees wholeheartedly that life is not a bowl of cherries and ought not be described that way. But unlike those who read this book as pessimistic, Luther sees the truth of the book captured in the insight that the joys of life are a gift, freely given to us by God. Luther is comforted rather than dismayed by the fact that God is solely in charge. Certainly, we cannot know all things; we cannot know the future; we cannot have all that we desire. But if we give up such striving, we can enjoy life in those times when it is given to us to enjoy it.

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I confess to finding it equally true that Ecclesiastes is skeptical and uplifting. The wisdom of the book is found in the struggle between the two readings, rather like having two contradictory proverbs juxtaposed to one other.

The Wisdom of Job

If Ecclesiastes is the edgiest book of "advice," then Job is the wisdom book that most puts us on edge and at the edge. Job tells a story demanding that we ask questions and think deeply and search for both answers and God. More than any other book in Scripture, Job takes suffering head-on. The whole notion of undeserved suffering is deeply unnerving for people of faith—for all people, truth be told. What kind of loving God allows folks to suffer? And no matter how much we want clear answers, no matter how often we return to Job, we are always invited into only glimpses of answers and more questions that follow.

That Job tells a story is important. We need to know Job as a righteous and upright man who loses everything—wealth, status, family, and health. We need to see his "friends" as true believers who, like us, want suffering to be deserved. We need to see ourselves in them as we see ourselves in the religious leaders who question Jesus. And we need to hear the book in conversation with other books of Scripture, most particularly Psalms (8; 38:11–12; 41:5–9; 55:12–14; 88:14–18, and all laments), Genesis 1, Leviticus (particularly laws about clean and unclean),

Jeremiah, Proverbs, and more. Job insists that we think about questions of psalms like the ones of Psalm 8 as mimicked in Job 7:17–19:

> What are human beings, that you make so much of them,
> that you set your mind on them,
> visit them every morning,
> test them every moment?

Most particularly we are invited to consider the questions of the laments, as this is the primary form of Job's speeches—speeches that God declares, in 42:7, to be true.

By inviting us into the morass of questions about suffering, Job also invites us to consider the nature of creation and the nature of law, particularly laws that center on clean and unclean. Job's first speech in chapter 3 is a countercosmic incantation, inviting God to undo creation. In 12:7–8, Job says, "Ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you. Ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you." In 30:29, Job complains, "I am a brother of jackals, and a companion of ostriches." And of course, in God's confounding and inspiring speeches from the whirlwind to the leprous Job (38–39), God brags about the world of the wilderness, the wild, the unclean, the untamable, and even the chaotic. God's created order is not what we think or imagine. We are invited to read this alongside Genesis and Leviticus and to know that wisdom is way more complicated than we had imagined and that God and faith are found in the most unexpected places.[8]

Job provides us with one of the central arguments of why the wisdom tradition is so important and central to Scripture. If we read the other books without Job's counterbalance and questions, we fail to be wise in the complexities of God's truth and God's will for us.

The Wisdom of Wisdom Found in the New Testament

My ponderings about the centrality of the wisdom tradition are not complete without turning to the wisdom tradition in the New Testament. There is so much to say on this subject that I can hardly scratch the surface. So, I will limit myself to saying only two things: Jesus is a wisdom teacher, and Jesus is Wisdom incarnate.

That Jesus is a wisdom teacher is both a formal and a substantial claim. Aside from all else, Jesus is consistently addressed as Rabbi or Teacher, particularly in Matthew. Still, while no one would dispute that Jesus was a teacher, some might question the designation "*wisdom* teacher." Formally, Jesus adopts wisdom forms in all of his teachings. I give you two significant examples among many. Jesus teaches

[8] I have written far more extensively on these matters in two other articles: Diane Jacobson, "Job as a Theologian of the Cross," *Word & World* 31, no. 4 (2011): 374–380; and "God's Natural Order: Genesis or Job?," *"And God Saw That It Was Good": Essays on Creation and God in Honor of Terence E. Fretheim*, *Word & World* Supplement Series 5 (2006): 49–56.

mainly through parables, and a parable can be actually characterized as a proverb (often an aphorism) in narrative form. His parables are intended to pass on personal insights that, rather like Job and Ecclesiastes, are undermining, even subversive of traditional authority. In many of Jesus's parables, the poor, the outcast, and the unclean become the bearers of truth. I would add that the disciples thus become the "simple" of Proverbs who need "instruction," while the proclaimed authorities become the "fools" who reject, even despise such instruction (see Prov 1:7, 22). As a student of mine once observed, in Luke 11:40 Jesus calls the Pharisees "fools."

The parables are intended to reorient us. The manner of reasoning employed by Jesus in these parables and elsewhere might be designated as wisdom reasoning. Jesus doesn't speak like a traditional prophet. He doesn't use introductions like "Thus says the Lord." Rather he appeals to reason, to logic, to experience, and to nature. Jesus uses irony and paradox—all part of the heritage of wisdom. He does appeal to authority, but that authority is his own, a subject to which I will shortly return.

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Which brings us to a second wisdom form that Jesus uses—the beatitude, as in the Sermon on the Mount. We are told in Matthew 5 that Jesus teaches the crowd from the mountain, beginning:

> *Blessed* are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
> *Blessed* are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
> *Blessed* are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
> *Blessed* are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. (Matt 5:3–6)

When we read a beatitude in the Hebrew Scriptures, we tend to translate the beginning not "blessed is" but rather "happy is." As in Proverbs 28:14, "Happy is the one who is never without fear . . ." What happens when we hear the beatitudes of Jesus not as law but as wisdom? We then ask such questions as "How is this true? What are the implications of this insight?" The beatitudes become disorienting in a different way. And just as interesting as how the sermon begins is how it ends:

> Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these

> words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came . . .
>
> Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes. (Matt 7:24–29)

This final parable and insight that Jesus taught them as one having authority brings us to our final and most significant claim of the New Testament. Teaching is not incidental to who Jesus is. Jesus is not only a wisdom teacher; Jesus is the embodiment of Wisdom (Sophia) herself. I believe that we can observe this claim in all manner of places throughout the New Testament—in Matthew and Mark, in John, in Paul, each one with different emphases and insights that arise from this claim. Once again, I will only give us a glimpse.[9]

In Matthew 11:19, "wisdom [that is, Jesus] is vindicated by her deeds." Her/his yoke is easy, given to those who are weary (11:25–30), taking up the argument, made differently in John, that wisdom is embodied in Jesus as the fulfillment of the law.[10] References abound to both Wisdom and Torah as a yoke (e.g., Sir 6:28–30). I am struck by Matthew's addition of sages and scribes alongside prophets as those who will be killed and crucified (23:34).

In Luke 7:35, "wisdom [Jesus] is vindicated by all her children," rather than her deeds. Interestingly, this comes after a comment about whom Jesus eats with. In Proverbs 9, Wisdom sends out a call and then sets her table for the simple, inviting them into the way of insight. Rather than "You are what you eat," with Jesus the more accurate saying would be "You are who you eat with." Jesus feasts, not with the deserving and the wise, but with the poor and the outcast, the unclean, the undeserving, and the sinners. The banqueting and feasting imagery of Woman Wisdom is quite intentionally evoked and then turned on its head.

John's claim that Jesus is incarnate Wisdom is all over his gospel. The opening chapter, which reads like a hymn to Wisdom beginning with the Word being with God in the beginning (see Prov 8, Sir 24, and Wis 9) and ending with the claim that Jesus, not Torah, gives grace and truth. In John Jesus is identified as the bread of life (6:35); the light of the world (8:12); the gate (10:9); the way, the truth, and the life (14:6); and the true vine (15:1), all of which have connections with Woman Wisdom. Clearly, John's view of Jesus—his Christology, if you will—is intimately connected with Jesus being incarnate Wisdom.

And finally, Paul has his own take on the identity of Jesus and Wisdom. One of the best places to see his approach is found in 1 Corinthian 1:17–25:

> For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

[9] I have written about this in considerably more detail in Diane Jacobson, "Jesus as Wisdom in the New Testament," *The Quest for Jesus and the Christian Faith*, *Word & World* Supplement Series 3 (1997), 72–93.

[10] The argument that Wisdom is Torah is very much present in Proverbs, some wisdom psalms, Sirach, and Wisdom of Solomon.

> For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart."
>
> Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of our proclamation to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

As I hope we all can hear, Wisdom is being redefined by Paul. His claim has a different flavor from that of Matthew and Luke or even John. His emphasis is not on *Jesus* being Wisdom; his emphasis is on *Christ crucified* being and revealing wisdom. This distinction is crucial for Paul. It has been assumed in much of the tradition that wisdom at some level made sense, but Paul speaks of wisdom as foolishness. We are taken back to Ecclesiastes and Job. What would make sense is God judging the world as it deserves, God ruling the world by discernible and logical laws—by Torah, if you will. But instead, God turns the meaning of the world inside out and views the truth of the world through the lens and the efficacy of the cross. Foolishness becomes wisdom, and wisdom becomes strength.

Enough said, though of course there is more. Suffice it to say that the biblical wisdom tradition is crucial to our Scripture and to our faith. ⊕

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