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Wisdom in Looking to Green

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In Richard Powers's Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *The Overstory*, character Patricia Westerford is introduced through a dialogue with her father. Agriculture extension agent Bill Westerford tours southwestern Ohio sharing his lived knowledge of trees with his precocious daughter, regularly pulling over to revel in the "oblique miracles that green can devise." "People," he says, "have no corner on curious behavior. Other creatures—bigger, slower, older, more durable—call the shots, make the weather, feed creation, and create the very air." Heeding the lessons of her father alongside those of marcescent leaves during a midwestern winter, Patricia reflects:

> Real joy consists of knowing that human wisdom counts less than the shimmer of beeches in a breeze. As certain as weather coming from the west, the things people know for sure will change. There is no knowing *for a fact*. The only dependable things are humility and looking.[1]

To Patricia, a character who goes on to earn a doctorate in forestry and make landmark discoveries in tree communication, it is the trees that embody wisdom.

[1] Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018), 115.

As Genesis explains, humanity fell into sin and alienation from God and from creation. But perhaps the wisdom from God that we seek can, in part, be found in God's creation. We seek wisdom as a possession, when perhaps we should rather think of it as a way of being, especially being in relation to God and God's created order.

Stranger than fiction, it turns out trees are truly wise in a sense. Indigenous carriers of traditional ecological knowledge have long said as much, and contemporary arboriculturalists studying a variety of tree species now concur that trees regularly act as discerning agents.[2] Coniferous and deciduous alike, individuals and entire communities of trees skillfully apply varied forms of knowledge. Under stress of pestilence, oaks produce just the right measure of toxic tannins and willows produce precise amounts of salicylic acid to ward off enemies, all while maintaining internal homeostasis. Douglas firs self-graft beneath the earth to feed and heal each other, pooling their resources and metabolites in underground treasure chests. Mast fruiting trees like pecans and apples flourish mutually and secure their survival by selectively partnering with fungal mycorrhizae, which distribute the wealth of carbohydrates to trees most in need.

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Pausing to absorb the meaning of such marvels may prompt any of us to understand Scripture's trees in a whole new light and lead us to consider the ways our spiritual ancestors have interpreted these powerful life forces. We might take further note of how tamarisk, oaks, and palms memorialize God's faithfulness throughout the Torah; in contrast to cairns of stone, they are said to be living ebenezers (Gen 21:33; 35:8; Exod 15:27). We ought to recall Second Isaiah's groves of interconnected cedar, acacia, and cypress, which repeatedly serve as reminders of God's goodness (Isa 41:19–20; 60:12–13). So too we can notice afresh how warnings against deforestation (Deut 20:19–20; Rev 18:9–17) couple with metaphors of life springing forth from olive tree stumps (Job 14:7; Isa 11:1; Hos 14:5—6) to make plain the true source of hope. And of course, there are myriad references to the Tree of Life (Dan 4:10–12; Ezek 47:12; Prov 3:18; Rev 22:2), known to have healing power and provide sustenance for all of creation. Indeed, if we read the Scriptures as a kind of environmental narrative—that is, a way of understanding how the ancients both interpreted and constructed meaning from their ecological realities—trees loom large and offer many lessons. Time and again they prove resourceful in drought, resilient in the face of violence, collaborative and fecund in especially diverse landscapes, and generous with the many ecological services they offer.

[2] Peter Wohlleben offers a helpful, popular resource with an overview of the unfolding science, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate* (Berkeley: Greystone, 2015). Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed, 2015) is flush with examples from Anishinaabe traditions.

Yet the church's attention in and through doctrine, catechesis, liturgy, practice, and the like has seemingly focused upon one tree above all others: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In the Jahwist creation account, earthkin Adam (a close literal translation of *Adam* is "human of the dirt") freely delights in Eden's utopian foliage, staved off only by a warning to avoid the fruit of this particular tree: "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat" (Gen 2:16–17). Given the merism of "good and evil" here, the forbidden tree is widely understood as a literary stand-in for true knowledge or wisdom, which explains why it is simply referred to as the Tree of Knowledge or the Tree of Wisdom in many early theological works.[3] In some way this organism of canopy and roots, thought to be a material tree rather than a symbolic one in most Jewish and Christian commentary, embodies a breadth and scope of knowledge that is beyond human capacity. As Theophilus, a second-century patriarch of Antioch, notes:

> The tree of knowledge was good and its fruit was good. For it was not the tree, as some think, but the disobedience, which had death in it. For there was nothing else in the fruit than only knowledge; but knowledge is good when one uses it discreetly. But Adam, being yet an infant in age, was on this account as yet unable to receive knowledge worthily.[4]

Taking Theophilus's distinction into consideration, as well as the call to receive knowledge worthily, it remains puzzling to me why most historical and contemporary renderings of Genesis 1–3 fail to read the Tree of Wisdom as a subject within the narrative.[5] It seems the fruit quite literally remains the apple of an interpreter's eye and, by contrast, the tree a mere resource, significant to the extent that it conceives the taboo produce responsible for animating the *real* point of the story—an explanation of sin's wages. It is as if the genitive construction in Genesis 2 flags the tree's capacity to be a storehouse of wisdom rather than a source of it, a kind of vessel or the means by which one accesses wisdom. To use common contemporary language, the tree is merely a natural resource, nothing more. Even though the rules of Hebrew grammar debunk such a reading, the tendency to overlook the tree's subjectivity while underemphasizing human dependence upon its life is indicative of Western Christianity's perennial use of

[3] See, for example, Irenaeus, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:457, and Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 20, and John of Damascus, *De Fide Orthodoxa 2:11*.

[4] Theophilus, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:104. Throughout this passage Theophilus exclusively refers to knowledge as *sapientia*, often regarded as applied/lived knowledge. In his day and in the Medieval/Scholastic traditions that would later emerge, *sapientia* differs from knowledge as *scientia*. The latter was commonly understood as knowledge derived from demonstrable data.

[5] Several ecohermeneutical methods champion this exegetical vantage, disavowing the subject/object binaries replete within biblical studies in particular and the environmental humanities in general. Commentaries within the Earth Bible Series are key among these approaches. See *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008). In the case of Genesis 1–3, see essays 2–5 in Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst, eds., *The Earth Story in Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000). While some center the experience of the tree, all intentionally subjectivize the other-than-human, including Earth, water, serpent, etc.

erroneous and detrimental "mental categories."[6] Tragically, the classification of life into silos of human and nonhuman has undermined the accessibility and efficacy of creation's wisdom.

An anthropocentric reading of the text and the resulting focus upon the effects of the fruit over and above the character of the tree impact theological discourse on wisdom, which, although varied in emphasis (speculative vs. practical, innate, spiritual gift, etc.), has largely focused on the cultivation or giftedness of *human* knowledge. In Augustinian terms, Genesis 3's original sin of greedy consumption has marred the intellect or human ability to discern, just as it has also perverted the moral fiber of human being, marking a tragic "fall from love." In Luther's words, human understanding has become darkened:

> . . . so that we no longer know God and His will and no longer perceive the works of God . . . so that we do not trust the mercy of God and do not fear God but are unconcerned, disregard the Word and will of God, and follow the desire and the impulses of the flesh; likewise, that our conscience is no longer quiet but, when it thinks of God's judgement, despairs and adopts illicit defenses and remedies.[7]

Therefore, life in lapsarian context is characterized in part by the human quest to regain wisdom one way or another. In some theological traditions this has included the cultivation of prudence, the foremost intellectual virtue in scholastic Thomism, for example. In Pauline terms prudence might ripen to become a fruit of its own, although habitually fostered rather than unscrupulously taken as in the case of the infamous apple. In this respect, prudence is useful and can be called upon to make sense of creation's wonders as well as humans' perpetual violation of them. When it comes to living lightly on Earth, prudence is knowing the difference between what is needful and what is not, and therefore guides other virtues such as temperance, the moderation of appetites. Consequently, prudence can counsel our consumption and fuel our capacity for gratitude, which can in turn generate reciprocity and generosity, virtues so beautifully modeled by trees and other plants. Weaving within and around all other virtues and circling back

[6] This phrase comes from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's *The Divine Milieu* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001). Teilhard believed that the attention of science to the smallest detail of the physical world made the mind more radically open to God. In his estimation, science and spirituality share a common goal, an unremitting attention to details. To bracket them off in separate spheres is to artificially impose "mental categories" upon life. Research in the natural world (*scientia*) can wean us from preconceptions to which we would otherwise cling and open us to the unimagined dimensions of God.

[7] Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535), in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–), 1:114. Just paragraphs earlier Luther cites ecological harmony and human immortality as the original intent of creation. Adam (read: human) had all that was needed from the trees. Luther writes, "There was not yet any sin, because God did not create sin. Therefore, if Adam had obeyed this command, he would never have died; for death came through sin. Thus, the remaining trees of Paradise were all created for the purpose of helping man and maintaining his physical life sound and unimpaired" (1:111).

to itself, prudence expands and deepens over time much like the spatial rings of a tree that travel forth in years.

Alternative theological variations on wisdom focus more on the primeval need for divine vision than on the human development of something like it. From this theocentric vantage, what makes someone wise is acknowledgment of their utter dependence upon God. Here the apostle Paul's countercultural reference to the wisdom of the cross readily comes to mind, in contrast to the foolishness of those who claim to have no need of Christ. Within the Protestant tradition, wherein this form of wisdom is arguably most emphasized, the Holy Spirit makes the recognition of need possible and in so doing serves as Wisdom's envoy.[8] Whether in the quickening of humility or in the gift of vision itself, it is therefore divine Wisdom who initiates the human process of becoming wise and who serves as the standard by which wisdom is measured.[9] In today's Anthropocene—a proposed and contested new ecological epoch named for human impact on Earth's systems—wisdom might therefore be characterized as the ability to see planetary realities for what they are, and with stubborn hope envision what they might otherwise be.

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However, another conceptualization of wisdom presents if we read Scripture as a kind of environmental narrative, and in particular the Edenic Tree of Knowledge as an actual subject within the "creation and fall" account. Here beyond virtue or gift, wisdom parades as a way of relating under the premise that one's essence (*esse*) is perpetually and necessarily bound by another's. Wisdom as a way of being, as something one *is* rather than something one *has*, is therefore by no means limited to the human realm. In, with, and under its rhytidome the Tree of Knowledge embodies a spectrum of good and evil, relating one to another and everything in between in a manner that ultimately results in plenty rather than scarcity, fruit in place of death. And perhaps the lessons of this mythical tree shouldn't surprise us, for those paying attention in ancient and contemporary contexts alike know (*sapientia*) giving and receiving to be the very stuff and way of trees. How ironic

[8] The first two chapters of 1 Corinthians tease out the differences between wisdom and foolishness, explicitly linking the former with the work of the Spirit. See 1 Corinthians 2:8, 10–13 in particular.

[9] A great deal more can and should be said about divine Wisdom and its relationship to Spirit, although this lies beyond the purview of this brief essay. A few critical works examining wisdom theologies and their close connection to wisdom Christologies include Niels Henrik Gregersen, ed., *Incarnation: On the Depth and Scope of Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015); Denis Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995); and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet* (New York: Continuum International, 1994).

it is that arboriculture, another form of knowledge (*scientia*), now verifies what culturally wise keepers of indigenous knowledge have long proclaimed.

Thankfully, in spheres of Christian ecohermeneutics recognition of the other-than-human's voice within the text is becoming increasingly common, as is the reclamation of past, lesser-known biblical commentary that we might now regard as ecocentric. Likewise, Christian theologies—collectively a discipline tethered to biblical studies by its influence upon the hermeneutical task as well as its response to hermeneutical enterprise—are also more readily affirming the agency of earth-kin. This is manifest in both emergent works and a renaissance of yesteryear's under-examined readings. For example, in theologies of becoming, many heavily influenced by principles of deep ecology, God is regarded as the subjective force under which creation evolves rather than as an object above or beside the material world. Primevally and presumptively immanent, God is the Source of order and the Fount of creative-responsive love. As such, divine Wisdom is characterized by creation's revelry and fecundity, making lesser and partial human wisdom fundamentally reliant upon creation. It is not that humans bring to bear upon "nature" some privileged form of wisdom *vis-à-vis* a redemptive theology of *creatio imago Dei,* but rather that humans witness wisdom and have cause to testify to it through nature's organisms, systems, and cultures. "Wisdom sits in places" and is cultivated through deep, sustained attention to the lives that constitute place.[10]

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But what does it mean to truly pay attention, to notice, and to heed? Is attending to creation's simple, subtle, and slow wisdom even possible in today's denitrified and rapidly modified context? And what are we to make of Jean Paul Sartre's demanding admonition that we only notice what we already know, or Aldo Leopold's softer notion that we only care for places we've once learned about? Are we not in the very predicament of Eve and Adam with apple in hand, questing for knowledge toward the aim of self-importance over and above any shared sense of interdependence? In response to these questions, it is important to mark the substantive relationship between attention and wonder, and between wonder and humility. Surely we will miss the trees, their splendor and "oblique miracles of

[10] The phrase "wisdom sits in places" comes from Keith Basso's acclaimed article on Apache conceptions of place: "Wisdom Sits in Places: Notes on a Western Apache Landscape," in *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basson (Sante Fe, NM: School of American Research, 1996). In the article, Basso interviews Apache elder Dudley Patterson, who repeatedly insists on the integration of place and wisdom. Wisdom, Patterson argues, cannot be separated from place because it is fundamentally a way of re-membering our relationship to Earth (76).

green," if we insist upon acting and living out the telltale narrative of the "fall." If we remain distracted by knowledge as power through increasingly affluent and frenetic lifestyles, for example, we will have little space to contemplate that which we do not know.[11] That is, we will have no margin for wonder, no currency for questions. And in this anemic state of self-inflation and illusionary grandeur, surely we shall have no fear of God's reprisal, repeatedly cited within biblical wisdom literature as the effective beginning of all wisdom (Prov 1:7).

On the contrary, if in keeping with the Scriptures we classify ourselves as small, needful, a mist here today and gone tomorrow (Jas 4:14), we may wonder why and how it is that we dwell among these wooden giants, species that existed well before us and will stand long after our bodily passage and return to the earth. In humility, we may look to Earth's lungs and wonder more, wonder longer about how they do what they do. And in our wondering, perhaps our attention will fall not just upon the trees, but upon Wisdom itself.

In closing, I'd like to briefly share the insights of a Christian exemplar, one who asked and stayed with the questions of "nature" and Scripture, inhabiting attentive wonder and thus growing in wisdom. Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth-century German Benedictine abbess and mystic, had a deep and profound relationship with trees, writing of them often in her poems, songs, botanical writings, and theological visions. With little knowledge of their biological processes by today's standards, she regarded their greening power as nothing short of Wisdom itself. This "Sibyl of the German Rhine," acclaimed as a healer and knowledgeable herbalist within and beyond the church, understood the greening, or *veriditas*, as a divine vitality and animating power of God in all of creation. In Hildegard's vision of the Cosmic Tree pictured in the mandala above, humans are depicted as wholly dependent upon the natural world—cradled within it, in fact. Throughout the vision, trees play an especially important role, girding and sustaining creaturely existence. In the vision's explication of what it is to be a human animal, trees serve as the paragons. It is they that prove constant, dependable, and wise. As we can see in the artistic rendering of the vision, the forest upholds the heavens and supports the firmament of Earth, collectively enthroning the God of fire who sparks, emanates, and circles round, holding all life in circular union.

In her explanation of the vision, Hildegard reminds the believer, "How would God be known as life if not through the fact that the realm of the living, which

[11] I have greatly benefited from the insights of creative nonfiction writer Eula Biss when considering the impact of increased widespread affluence and related patterns of hyperproductivity, accumulation, and consumption. Her recent work *Having and Being Had* (New York: Riverhead, 2020) is a revelatory primer on these matters, describing at length our stymied ability to pay attention to the life that surrounds us.

glorifies and praises God, also emerges from God?"[12] Describing the radiance of God as seed and bud, she speaks of the branches and fruits of the trees as virtues, forms of cosmic power. These *primordiales causae* are not housed within any individual being, however, and certainly not exclusively in humans, but rather in one tree's relationship to another, in the *oikos* they create and share. These virtues, Hildegard explains in yet another vision, radiate the light of the Logos and collectively build the limbs of Christ's beautiful, resurrected body. Wisdom, Christ incarnate, is therefore not merely accessible *through* the tree as is often the reading of Genesis 2, but is in fact present *within* it. And it is to this Wisdom that Hildegard earnestly prays in humility:

> O most noble Greenness, rooted in the sun, shining forth in streaming splendor upon the wheel of Earth. No earthly sense of being can comprehend you. You are encircled by the very arms of Divine mysteries. You are radiant like the red of dawn! You glow like the incandescence of the sun![13]

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[12] Hildegard of Bingen, *Book of Divine Works with Letters and Songs*, ed. Matthew Fox (Santa Fe, NM: Bear, 1987), 86.

[13] This text is from one of Hildegard's published hymns, "*Item de Virginibus*," found in *Book of Divine Works*,374–75.