



Jesus: God's Wisdom

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In 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, St. Paul links the pursuit of wisdom with the Greeks. Jews seek “signs” of God’s activity and power. Both, he argues, are part of the human quest for knowledge or salvation that has been rendered “folly” by God’s true wisdom, Christ crucified. The Corinthians were evidently captivated by a spirituality which held that the spirit breathed into the human at creation made a union with God through wisdom possible. They seem to have concluded that Christianity had provided them with the perfection that this mystical interpretation of wisdom tradition promised. Paul retorts that they were not “noble” when God called them (1 Cor 1:26-31) and their conduct shows that they are still fleshly and immature, not “perfect ones” as they claim (3:1-4). While the Corinthians pride themselves on their spiritual “kingship,” the sufferings of the apostle show what it truly means to be a Christian, to be “the refuse of the world” (4:8-13).¹ The apostle insists that salvation through the cross calls human standards of wisdom, even those grounded in religious speculation, into question. In what sense then can Christians claim that Christ embodies divine Wisdom?

I. WISDOM SPECULATION IN JUDAISM

The wisdom spirituality which Paul rejects at Corinth fits the pattern of wisdom speculation that we find in the first century Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria. For Philo, God is a transcendent being. God’s power is mediated to creation through the divine Word (*logos*) or divine Wisdom (*sophia*). Philo used Word and Wisdom interchangeably. The souls of the great “wise men” of Israel,

¹See the treatment of the Corinthian spirituality in Richard A. Horsley, “Spiritual Marriage with Sophia,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 33 (1979) 30-54; and Birger A. Pearson, “Hellenistic-Jewish Wisdom Speculation and Paul,” *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Robert L. Wilken (Notre Dame; University of Notre Dame, 1975) 43-66.

Abraham and Moses, were united to the Word/Wisdom. In that way they had become “friends of God,” were able to speak to God boldly in prayer, and had turned their vision away from the perishable things of earth to the divine realities of heaven. Philo’s synthesis brought together the Old Testament heritage with the most profound insights of Greek philosophy. Another Alexandrian writing from close to the same period, Wisdom of Solomon (found among the Old Testament apocrypha), shows other elements in the Jewish assimilation of “Wisdom.” Wisdom is the divine power through which God has created and maintains the universe. She is also embodied in the Law, which makes the souls of the righteous holy. She is the image, reflection,

spotless mirror of God, who can do all things (e.g., Wisdom 7:22-8:1).

These examples suggest that Wisdom speculation had its impact on those who were attempting to understand the value of their Jewish heritage in the context of Greek culture and learning. But there was another motive at work in the emergence of the figure of “Lady Wisdom” manifesting God in creation, the struggle with idolatry. Wisdom 13:1-19 (much like St. Paul in Rom 1:18-32) contrasts the folly of Greeks worshipping the stars, planets, or hand-painted idols with the true glory of the creator who is responsible for the beauty of the cosmic order. One of the most powerful figures of “cosmic order” in the first and second centuries A.D. was the Hellenized Egyptian goddess, Isis. She claimed to control the fates, the stars, to be worshipped under many names, and to be responsible for the “order” of the cultural achievements of humanity as well as protectress of humans in distress. Her cult spread from Egypt throughout the Mediterranean. Archaeologists have uncovered remains of her temple complex in the seaport at Corinth. A popular novel of the second century, Apuleius’ *Golden Ass*, ends with a dramatic description of the author’s conversion and initiation into the mysteries of Isis in what may be that same complex. Many scholars have pointed out that the presentation of God’s Wisdom as a powerful, feminine figure operating throughout creation provided a counter-balance to this attractive cult.

What then of Christianity? Does the paradox of the cross cut off all possibility of a similar assimilation of Wisdom? One can think immediately of one example in which it did not, the presentation of Jesus as the Word in John 1:1-18.² We also find Paul himself quoting formulae which indicate that Christ is the mediator of God’s creative power (e.g., 1 Cor 8:6). These examples already suggest one of the most pressing reasons for early Christians to speak of Jesus as divine Wisdom, the need to express the sense in which Jesus is “God” and not merely an inspired, human religious figure.

II. WISDOM: GOD’S ESCHATOLOGICAL GIFT IN JESUS

The sayings of the wise were a common form of wisdom in antiquity. The book of Proverbs combines such a collection of wise sayings with the figure of Wisdom (e.g., Prov 8:1-36). The wise are those who heed the summons of Lady Wisdom. Their wisdom is her gift, not a human achievement. At the same time,

²For a brief survey of New Testament wisdom christology, see Reginald H. Fuller and PHEME PERKINS, *Who Is This Christ?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 53-66.

the universality of Wisdom’s activity in creation suggests that her summons goes out to all, but most do not respond. In the pseudepigraphical apocalypse *I Enoch*, we find this failure embodied in a new “story” of Wisdom. She sought a dwelling with humanity, but finding none returned to heaven. Humans welcomed Iniquity instead:

Wisdom could not find a place in which she could dwell; but a place was found for her in the heavens. Then Wisdom went out to dwell with the children of the people, but she found no dwelling place. So Wisdom returned to her place and she settled among the angels. Then Iniquity went out of her rooms, and found whom she did not expect. And she dwelt with them, like rain in a desert, like dew on a

thirsty land.³

In this apocalyptic adaptation of the wisdom story, Wisdom is hidden in heaven. Only the righteous few have access to her. Possession of wisdom is associated with belonging to the elect. Collections of Jesus' sayings circulated among early Christians. One such collection, called "Q" by scholars, apparently underlies the sayings material that Matthew and Luke share. Another collection developed into the second century A.D. gnostic collection known as the *Gospel of Thomas*. The introduction to the collection presents the words of the Living (= resurrected) Jesus as the source of eternal life.⁴ Scholars have found that the Q material pictures Jesus as the envoy of Wisdom. He speaks wisdom as God's eschatological prophet. Matthew 11:25-27/Luke 10:21-22 describes the wisdom hidden from the so-called wise persons, which Jesus has given to his disciples. Only those who "listen to Wisdom" know the true identity of Jesus, her spokesperson.⁵

Comparisons of wisdom sayings found in both Matthew and Luke have shown that Matthew's Gospel develops the connection between Jesus and Wisdom even further. Jesus, Sophia's spokesperson, is pictured as Wisdom herself speaking to humanity. The simile of the children in the marketplace concludes with a wisdom saying (Luke 7:35/Matt 11:19). Luke 7:35 speaks of Wisdom being justified by her "children," that is, her spokespersons like Jesus and John the Baptist. Turning to Matthew 11:19 we find "deeds" instead of children in the saying. This version tells the reader of the gospel that Jesus is the one who does Wisdom's deeds. Or turn to the saying about the yoke in Matthew 11:28-30. This saying is a variant of a wisdom saying found in the apocryphal Old Testament writing Sirach. There Wisdom summons people to draw close to her; dwell in her school, and put themselves under her yoke, and they will discover that they have gained much rest (Sir 51:23-27). Matthew has Jesus speaking these words instead of Wisdom. Luke 11:49 preserves another wisdom saying in which Israel is condemned for rejecting and killing Wisdom's messengers. Matthew 23:34 has converted this saying into an oracle of doom

³*1 Enoch* 42, 1-3; quoted from *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed James H. Charlesworth (2 vols.; Garden City: Doubleday, 1983-84) 1:33 [translation of *1 Enoch* by E. Isaac].

⁴"And he said, 'Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death'" (*Gospel of Thomas* 1). Quoted from *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977) 118 [translation of *Gos. Thorn.* by T. O. Lambdin].

⁵See James M. Robinson, "Jesus as Sophos and Sophia: Wisdom Tradition and the Gospels," *Aspects of Wisdom*, ed. R. L. Wilken, 1-16.

spoken by Jesus himself. Jesus becomes the one who has sent "prophets and wise men and scribes."

The subtle shifts in Matthew's use of the wisdom sayings from his tradition show that the evangelist identifies Jesus' words and deeds with Wisdom. The apocalyptic theme of Wisdom's withdrawal is preserved in a Q tradition of the Lament over Jerusalem (Matt 23:37-39/Luke 13:34-35). Matthew uses this lament in the sequence of woes that includes 23:34. There is no question that he associates the withdrawal of Wisdom/Jesus from a hostile people as the prelude to the divine judgment against Jerusalem. By identifying Jesus as Wisdom, Matthew has made it clear that his words and deeds are not simply those of the long chain of prophets and wise persons sent by Wisdom. They must be understood as Wisdom herself speaking and acting.

III. PRE-EXISTENT WISDOM: GOD REVEALED IN CHRIST

Jewish traditions celebrated Wisdom's eternal presence with God. Proverbs 8:22-31 pictures God creating Wisdom before beginning the creation of the earth. She is God's assistant in creation. Wisdom 7:22-8:1 speaks of her in terms that recall the way in which Stoic philosophers spoke of the divine "spirit" out of which the cosmos was fashioned and which pervades the whole universe to hold it together. At the same time Wisdom is the image of God:

For in her there is a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, loving the good, keen, irresistible, beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent and pure and most subtle. For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness. Though she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things....For she is more beautiful than the sun and excels every constellation of the stars. Compared with the light she is found to be superior, for it is succeeded by the night, but against wisdom evil does not prevail. She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other and orders all things well.

We find such visions of Wisdom emerging in brief formulae like 1 Corinthians 8:6, which speak of Christ's role in ordering or sustaining God's creation, and in longer passages which appear to be taken from early Christian hymns. Some exegetes have also found appeals to Wisdom tradition in some of Paul's imagery. For example, 1 Corinthians 10:4 identifies the Rock which followed the Israelites in the desert with Christ. Jewish midrashic traditions found in *Wisdom* (10:17-18; 11:4) and Philo link the Rock with Wisdom. She is the mediator of divine salvation throughout the story of Israel. Paul's exegesis in 1 Corinthians 19:4 has put Christ in her place.⁶ The substitution of Christ for the Torah in Paul's interpretation of Deuteronomy 30:12-14 (Rom 10:6-7) may also have been

⁶See Hans Conzelman, *1 Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 166-67.

mediated by Wisdom traditions which identified the Torah and Wisdom such as at Baruch 3:29-30.⁷ Both of these examples are typological. Paul wishes to show his readers that the Scriptures spoke of the salvation which they have experienced in Christ. Scholars are sharply divided over the question of whether or not Paul would have spoken of Christ as revealing God to earlier generations as some later Christian writers would do, or if he even thought of God's Wisdom becoming incarnate in Jesus.⁸

We have seen that Paul spoke of Christ crucified as the "wisdom of God." The presupposition for any link between Christ and Wisdom in Paul's thought is the crucifixion and exaltation of the crucified to God's right hand. One of the earliest christological hymns, Philippians 2:6-11, makes this pattern of humiliation/exaltation evident. There is a three-part action presupposed by the passage: (1) a state of equality with or likeness to God, which Christ

does not “grasp” or “exploit to his advantage” (the translation of the Greek word *harpagmos* is difficult in 2:6); (2) an “emptying” in which his likeness to God is traded for the lowest human form, that of the obedient slave (2:7-8), and a subsequent “super-exaltation” by which God has exalted Jesus over all the powers of the cosmos and bestowed the divine name “Lord” upon him (2:9-11). Most interpreters agree that Paul is quoting an established hymn into which he has inserted the identification of the humiliation of the obedient slave with death on the cross (2:8) and perhaps the formulaic description of the location of the powers in 2:10.

Clearly the exaltation of the crucified at the end of the hymn does not leave any room for some other mediating power between Jesus, now worshipped as “Lord,” and God. Nor has Jesus been divinized by some form of post-resurrection merger with divine Wisdom. The exegetical question focuses on 2:6. Either this verse is speaking of Wisdom, the preexistent image of God, or an alternate interpretation has to be found for “being in the likeness of God.” The most common alternative is to suggest that the hymn was thinking of the “likeness of God” borne by Adam before the fall. As a sinless person, Christ would not have had to share the lot of suffering and death that faces other humans, but chose to exemplify his obedience to God in so doing. Thus Christ reversed the fall of Adam. Heated arguments are waged on both sides. The text itself is too ambiguous to declare for one view or the other.

The hymn in Philippians 2:6-11, however, can be seen as abridge to the more explicit identifications of Christ and God’s creative Wisdom that we find in other hymnic passages. Colossians 1:15-20—also from Pauline circles—describes Christ’s role in creation (1:15-18a) and then in redemption (1:18b-20). Influence of Wisdom tradition is immediately evident. Christ is “image of the invisible God,” “first born of all creation,” and the one in whom all things were created. Wisdom language also shapes the description of Christ in the second half of the hymn. He is again “first born”—this time “from the dead”—that is, the begin-

⁷See Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 288-90.

⁸For a sustained argument against any form of “pre-existence” theology in Paul, see James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 167-96; for counter-arguments to Dunn, see Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Law and Wisdom from Ben Sira to Paul* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 2/16; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1985) 236-64.

ning of a new creation. The term “fulness” may also have been taken from a wisdom background (e.g., Prov 8:12-14; Baruch 3:38; Wisdom 24:4-11). Again the Pauline note that the cross is the central point of redemption has been added to the notice of cosmic reconciliation in 1:20.

Colossians 1:15-20 focuses on the parallelism between God’s Wisdom in creation and in salvation. All creation is held together by Wisdom; all things are reconciled to God in Christ, the “fulness of God.” The narrative dynamic of humiliation/exaltation that we saw in Philippians 2:6-11 is missing. The hymn in Hebrews 1:3-4 follows the narrative pattern; (a) the preexistent image of God is described (1:3ab); (b) he made purification for sins (1:3c; by his death); and (c) he is seated at the right hand of God, exalted above the angels with a name that much greater than theirs (1:3c-4; for Hebrews the name is “Son”). The opening description clearly derives from the tradition of Wisdom as God’s image. But that cosmological relationship is not part of the soteriology of the hymn as it is in Colossians. Both Philippians and Hebrews develop their soteriology from the perspective of Christ’s obedient self-offering in death and subsequent

glorification to the right hand of God.

Our final example of the hymnic use of Wisdom appears in the prologue to John. Verses 1:1-5, 9-12, 14, and 16 embody hymnic material with some expansions. (Reconstructions of the original hymn differ.⁹) Exegetes are also divided over where the description of the creative activity of the Word ends and soteriology begins. With the reference to the Word “dwelling among us” in 1:14, the hymn has clearly shifted to this dimension. The section on the Word’s coming and rejection, except by those destined to be children of God, will be exemplified in the story of Jesus that unfolds in the gospel. But the same pattern could have originally been derived from the apocalyptic tradition of Wisdom’s descent and rejection. Instead of speaking of “wisdom,” however, the Fourth Gospel speaks of the “Word” of God. Philo uses Word and Wisdom interchangeably. The author of the Johannine hymn may have employed “Word,” a masculine noun, as a more appropriate term for a male subject than the feminine noun “Wisdom” or may simply have been dependent upon a Jewish tradition in which “Word” was used exclusively for the divine power which mediated between the transcendent God and the created world.

The gospel narrative spells out the unique relationship between Jesus and God in terms of Sonship rather than in the wisdom categories of God and the divine Word/Wisdom image. However, the soteriology of the prologue (which is closest to the wisdom traditions of any of the New Testament hymns) is maintained throughout the gospel. Salvation comes to those who believe in Jesus, the only revelation of God. The gospel itself is structured on the pattern of Jesus’ descent from God and return to the glory of God after completing his mission of revealing God to those who are chosen to be “children of God.” The cross is not the moment of divine humiliation, but the hour of Jesus’ “being lifted up” in returning to his Father. The Fourth Gospel gives narrative embodiment to a christology in which God’s creative Wisdom/Word has become incarnate. God’s revelation is exclusively identified with the person of Jesus. The radical nature of

⁹See the relatively conservative reconstruction in J. Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 239-40.

this identification is not lost on the evangelist or his readers, since charges of blasphemy are leveled at Jesus (and indirectly at the Christians) throughout the public ministry of Jesus (chapters 5-12), which concludes with the Wisdom image of light withdrawing from a hostile world (12:35-50). During these disputes Jesus even lays claim to the most exalted divine name of all, the “I Am” (cf. 8:28, 58). He is the one “seen” by Abraham and the prophets.

With the Fourth Gospel, Wisdom/Word christology has become the vehicle for the explicit affirmation that Jesus is “God” (cf. 20:28-29). Further, Jesus reveals God in his person; he has not merely been exalted to a divine status after his death. But that recognition carried with it a danger, which is only implicit in the narrative of the gospel, a danger of reducing the humanity of Jesus to insignificance. Wisdom must reveal God to her followers. Her summons leads them to a heavenly destiny, not an earthly one. In this pattern of salvation, the humanity of Jesus becomes simply a means for conveying that revelation into this world. It apparently did not take long for such a reductionist view of the humanity and suffering death of Jesus to appear in Johannine circles. The first and second Epistles of John warn against a dissident group of Johannine Christians who deny that Jesus “came in the flesh” (e.g., 1 John 4:2; 2 John 7). First

John's emphasis on the atoning blood of Jesus suggests that the opponents also rejected the significance of Jesus' death for forgiveness of sin (e.g., 1 John 1:7; 5:6-9). This controversy points up the tension between a Wisdom christology which most naturally implies a soteriology based on divine self-revelation, on the one hand, and the atonement soteriology which grows out of the christology of the obedient, suffering servant. It also points to the dilemmas which required the formulation of the classical christological statements.¹⁰

IV. BEYOND ANDROCENTRISM: WISDOM CHRISTOLOGY TODAY

The classical christological affirmations adopted the language of the Johannine tradition: Jesus as Incarnate Word; Jesus as divine Son. Accustomed to speak of Jesus' relationship with God in this way, Christians lost sight of the origins of that tradition in the feminine figure of God's creative Wisdom. But as feminist theologians have sought images to broaden our concept of God beyond the explicitly power-oriented and patriarchal models of God as father, warrior, and king, they have turned to Wisdom christology as a resource.¹¹

Earliest Christianity was not limited to male-gendered images even when speaking about the activity of Jesus, as the Matthean identification of Jesus and Wisdom shows. Certain activities of God in creation, joyous celebration of the created order, sustaining that order, and even self-revelation were better imagined in the feminine terms of Wisdom than in the more dominant masculine traits of father, warrior, or king. Wisdom's revelation summons all persons to become children of God. Ethnic, racial, cultural, or sexual differences between

¹⁰See R. H. Fuller and P. Perkins, *Who Is This Christ?*, 121-34.

¹¹See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 187-93; Elizabeth E. A. Johnson, "Jesus, The Wisdom of God: A Biblical Basis for Non-androcentric Christology," *Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses* 61 (1985) 261-94.

them do not make a difference. What distinguishes persons is their response to the summons of Wisdom. Thus this christology supports an image of the church as "community of disciples" rather than as hierarchical kingdom.

Other theologians have suggested that the quest for justice and liberation could also benefit from a Wisdom christology. The order for which Jesus died was not the status quo but an order of justice based in God's sustaining creativity. Jesus found God sustaining the poor and marginal. He embraced them with the compassion of Wisdom, but did not take up the sword of the warrior god so often pictured in apocalyptic visions of divine justice. Thus Wisdom christology is a challenge to find other sources for speaking of God's justice and renewing power than those embodied in structures of domination and violence. These reflections provide a twentieth-century way of reconciling Wisdom and the cross. The paradox of the cross as God's Wisdom is grounded in a new vision of divine compassion and sustaining power. It challenges us to move beyond the rigid structures of our inherited human wisdoms to find new ways of representing Christ as Wisdom of God for our fragmented and suffering world.