



What Is Wisdom? Who Is She?

DIANE JACOBSON

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

We live in a time when the nature and place of human reason is a subject of considerable controversy. Often human reason is set over against divine revelation and battle lines are drawn between secular humanists and believers in Scripture. Yet there are many among us who despair of this division and look to Scripture itself to find in its pages some insight into the complex relationship between reason and revelation, human and divine. And there, hidden in, with, and under the familiar books of Scripture are insights about insight, and reasoned statements about reason. Thus we turn our attention to the area known as biblical wisdom.

This is a confusing area to many who haven't a clue what all the fuss is about and who have a difficult time figuring out what precisely is meant by the term "wisdom." The truth is, there is not a simple definition nor any scholarly consensus about what is meant by this term; rather, wisdom covers a field or grid of meaning which can be approached from a number of angles.¹

One can confine discussions about wisdom to a specific corpus of literature within Scripture identified as wisdom literature, namely, Proverbs, Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes), Job, a few psalms designated as wisdom psalms, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), and Wisdom of Solomon.² Closely connected with this approach is the view which identifies as wisdom those passages which can be formally identified as proverbs, aphorisms, riddles, instructions, speculative literature, and the like.

One can also speak of wisdom as a certain way of asking questions, of seeking information, of looking at the world and making sense of it. It is away based on experience and observation as opposed to revelation. The goal of this way of wisdom is to figure out what things are, how things work, and how to live happily, successfully, and constructively. Wisdom from this perspective is

¹One of the best thorough introductions to the study and definition of wisdom is found in James Crenshaw, "Prolegomenon," *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, ed. James Crenshaw (New York: KTAV, 1976) 1-60.

²The last two books are found in the Apocrypha, a liquid part of the biblical corpus which has in the history of the church variously been considered to be and not to be part of the canon.

seen as pragmatic, eudemonistic, and humanistic in the sense that human insight is considered to be basically good and trustworthy if used properly. This is the wisdom found in much of Proverbs, but it is found as well scattered throughout other books of the Bible, in literature throughout the Ancient Near East, and in many other cultures both ancient and modern. This

adds a universal quality to wisdom, a quality which adds to the suspicion that it is therefore, at base, unbiblical.

A third way to speak about wisdom is as a particular movement within early Israel, the wisdom movement. Within this definition one speaks of groups of individuals or parts of society which were responsible for the propagation of wisdom. Initially, scholars spoke primarily of royal court wisdom. The royal sages were seen as worldly wise, acquainted with the courts of Egypt and Mesopotamia, men of letters, and political advisors. This notion was later balanced by a notion of clan wisdom, popular wisdom passed on by the local wise women and the village elders. The school is speculated to be another popular province of wisdom. In post-exilic and intertestamental times, the influential scribe is seen as the bearer of the wisdom tradition. While this notion of a particular province of wisdom thinking which has a specific place and influence within society continues to hold some sway, alongside of this must be placed the notion articulated by Roland Murphy:

It is not a question of direct influence of the sages or of the wisdom literature, but rather of an approach to reality which was shared by all Israelites in varying degrees. ...[I]t was shared at all levels of society that interpreted daily experience.³

Finally, one might fruitfully speak of wisdom as an overall view of the world which insists that there is an underlying order to the universe. This order makes possible reasoned observation and provides, at least theoretically, for a balance between the cosmos and all aspects of human existence—a balance which is both good and just. There is a tension within the literature as to whether knowledge of this order is plainly accessible to humans (the view held in most of Proverbs and Sirach) or mysteriously inaccessible (as in Job and Qoheleth). In either case there is, at base, an assumption that such order exists and that God is its source. This leads to the scholarly assertion that belief in the Creator, the one who makes order where there was only chaos, underlies biblical wisdom. Creation thinking is thus wisdom's theological and speculative base.

The presence of wisdom literature and wisdom thought in Scripture has led to any number of interesting observations, questions, and avenues of research. Looking at the list of books identified as wisdom literature, one is struck by the fact that these books lie outside of what most of us have been trained to see as the “central” books of the Old Testament, books found in the Torah and the Prophets. What place do these wisdom writings have in the overall theology of the Bible? How do we deal with books which, though they speak of God, normally do not even mention Israel, the covenant, the temple, or

³Roland Murphy, “Theses and Hypotheses,” *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien*, ed. John Gammie et al. (Missoula: Scholar's, 1977) 39-40.

the kingdom? Their presence in our canon calls into question a view of God's relationship with the world which comes exclusively in terms of a history of salvation.⁴ There is here a different kind of word. One might ask what is revelatory about this word when the words are not themselves about revelation. In working with wisdom in the biblical text, one comes face to face with the issue of the relationship between reason and revelation. It is helpful to ponder the

possibility that part of what is “revealed” here is a model for dealing with the world, a model which rejoices in human capacity to think, observe, and weigh, all the while pushing to understand the relationship of this capacity to divine truth.

At the same time, the artistry and theological depth of the wisdom literature invites us to think differently about the basic nature of human reason and logic. There is, in this biblical wisdom, a marriage of science and poetry. One cannot strip these observations of their form, be it subtle proverb or Jobian dialog, and expect there to be a raw extractable message. In biblical wisdom, observation stripped of the poetic form is not a true reflection of the world. Moreover, these observations are never neutral; rather, they reverberate with moral, ethical, and theological implications. Present in these biblical observations are a range of emotions from ecstasy to pathos, a keen sense of irony, a profound notion of human limitation, and, above all, an articulated awareness of divine presence and influence. This marked difference between modern science and biblical wisdom must be taken into account in any discussion of the relationship between reason and revelation.

In the last several years, there have been many other fascinating avenues of research in biblical wisdom. There has been much work done on individual books, on the presence or “influence” of wisdom in other parts of Scripture, on the similarities and differences between biblical wisdom and the wisdom of other cultures, on the nature of intertestamental wisdom and its influence on the New Testament, on the theology of wisdom, and on the relationship of wisdom thinking to the rest of biblical thought. In addition and of particular interest to many, there has been a good deal written about the mysterious figure of personified Wisdom, variously called “Dame Wisdom” or “Lady Wisdom.” Her presence in the text is both enigmatic and influential, particularly in the intertestamental period.⁵ The descriptions of personified Wisdom variously resemble a teacher, a woman of the night, a prophetess, and a goddess. In Proverbs 8 she is present and active in creation. In Sirach 24 she is identified with Torah, and in the Wisdom of Solomon 7 she is “a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty....She is a reflection of eternal light” (7:25-26). Much of the research has centered on the feminine nature of personified Wisdom, the relationship of personified Wisdom to God, and the influence of this figure on the portrayal of Christ in John, Paul, and the Q source of the Synoptic Gospels.

⁴The presence of wisdom literature in the canon as one of several challenges to a theology based exclusively on revelation through history is articulately addressed in James Barr, “Revelation through History in the Old Testament and in Modern Theology,” *Interpretation* 17 (1963) 193-205.

⁵Personified Wisdom is first found in Proverbs 1-9, esp. chapter 8. She is also found in Sirach (esp. chapter 24), Wisdom of Solomon, and Baruch.

Modern research in the field of biblical wisdom is in its infancy. Even its definition is wide open. Yet there is a pull to dig deeper into this rich vein of Scripture and explore the wealth which it has to offer. It is a challenge to play lovingly with proverbs, suffer indignities beside Job, and ponder with Paul “Christ Jesus whom God made our wisdom” (1 Cor 1:30). The promised rewards are great.

Say to wisdom, “You are my sister,”

and name as your kin understanding. (Prov 7:4)
She is a tree of life to those who embrace her;
those who hold her fast will be blessed. (Prov 3:18)

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Behind this introductory article lies much work that has been done in the field of biblical wisdom. Several works are listed here which are particularly helpful for those who wish to pursue further study. The two volumes edited by J. Crenshaw and by J. Gammie and others contain the best collections of articles.

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