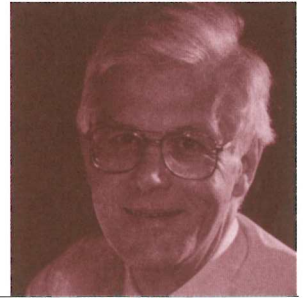


THE BIBLE AS WISDOM TODAY: A KEY TO CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT? (A MISSING PIECE OF MISSION)

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"MOST CHRISTIANS HAVE A VERY GOOD GRASP OF UK CULTURE – THEY LIVE IN IT. They wake up in the morning, listen to the radio, read newspapers, go to work, are managed, trained, motivated in particular ways, go shopping, play football, watch TV ..."¹

"Why then," we may ask, "do most Christians struggle to relate their faith effectively when they are 'in' the culture and why do most people 'in' the culture not find the Church attractive, relevant or, at the very least, challenging?" Somewhere and somehow the two interwoven spheres have separated and a fissure has opened up between Church and culture or the Christian life of a Christian and her or his "real" life.

Bible Society is deeply concerned about this fissure, for it hinders the effective mission of the Church and denudes the credibility of the Bible within the culture. Could it be that the way we have learned to view the Bible over the last century has itself fundamentally contributed to this chasm appearing in the lives of Christians? If so, then it underlines the importance of the approaches that Bible Society has been taking as it, in effect, is mining again the riches of "wisdom" in the Bible.

My perception is that during the last century or so we have lost dynamic contact with the wisdom material of the Bible² and this has at the very least contributed to the difficulties we have engaging the culture Christianly. So, let me quickly reflect on "wisdom" within the Bible and within trends in biblical theology, particularly within the Old Testament, over the last century.³

Quite a lot of the Old Testament is made up of wisdom materials – most obviously books like Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, but also some Psalms, Ruth, the Joseph Story and the Succession Narrative (2 Sam 9–20) and even Jonah. Viewed from within the biblical traditions, it is proper to see wisdom as one of the core ways in which Israel recognised its links with surrounding cultures and attempted to explore the foundations of and implications for this recognition. Robert Gordis writes: "The discovery and elucidation of ancient oriental literature has made it clear that Hebrew wisdom was not an isolated creation in Israel. On the contrary, it was part of a vast intellectual tradition that had been cultivated for centuries throughout the lands of the Fertile Crescent."⁴

This connectivity may be established by comparing Israel's wisdom sayings with, for instance, those of Egypt. More significantly this commonality is also part of Israel's *consciousness and this connectivity is viewed positively*.⁵

Theologically, for Israel, the foundation for wisdom is in creation – one God created the entire world and all the peoples of this world.⁶ It is his world and so the deep-level structures which underpin both a successful individual/family and communal/international life are actually "written into" the world by God. Although there is a profound element of mystery, these structures (the way things work best) are more or less accessible to anyone who either seeks for them or stumbles across them through the experiences of their life; they can be read out of the world and ongoing life.⁷ Directly or indirectly they reflect the nature of God, whose world it is. Essentially they do not require specific revelation although there is no reason why God cannot provide such truths by special revelation as well. Further, for those who know God through special revelation (that is Israelites), it is likely that they will be able to perceive more clearly and more readily the footprints of God in the structures of ordinary life; hence the view that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Understood along these lines, wisdom becomes a bridge from the special community of Israel, with its covenantal relationship with God, to all other peoples.

In some eras there is the hope that people will recognise the quality of wisdom that Israel projects and so be drawn towards her God (see for instance Deut 4.6 and 1 Kgs 10.1–13). It is in the arena covered by "wisdom" that Israel can have conversations with non-Israelites about anything, with the underlying certainty that its God is the source of all true wisdom. So, wisdom is intimately related to creationally based theology and has more to do with what is shared truth rather than special revelation, continuous truth rather than the historically conditioned, generally applicable insights rather than those which pertain to the cultus and its rituals or even religion. It is, we can say briefly, "everyday theology", but one in which Israel, with her eyes of faith, should excel.

Given this assessment of wisdom for Israel's faith, it is not hard to see that any disregard for this part of the canon is likely to generate an imbalance in the way the biblical faith community operates. I propose that this is precisely what has happened. Over the last 100–150 years in Old Testament theology there has been a contextual devaluation of "wisdom".

Symptomatic of the trends is the generally agreed observation that however Old Testament theologies have been organised and however they have conceived the fine print of their *raison d'être*, they have found the wisdom material problematic.⁸ Epitomising this is von

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1 Mark Greene, *Imagine* (London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, 2003), p. 11.

2 Although my presentation works mainly from the Old Testament, a New Testament perspective would probably not be so different. RE Clements notes, "It can now be agreed that the extent of wisdom's impact upon the growth of the earliest Christian traditions had previously been widely underestimated and insufficiently recognized." See, *Wisdom in Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster 1992), p. 15.

3 Wisdom can be viewed as a genre that encompasses a range of literature, or sociologically, or as a main biblical category, alongside Torah, History or Prophetic materials. It is mainly this broad theological approach that we are taking.

4 See R Gordis, "Wisdom and Job", in S. Sandmel (ed.), *Old Testament Issues* (London: SCM 1969), p. 216. Cf. G von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM, 1972), especially p. 317.

5 To take one illustration of this awareness, Job is not an Israelite, neither are his friends, but their complex testimony is firmly grounded within the canon!

6 For a generally more positive evaluation of the place of wisdom in the Scriptures see J Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), especially pp. 200–39.

“A revaluation of the importance of wisdom within the Bible is vital for sustaining the church community in a rapidly fluxing world.”

NOTES CONTINUED

7 In *Wisdom in Israel*, von Rad speaks of “the self-revelation of the orders of creation” (p. 317). He amplifies this by claiming that from the very beginning there was “the unwavering certainty that creation herself will reveal her truths to the man who becomes involved with her and trusts her.”

8 Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1997), especially p. 36; and Clements, *Wisdom in Theology*, especially p. 20.

9 See, *Wisdom in Israel*.

10 For a helpful and straightforward examination of some of the issues associated with this see, J Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation* (Leicester: Apollos, 1990), pp. 66–8.

11 It is worth noting here how von Rad, at the end of his book, seeks to identify that which made Israel’s approach to wisdom unique (see pp. 317–18). Further, the strange consequences of this “doctrine” that only that which is unique counts can be seen mirrored in the claims for limiting authentic saying of Jesus using a similar approach! This methodology excludes anything Jewish about Jesus from being authentic.

12 D Wilkinson, “The Art of Apologetics in the Twenty-First Century”, *Anvil* 19.1 (2002), pp. 5–17, especially pp. 11–12. Cf. also R Zacharias, quoted in “Living an Apologetic Life”, *Just Thinking*, Fall 2003.

► Rad, who after his work on Old Testament theology then published a separate volume which was essentially his theological reflecting on the wisdom materials.⁹

Further, it had also become a dogma of Old Testament scholars that “creation theology” (fundamental to perceiving the theological basis of wisdom) was not a primary facet of Israel’s or the Old Testament’s theology. This has been argued in a number of ways from maintaining that in terms of historical development “creation” was a late arrival on the theological scene, to proposing that it was of a derivative nature because God’s relationship with Israel or revelation to Israel was primary.

These tendencies probably reflect pressures from the wider regions of theology. In the nineteenth century, with the rise of evolutionary doctrines and with the demise of the popularity of the cosmological and the teleological arguments for the existence of God, perhaps also influenced by reactions to deism and rationalism, theologians tended to move the focus of their attention to history – perhaps general history, but usually Israel’s history and the historical Jesus. In this sort of context, where it was easy to accuse theologians who dared to focus on “creation” as having a “god of the gaps” mentality, there was strong motivation to withdraw from creation to history as the locus of revelation. This seemed safe from scientific positivism and avoided the philosophical critiques as well. This attention on history was, I suspect, further fuelled positively by archaeology and the apparent progress in the “Quest for the historical Jesus” using scientific/historical methods, which seemed to highlight the opportunities for and values of the biblical materials looked at through this kind of lens.

However, focusing on “Israel’s history” as well as history more generally, was soon discovered to be vulnerable too, so there was the further step towards *Heilsgeschichte*¹⁰ as either the arena of revelation or the method Israel used to ascertain and transmit her faith or indeed the best methodological way to structure a theology. It was hoped, erroneously in my view, that *Heilsgeschichte* could be ring-fenced from the corrosive attention of the historians and philosophers.

Sometimes inherent within these trends and sometimes as a further and distinct pressure, was the concentration on what was unique to Israel’s faith. This was, in part, a response to the history of religions approach which seemed to dissolve that which was particular to a faith or culture in the search for universal types and anti-types. This striving after “uniqueness” to compensate for *religionsgeschichtlich* claims, usually became subtly

transmuted into the stance that only that which was unique could be given revelatory value.¹¹

If the account of these trends I have given has validity it now becomes fairly obvious why theologians had problems with wisdom materials – they wanted what was unique not what was common, they wanted particular historical events not repeatable everyday observations and they looked for that which was based on special revelation rather than creational and providential revelation.

The preferences within Old Testament theology have, over time, very likely contributed to the neglect of the biblical wisdom streams within the churches. It can easily take 100 years between an initial movement in theological thought and its impact in the ethos of the people in local churches. But the net impact of the trends mentioned above is not only to marginalise and consider alien the wisdom approach but also to (over)value that which is distinctive in the Christian religion over against that which is fundamentally human within a “good” society. So the arts and media which grow out of the culture are likely to become devalued, as well as the abilities to appreciate and affirm goodness in human life and relate the gospel to the ordinary from within the Church. In this milieu, the Church and all that it holds dear in thought and practice are likely to become more and more remote from the normal forms and models that are prevalent in the surrounding society. The drip, drip effect of the rejection of, disinterest in, or the inability to appropriately access and value, the wisdom strand of the Bible is likely to have long term consequences within the churches. They will drift towards being essentially religious communities rather than social transformation agents, ghettoised rather than culturally engaged, known for what is distinctive rather than people who intentionally bridge into the community. The emphasis within church life is to become immersed in a Christian (that is church-based) culture/lifestyle/ programme rather than a call to be and become the salt and light in the community; the culture is implicitly viewed negatively and as an alien world.

One appropriate way to understand and express the felt discontinuity (from the perspective of the Church) between the ethos of “Church” and “culture” is to say that we have largely lost the ability to function as the wise community. Because most members of our churches spend most of their lives in and responding to non-churchy contexts, Christians have lost the skill of seeing where faith impinges on ordinary life and how to

comment in an engaging and stimulating way when they do.

Von Rad correctly observed that the intellectual and spiritual resource required to produce a theologically enriched understanding of ordinary life (including the ability to explore challenging and unavoidable human predicaments such as suffering and death, as well as striving towards the limitations of the abilities of humans to understand themselves and their place in the world, resulting in a proper humility) is very high. If this skill is lost, it is unlikely that it can be quickly or easily be replaced within a community. The challenge and scale of the task probably implies a concerted and persistent effort by someone (or many someones!) to redress the loss.¹²

As far as we can discern from, say, the Book of Proverbs, it was precisely the wisdom tradition which reflects the role of *developing people* who had the capacity to find God's way in a confusing world and help others see it also. There is with wisdom material an address to and attention on the person, as well as the understanding. Neglecting the wisdom aspect of the biblical tradition may have contributed to an inability from the side of the Church to prepare people to speak into and so engage ordinary human life – we are in danger of losing the humanity of the Church and theology!

Bible Society's commitment to a long campaign seeking to re-establish the credibility of the Bible in our culture is a necessary contribution to help the churches in their mission. We are seeking to make the Bible heard everywhere, promote the Bible as essential for nourishing the imagination of individuals and society, and uphold the Bible as a resource for the flourishing of human life. In doing so, we are, I would suggest, essentially speaking the language of "wisdom". So, whether through a fashion shoot in *Vogue*, the promotion of the *Miracle Maker*, in our media campaigns, through the Telling Place storytelling initiative, by resourcing MPs with biblical material relevant to their concerns, or through our Church Leader Events, we are exploring and exporting the wisdom dimension of the Bible and helping the churches re-engage with this vital dimension of biblical material.

A revaluation of the importance of wisdom within the Bible is vital for sustaining the church community in a rapidly fluxing world. It is equally vital if Christians are going to be able to stimulate and impress people with the insights and resources we have from God for living fully human lives, as Daniel and his friends once did (cf. Dan 1.20). ■