

Wisdom and its Literature in Biblical-Theological Context

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WISDOM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Every culture, ancient and modern, has developed its own wisdom, and recorded much of it in literature. Such wisdom can be based on human experience from which people learn what is in life and how to deal with it. There are written storehouses of wisdom from many different cultures in which human experiences are crystallized and typically abstracted from their original contexts to become aphorisms which can be applied in new situations that the inheritors of such wisdom think to be apt. This commonality itself constitutes one of the problems of Old Testament wisdom in that the radical distinction between

revealed truth in the word of God and human musing and philosophizing seems to break down.

There is enough evidence from the Ancient Near East to support the view that Israel's wisdom was a part of a common human activity of learning about life and seeking to pass on the gathered wisdom to succeeding generations. We have Sumerian and Babylonian wisdom that is far older than anything that is in the Bible. The Egyptians also produced wisdom works, one of which—*Wisdom of Amenemope*—is generally considered to be the origin of part of the Book of Proverbs (Prov 22:17-23:11). There are examples of proverbial wisdom and the longer reflective creations emanating from Babylon and Egypt. Biblical Wisdom, as well as its foreign counterparts, can be more reflective and can be expressed in longer compositions that indicate a less spontaneous origin than the empirical aphorisms and proverbs. Like the Book of Job, reflective wisdom may be the basis of a long and complex composition that addresses some of the great problems of life.

But, how is Israel's wisdom different? The many parallels to the forms of Israelite wisdom that are found among the compositions of Israel's neighbors may suggest a complete leveling of this phenomenon in the region. Obviously Israel's wisdom had much in common with that of her neighbors, and this is not surprising since they all belonged to the same humanity and lived in the same world. They faced the same matters of personal and social interaction, and they all had to learn to live, as far as possible, in harmony with the environment. When wisdom developed characteristic forms of expression, both oral and written, there may well have been some cross-fertilizing going on between nations. The writer of Kings reports that Solomon's wisdom caused some international excitement. Not only does Solomon surpass the foreigners in wisdom, but they come flocking from lands round about to hear his wisdom (1 Kgs 4:29-34). These interactions, along with Solomon's dialogue with the queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10:1-9), indicate that there existed some kind of common idiom and vocabulary. It seems they could talk to each other about what is real in life.

But Solomon's wisdom surpassed that of the people of the East and of Egypt so that he became famous among the nations (1 Kgs 4:30-31). What, then, made his wisdom superior? According to Proverbs 1:7, the basis of Solomon's wisdom was "the fear of the Lord." The aim of this article is to apply a method of biblical theology to the theme of wisdom in the Bible in order to give some understanding of the overall context within which any part of the identifiable wisdom literature falls.

WISDOM IN THE WRITING OF OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGIES

First, a brief survey of how others have handled wisdom as a part of the theology of the Bible is in order. A key player in the so-called American Biblical Theology Movement was George Ernest Wright. There is an oft-quoted statement of his that indicates a problem with the wisdom literature as part of an integrated biblical theology: "In

any attempt to outline a discussion of Biblical faith it is the wisdom literature which offers the chief difficulty because it does not fit into the type of faith exhibited in the historic and prophetic literatures."¹ Wright does not deny the important distinctions between wisdom based on the fear of Yahweh and the wisdom of Israel's neighbors, but he nevertheless points to the difficulties created by the dissimilarities between the biblical wisdom books and the narratives involving salvation history along with the prophetic commentaries on the narratives. Since Wright expressed his view, based on his understanding of the nature and the primacy of salvation history, various proposals have been made as to how Wisdom can be understood and accommodated in biblical theology.²

In his Tyndale Lecture of 1965, D. A. Hubbard commented: "Of the Old Testament theologies with which our generation has been so abundantly blessed, only von Rad's has sought to do anything like justice to the wisdom movement."³ A brief and selective survey of some of the Old Testament theologies written since the latter part of the nineteenth century shows something of the range of attitudes to wisdom as a part of the theological contribution of the Hebrew Scriptures.⁴ Some of the differences, but not all, reflect differences in presuppositions concerning the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures.

Starting in the latter part of the nineteenth century, we note that Gustave Oehler (1873), a conservative, begins with wisdom as the attribute of God.⁵ Although his treatment is relatively short, it is nevertheless an attempt to treat wisdom seriously as part of Old Testament theology. Essentially, wisdom is the subjective aspect of theology which seeks the implications of the Mosaic revelation as applied to the varied aspects of life in the world. It is only indirectly related to covenantal theology. By contrast, Hermann Schultz (1895), who was much more accepting of liberal thinking and was moving to a position of *Religionsgeschichte*, (history of religions) found wisdom of only passing interest with little to say about theology.⁶

After the heyday of *Religionsgeschichte* there was something of a revival of concern for the theology of the Old Testament in contrast to the history of Israel's religious thought. A leader in this was Walther Eichrodt (1933-39).⁷ But his intention to describe the diverse aspects of a complex theological unity came unstuck most markedly in his treatment of wisdom. He has less trouble dealing with the overtly theological wisdom than he does with that which must be linked with a general theology of creation if it is to be theologized at all. Ludwig Koehler (1935-36)⁸ gave the vague definition of Old Testament theology as the bringing together of ideas, thoughts, and concepts of the Old Testament "which are or can be important."⁹ His summary treatment of wisdom suggests that he failed to find the relevant links within the Old Testament that would enable wisdom to be regarded as important.

Among the post-war offerings we have the excellent contribution of Theodorus C. Vriezen, first published in Dutch in 1949.¹⁰ This work follows a basic God-Man-Salvation organization. Vriezen makes a clear distinction between the religion of Israel and the theology of the Old Testament. He is also concerned to see "the message of the Old Testament both in itself and in its relation to the New Testament."¹¹ Given these promising proposals, Vriezen's treatment of wisdom is disappointingly lean. In an introductory chapter he remarks on the tensions between the books of Job and Ecclesiastes and the eudemonistic trends in the book of Proverbs: tensions that are not resolved but only kept in equilibrium.

One of the most significant treatments of wisdom is found in the work of Gerhard von Rad (1957, 1960).¹² His presuppositions and method were somewhat innovative. He made a distinction between drawing a tolerably objective picture of the religion of Israel and the task of Old Testament theology. He also distinguished between the history of Israel as constructed by the faith of Israel and that recovered by critical scholarship. He found no actual unity in the Old Testament yet he had no real problem with wisdom as a subject

on its own. In the section of his theology "Israel before Yahweh (Israel's answer)," and in his later work *Weisheit in Israel* (1970),¹³ he gives brilliant analyses of the wisdom literature. But, if he had been content to forego his lengthy defense of the primacy of *Heilsgeschichte* he would not have had to go to such great lengths to justify his attention to wisdom. His awkward distinction between Israel's world of faith and Israel's assertions about Yahweh requires his apologetic for his treatment of Israel's response. Von Rad moved from wisdom as a response to Israel's creeds to wisdom as essentially a different method of theologizing from that of *Heilsgeschichte*. Charles Scobie aptly remarks: "We are left with the impression that von Rad has given us not one Old Testament Theology, but three – one of the historical traditions, one of the prophetic traditions and one of the Wisdom traditions."¹⁴ But Scobie himself seemed at the same time to be looking at two theologies when he commented, "In particular, Wisdom challenges the often-held assumption that revelation in history is all that counts in biblical theology. Wisdom points to an alternate mode of revelation and of salvation."¹⁵

John L. McKenzie (1974)¹⁶ defines the task of Old Testament theology as "the analysis of an experience through the study of the written record of that experience."¹⁷ The unity of that experience is based on the unity of the group (Israel) and the divine being (Yahweh) that the group believed in. Wisdom then is described as a shared experience with other nations. McKenzie's approach is to describe what is found in biblical wisdom literature. He asserts that the Israelite scribes "affirmed that Yahweh himself was the original and primary wise one, from whom all wisdom was derived and imitated."¹⁸ On the other hand he takes an evolutionary view that sees God-talk as a later aspect of wisdom. Having followed more the approach of tradition history, he points up the unresolved tensions in wisdom without attempting to resolve them. He refers to the attempts at understanding the unanswerable questions—as in Job—as anti-wisdom. By contrast, Bernhard Anderson moves

to a form of the canonical perspective.¹⁹ Following what he refers to as “covenant trajectories,”²⁰ he includes wisdom in a section named “From Trials of Faith to Horizons of Hope.” He is thus able to include the theology of wisdom as an emerging aspect of a theology of creation and order.

Walter Brueggemann, whose Old Testament theology Bernhard Anderson describes as “bipolar,” proposes wisdom as complementary to the “core testimony.” Thus, he asserts: “I propose, wisdom theology insists that the primary testimony is not everywhere adequate or effective.”²¹ Paul House, a conservative theologian, follows the unusual route of describing each book of the Old Testament in turn as eloquent of some attribute of God.²² Thus, God is worth serving (Job), reveals wisdom (Proverbs), and defines meaningful living (Ecclesiastes). House seeks to overcome the potential for fragmentation by including in each chapter sections on the canonical synthesis of the book being treated.

Sidney Greidanus has been a leader in writing about the importance of preaching Christ from the Old Testament. It is pleasing to see that he does not ignore the wisdom literature in this. In fact he meets the subject head-on in an important study on preaching from Ecclesiastes.²³ Of all the wisdom material Qoheleth is surely the most difficult to fit into any simple schema of salvation history. While Greidanus has not produced an Old Testament theology as such, the question of the canonical unity of the Old Testament with the person and work of Christ is central to his work. He appears to agree with my own assessment of wisdom in general that it complements the perspective of salvation history and that it is “a theology of the redeemed man living in the world under God’s rule.”²⁴

That there is great diversity in the wisdom literature and the points of view propounded is obvious. If wisdom is about what life consists of and how one can best live the authentic life, there is also a recognition of the limits of human wisdom and of the mysteries of life that no human wisdom

can finally solve. There are at least three variables that affect the way wisdom is incorporated into the writing of biblical theologies: first, the descriptive definition of wisdom and its limits; second, the definition of biblical theology; and third, the method for doing biblical theology including the way a biblical theology is structured. For the purposes of this article I propose a method of doing a thematic study that involves assumptions about the theological nature of the Bible as the word of God, and which seeks to understand wisdom as a theme and a broadly based point of view within the Bible. I suspect that much of the difficulty experienced by many Old Testament theologians in dealing with wisdom is that, whatever their stated Christian presuppositions, their method in practice ignores the fact that wisdom is an essential part of the emerging Christology in the Bible.

If we start with the canon of Scripture, we must ask why the lack of historical narrative in the wisdom literature is seen to be a problem? Why is the assumption often made that the lack of redemptive history as the explicitly stated context of wisdom means that wisdom has some other foundation than the theology of covenant and redemption? From the point of view of a canonical biblical theology the wisdom books are important because they have been recognized by both synagogue and church as part of authoritative Scripture. From the point of view of a Christ-centered biblical theology, they are important because they are part of the Scripture that testifies to Christ. From the point of view of a redemptive-historical reading of biblical theology, they are important because wisdom is recognized as reflecting the overall thinking and worldview of the covenant people living the life of faith from day to day.

WISDOM IN BIBLICAL- THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

WE START AND END WITH CHRIST

Christian biblical theology recognizes that the heart of the biblical message is the person and

work of Jesus Christ. The method of doing any kind of thematic biblical theology that I would advocate involves making contact with the theme first of all in relation to Jesus. Thus with the theme of wisdom we might start with some of those references that clearly show some recognition of Jesus as the ultimate wise man of Israel. For example:

- (1) And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man (Luke 2:52).
- (2) The queen of the South . . . came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here (Matt 12:42).
- (3) “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock.... And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.... And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes. (Matt 7:24, 26, 28-29)
- (4) It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption (1 Cor 1:30, NIV).²⁵
- (5) [Christ] in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3).

Perhaps the most significant statement of all is Paul’s ministry manifesto:

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach 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 (1 Cor 1:22-24).

Not only is the true locus of God’s wisdom found in Christ, and him crucified, but such wisdom shows that all human wisdom is folly when it is not founded on Christ.

That Jesus is the locus of all wisdom is crucial to our investigation. We do not have a wisdom Jesus who is different from a salvation history Jesus. The Christology of wisdom is part of the total Christology of the New Testament.²⁶ Indeed, on reflection, we could add Wise Man to the traditional Christological offices of Prophet, Priest, and King. It is foundational to evangelical biblical theology that we recognize the unity of Scripture as established in the person and work of Jesus to whom all Scripture testifies. I suggest that we will find links between wisdom and salvation history in the Old Testament that foreshadow their ultimate unity in Christ.

We should be careful not to commit the error of supposing that “wisdom” is a word with a single and narrow semantic field. Does wisdom Christology in the New Testament reflect a connection with the wisdom nuances and conventional forms found in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament? That Jesus used parables and proverbs to teach adds to the impression that the New Testament understands one aspect of its Christology to be a fulfillment of the Old Testament wisdom traditions. His conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount employs a typical wisdom contrast of opposites. These are an important feature of Proverbs where wise/righteous and foolish/wicked are constantly compared. The same technique is found in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins.

Our approach to biblical theology, then, is to search out the Old Testament antecedents to this aspect of Christology. Given that it is Christ who is the wise man who is made to be the wisdom of those who believe, I propose that we start in the Old Testament with antecedents to the messianic office of Jesus—the kings of Israel, particularly David and Solomon. This is an easy transition given that Solomon is predicated as the wise man *par excellence* and is also the covenanted son of David. It will then be necessary to examine the idea of wisdom going back to creation and then forward to the fulfillment in Christ. At the same time we should try to engage in a kind of lateral

thinking to see what other themes link with and enrich the understanding of wisdom.

I am therefore proposing a biblical-theological method in these stages:

- (1) Begin with the Christological clues that surround the person and work of Jesus as Israel's wise man.
- (2) Move back to the most prominent antecedents to this in the Old Testament, in this case in the messianic narratives of Israel's kingship.
- (3) Capitalize on the links between Solomon and the wisdom literature in order to gather criteria for identifying the distinctive characteristics of wisdom theology and literature.
- (4) Identify the antecedents to this in the pre-Solomonic narratives.
- (5) Move forward to identify wisdom theology in the three main stages of revelation, while also making any lateral thematic connections between wisdom and other aspects of biblical theology. The three stages of revelation are: (a) biblical history and especially covenant history from Abraham to its zenith with Solomon; (b) prophetic eschatology as it recapitulates salvation history and predicts its future fulfillment in the Day of the Lord; (c) the fulfillment in Christ of the typology of the previous two stages.²⁷

The diagram on page 48 shows the essence of this approach.

DAVID AND SOLOMON

David and Solomon provide the obvious messianic antecedents to the Christology of wisdom. They also form the zenith of covenant grace in the course of the salvation history in the Old Testament. While Solomon has initial pride of place in the narrative accounts of wisdom in Israel, David is not without significance. Thus, while the prophet does not disappear from the scene during David's reign, we find a growing dependence on the counsel of advisors. Alongside of this is the emphasis on one's responsibility to choose what

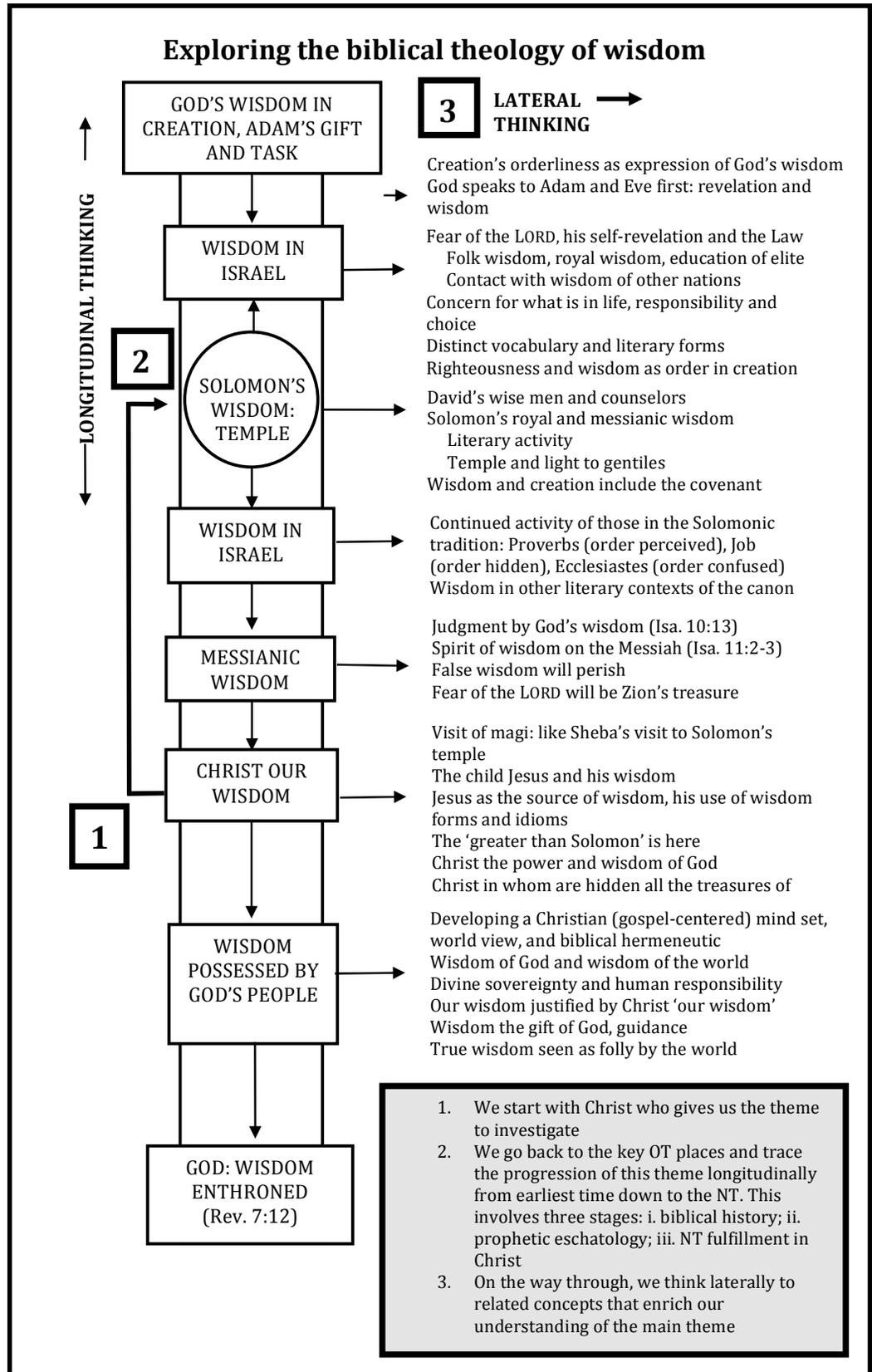
is wise and right. David's encounter with the wise woman of Tekoa indicates that a recognized class of sage was possibly already in existence. While the prophets still maintain their watch over the king and give needed rebukes and advice, there seems to be an increasing reliance on wise counsel for the running of the affairs of state. This is certainly true by the time we have David established as king in Jerusalem. Later texts will suggest that wise men had official recognition.

While wisdom activity continues after Solomon's fall and during the decline of the kingdom, 1 Kings 3-10 represents the high point in wisdom theology in relation to the covenant promises of God. From there we can try to pin down the characteristics that make wisdom an identifiable phenomenon expressed in characteristic genres. This will enable us then to search out the theological antecedents to the wisdom of the wisdom books. At the same time we can look for links between the teachings of wisdom and the more covenant-based parts of the Old Testament. Wisdom, as with any other concept or theme, can be looked at in the three revelatory stages of the biblical history, the prophetic eschatology, and the fulfillment in Christ.

I suggest that the undoubted accuracy of the observations about a lack of covenantal and redemptive history in the wisdom books is not an insurmountable problem. There has been much activity in the scholarly realms to demonstrate that the theological purview of wisdom is creation rather than covenant or redemptive history. It seems hard to argue with this until it is then suggested that somehow the sages of Israel actually were proposing an alternate worldview to that of the salvation history narratives. It is not feasible to suggest that the sages formed some kind of heretical clique that focused on creation, and that eschewed the idea of the covenant and the growing sense of redemptive history.

A good starting point for investigation into the roots of messianic wisdom is the wisdom pericope in 1 Kings 3-10. Some would argue that the Suc-

Exploring the biblical theology of wisdom



cession Narrative (2 Sam 9:20 and 1 Kgs 1:2) is closely linked with the wisdom tradition.²⁸ However, I will concentrate on the texts concerning Solomon and his wisdom. When God appears to Solomon at Gibeon with the invitation “Ask what I shall give you,” Solomon’s request for an understanding mind so that he can govern his people well is not a spur of the moment brainwave unrelated to anything else. Significantly, he recognizes as his grounds for making such a request the fact that God has made covenant with David and has kept covenant faithfulness (*hesed*) with him. Thus, at the outset Solomon has made the important link between wisdom and covenant.

The next thing we can note in the narrative of 1 Kings 3-4 is the correlation between wisdom and the fulfilling of covenant blessings. The fact that Solomon is to be rewarded with his requested wisdom *and* riches and honor indicates that these latter gifts are not incompatible with wisdom. They epitomize existence in the land of plenty as God’s blessing. Solomon’s skill in dealing with the problem of the two prostitutes and the baby may seem to us to be a fairly ordinary piece of applied psychology. We are assured, however, that it was not so in those days. The people were in awe of the wisdom of God that was in Solomon (1 Kgs 3:28). Following this event, the list of officials (1 Kgs 4:1-19) sounds more like a telephone directory after the ripping yarn that precedes it! Yet making of lists is evidence of orderly administration and is a common feature of wisdom. The description of Solomon’s rule and provisioning of the court are part of the package deal in 3:13.

In 1 Kings 4:20 and 29 the seashore metaphor is applied to the people, as it was in the promise to Abraham in Genesis 22:17, and then to Solomon’s wisdom. The extent of the land in 4:21 is applied to the extent of Solomon’s wisdom in 4:30-31. The covenant blessing of dominion and rest in the land of plenty (4:25) is extended to Solomon’s wisdom (4:32-33). “[E]very man under his vine and under his fig tree” is a phrase given eschatological significance in Micah 4:4. This oracle (Mic 4:1-5), which

parallels Isaiah 2:2-4, relates to the restoration of the temple and Zion on the Day of the Lord. Solomon’s composition of songs and proverbs about nature certainly links with the theme of creation, but so does the covenant promise of a fruitful land. The coming of the nations to Israel in response to Solomon’s wisdom echoes the covenant promise which generates the idea of Israel as a light to the nations (Gen 12:3; Deut 4:6; 1 Kgs 4:34). This is followed by the coming of the queen of Sheba and foreshadows the magi’s visit to the infant Jesus. In short, we observe that creation and covenant are not disparate perspectives. They are, in fact, inseparable.

The building of the temple is central to Solomon’s wisdom, as the King of Tyre recognizes (1 Kgs 5:7, 12). Wisdom attributes are applied to people with practical skills, but it is surely significant that these skills belong to people engaged in constructing both the tabernacle and the temple (Exod 31:3; 1 Kgs 7:13). The account of the queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10:1-13) acts as a summary and inclusio for the wisdom pericope (1 Kgs 3:3-10:13). But the coming of the Gentiles to the light of Israel is a covenant thing (Gen 12:3; Isa 2:2-4; 42:6; Luke 2:29-32). These testimonies concerning Solomon and his wisdom point to his wisdom patronage that is acknowledged in Proverbs 1:1; 10:1; 25:1; Ecclesiastes 1:1; and Song of Solomon 1:1.²⁹ The evidence from these books provides the basis for the attempt to define what wisdom is, how it is to be recognized, and how it relates to the larger covenantal perspectives.

A way forward here is to note the vocabulary that is prominent in the wisdom books and narratives, and to observe the literary types that employ or are related to such wisdom words. Proverbs 1:2-5 provides a good list to start with: following the ESV we have wisdom, instruction, insight, wise dealing, righteousness, justice, equity, prudence, knowledge, discretion, learning, guidance. Clearly, some of these belong also to a wider context. Of wisdom forms, Proverbs 1:6 refers to the proverb (*mashal*), the saying (*melitzah*), and riddle (*hidah*).

It is not always clear what these terms refer to, but we can observe forms in Proverbs that establish themselves as typically wisdom. Three main forms are found. First, the single sentence proverbs are the most numerous. These often contain the contrast of opposites, various kinds of parallelism and, in many, the simple juxtaposition of things that go together.³⁰ Second, the longer instruction typically contains an address and summons to pay attention, exhortations to right behavior, and motive clauses supporting the exhortations. Third, the numerical sayings list things that belong together for reasons that can be brain-teasing, and follow the typical formula $n, n + 1$. Proverbs also contains some longer discourses including the words of Agur (Prov 30), the words of Lemuel (Prov 31:1-9) and the praise of the godly woman (Prov 31:10-31). Wisdom sayings range between short, one-sentence aphorisms to lengthy reflections on the mysteries of life.

The typical wisdom words in their literary contexts enable us to gain some idea of the concerns of wisdom as well as how these concerns were expressed. The theological problem has been seen as the lack of covenantal contexts and absence of salvation historical concerns within the wisdom books and sayings. The suggestion of a context of creation theology has much to commend it, but once again we must avoid assuming that differences between creation and covenant concerns signal separate, even alternative, theological perspectives. There are no grounds for taking God's revelation in nature to be supportive of a natural theology that runs parallel to prophetic revelation. Thus Solomon's wisdom expresses itself in concerns for nature (1 Kgs 4:32-33), as do many of the sayings in Proverbs. But, his wisdom also expresses itself in the building of the temple as the sanctuary of God. There are solid biblical-theological reasons for connecting this sanctuary with God's original sanctuary on Eden as the focus of his good creation. The creation connection is explicitly given in the literature itself, for example in Proverbs 8:22-31. Psalm 104 expresses the

greatness of God in his role as Creator, not just at the beginning but also in his ongoing involvement in his creation: "O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures" (Ps 104:24).

The commonality that exists between Israel's wisdom and that of its pagan neighbors is not absolute. Proverbs makes it clear that it is "the fear of Yahweh" that is the source of knowledge and wisdom. This phrase using either the verbal or substantive form of "fear" occurs some seventeen times in Proverbs. Some have wanted to discount the importance of this as a pointer to the covenant faith of the sages. I do not think it can be so easily dismissed. Yahweh is the covenant name of God (Exod 3:13-15). The fear of Yahweh is a phrase used consistently of reverent awe of the God who revealed himself in covenant to Abraham.³¹ The least we can say is that the sages worshipped the same God and acknowledged the same covenant relationship as did Moses and David.

CREATION

It is suggested by many scholars that the sages focused on a creation theology rather than a covenantal perspective.³² If, however, W. Zimmerli is correct to view wisdom as an outgrowth of Genesis 1:28,³³ then wisdom cannot be contrasted with covenant. Proposing wisdom and covenant as an either/or suggests a kind of dualism in Israel's theology. If wisdom pays little attention to salvation history, the argument runs that it can still be theologized in the context of creation. But does not biblical theology show that *creation to new creation* is the broad framework that embraces the unity of the canon of Scripture? To put it another way, the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2 form the presupposition to the theology of the fall, judgment, covenant, election, and salvation in Genesis 3-11 that, in turn, is the presupposition to the theology of covenant in Genesis 12-17, and then to the rest of the Bible. The emphasis on creation has usually gone hand in hand with the idea that the essence of wisdom is the concern for order. This

is an appealing concept and was boosted by comparisons made with wisdom in Israel's neighbors. The Egyptian concept of *Ma'at* is seen as providing a parallel concern for order in the world. There is no real need to go down that path in that it is clear that a sense of God's order pervades not only wisdom but the whole of biblical theology.³⁴ Roland Murphy has rightly pointed out that the quest for order is not explicit in Israel's wisdom.³⁵ Order is rather a scholarly construct to try to understand what lies behind wisdom's understanding of life and how to live it.

Solomon's nature concerns (1 Kgs 4:32-33) do suggest a link with the creation. Other themes in the wisdom literature also point in that direction. The six days of creation order the chaos of a formless and void world (Gen 1:2). That God speaks to Adam and Eve giving them a framework for life in the created order links revelation and the affirmation of their humanity subject to what is in essence the fear of the Lord. Eden, the probation, the knowledge of good and evil, and the tree of life, all have links with wisdom. The personification of wisdom as God's companion in the creation, as expressed in Proverbs 8:22-31, need not be seen as anything more than a poetic expression of the created order as reflecting God's wisdom.

LAW AND WISDOM

It is true that the virtual identity of law and wisdom is a late development that is given its main expression in Sirach. Roman Catholic scholars thus have in their deuterocanonical literature data which the Protestant canon does not include. We can, however, ask what impulses served this identification. Does the canonical literature give any grounds for this move? The nature of the wisdom literature, especially the empirical wisdom, may be distinguished from the prophetically revealed truth. While Proverbs is not the fine print to Sinai, this distinction does not invite complete separation. The revelation of God was the grounds for the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge. Thus, when Moses is about to give

the revised version of Sinai to the generation on the verge of entering Canaan, he urges obedience to the laws that God commands:

Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him (Deut 4:6-7).

While empirical wisdom does not function as the law does, obedience to the law was foundational to Israel's wisdom.

When Stephen describes Moses as "instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds," he appears to approve of this upbringing and its outcome (Acts 7:22). Yet it could never be said that Moses succumbed to a pagan mindset for, "he refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter" (Heb 11:24). Ultimately the direct word of God would set him on a collision course against the Egyptians, yet his schooling in the royal wisdom schools that prepared young men to rule was obviously not in vain.

REVISITING SOLOMON

The antecedents to Solomon's wisdom, then, began at the creation of the human race. The word of God created according to God's wisdom. The first word to humans comes from God: he speaks first to give them the context of their existence. God is sovereign but, under his rule he entrusts man with dominion over the creation (Gen 1:28-31). The intellectual adventure of man stems from the cultural mandate to have dominion. After the fall, sinful man pursues this dominion but does so corruptly, and he refuses to acknowledge the ultimate truth of God imprinted in creation (Rom 1:18-23). Wisdom without God is ultimately foolishness (Rom 1:22). The worldview of the serpent was accepted by Adam and Eve and has turned

worldly wisdom into foolishness.

But the redeemed submit to the fear of the Lord; a template for the intellectual task of seeking to know what is in the authentic life and how to cope with its complexities. Practical wisdom at the level of daily life will often agree with godless sagacity. Godless wisdom, however, can never give answers that endure for eternity or point to the heavenly vision founded on God's truth. Wisdom in Israel, with its antecedents going back to the creation of humanity, reaches a high-point with David and Solomon. Why? If the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom it is also its goal (Prov 2:1-6). And if the fear of the Lord is linked to the self-revelation of the God of the covenant and of the redemptive history of Israel, then we should not wonder if there is a clear correlation of the two.

To put it another way: David and Solomon mark the zenith of the revelation of the kingdom of God and the way into it in the first typological stage (biblical history). After the events of 1 Kings 10 there is no dimension of salvation or the kingdom that remains to be revealed. As Solomon's apostasy leads inexorably to destruction and exile, the prophets reveal various aspects of the Day of the Lord in which God will bring in his glorious and eternal kingdom while also meting out the ultimate judgment on evil. But the eschatology of the prophets is essentially a recapitulation and glorification of the dimensions of salvation history in Israel up to Solomon and the temple. Thus, the fear of Yahweh is given its fullest meaning at that point, and it is no surprise that wisdom should also have its flowering in this context.

The downside is that Solomon turns away from the fear of the Lord in 1 Kings 11. Was it that the boundary between Israelite and pagan wisdom was crossed as he engages in the very practices that much of Proverbs warns against? Did the commonality of wisdom in the cultural milieu of his day woo Solomon into forgetting the crucial differences between true wisdom and folly? Whatever the answer, it is clear that the covenant with David (2 Sam 7:8-16) figures prominently in

the New Testament's consideration of this period. David, not Solomon, is the focus while Solomon barely rates a mention.

WISDOM AND PROPHETIC ESCHATOLOGY

Two perspectives on wisdom are found in the prophets. On the negative side there is evidence that Solomon was not alone in the degradation of wisdom. The prophets announce the confounding of a false wisdom that seems to have become institutionalized alongside corrupted kingships (Isa 29:13b-14; Jer 8:8-9). On the positive side is the announcement of the new messianic wisdom that will be revealed in the new rule of God's restored kingdom. The messianic figure in Isaiah will be the wonderful counselor.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isa. 9:6)

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump
of Jesse,
And a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.
And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord
(Isa. 11:1-2).

This latter passage describes the coming Davidic scion as one filled with all the attributes of the wise man. His judgments in righteousness (Isa 11:3-5) go together with the renewal of nature (Isa 11:6-9). The wording is very similar to Proverbs 8:12-15 and uses a number of the same technical wisdom terms found in that poem that personifies wisdom.³⁶ It is difficult to sort out the different nuances of the word righteousness, but it is surely more than an ethical and moral concept. In Proverbs we see righteousness as a virtual synonym for wisdom. Isaiah points to a time when a king will

reign in righteousness (Isa 32:1), a time when fools will no more be called noble (Isa 32:5-6). Then God's Spirit is poured out from on high and justice and righteousness characterize the natural world (Isa 32:15-18). Again the vision is of the Lord's righteous and wise rule:

The Lord is exalted, for he dwells on high;
he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness,
and he will be the stability of your times,
abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge;
the fear of the Lord is Zion's treasure (Isa 33:5-6).

The tendency of some scholars to make a theology of creation to be the presupposition of wisdom, and to regard it as if creation were not integral to the whole covenant and redemptive historical structure of the Bible, is probably not helpful.

I can only mention here one final consideration. Many scholars have sought to identify wisdom influences in non-wisdom books of the Old Testament.³⁷ Insofar as these considerations are valid they serve to show the ease with which wisdom and other perspectives interacted without difficulty in the thinking of the saints of the Old Testament.

BEGINNING AND ENDING WITH CHRIST

The Christology of wisdom points to the relationship of the wisdom of God and the wisdom of his trusted creature: man. He is trusted in the sense of being redeemed from sin, dark ignorance, and death, to live once more in fellowship with God and to think, to use his God-given brains, to make decisions, and to act responsibly. Our brief survey of the biblical theology of wisdom has taken us back into the Old Testament antecedents to Christ our wisdom; the one whose word and Spirit is the ground for all true wisdom; the one who, as our wisdom, justifies our failures to think and act wisely in the way that the renewal of our minds demands. In Christ we find ourselves as fellow travelers with the faithful people of God in the Old Testament. Many of them lived their whole lives without ever seeing or hearing a great

prophet like Moses or Isaiah; without ever being witness to one of the great signs and wonders of redemptive history; having no contact with God's miraculous deeds other than the recital of these things by their elders and by attending the rituals of the tabernacle or temple. Their lives were lived sometimes in humdrum sameness from day to day; sometimes facing the mysteries of suffering without answers. They sharpened their thinking in much the same way we do by contemplating the wisdom that came to be enshrined in the wisdom books of the canon. Their guiding light in prophetic revelation and the fear of the Lord was but a pale shadow of what we see in Jesus. But, it nevertheless pointed them to their Creator God who established order, judged sin, ruled sovereignly over the world, made them responsible for their actions, established his covenant of grace and salvation with his people, and led them towards the full light of Christ, our wisdom.

ENDNOTES

¹G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (Studies in Biblical Theology 8; London: SCM, 1952), 103.

²For example: D. A. Hubbard, "The Wisdom Movement and Israel's Covenant Faith," *Tyndale Bulletin* 37 (1966): 3-33; R. C. Hill, "The Dimensions of Salvation History in the Wisdom Books," *Scripture: The Quarterly of the Catholic Biblical Association* 19 (1967): 97-106; Hans-Jürgen Hermisson, "Observations of the Creation Theology in Wisdom," in *Israelite Wisdom* (ed. in J. Gammie; Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1978), 44-57; John Goldingay, "The 'Salvation History' Perspective and the 'Wisdom' Perspective Within the Context of Biblical Theology," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (1979): 194-207; Charles H. H. Scobie, "The Place of Wisdom in Biblical Theology," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 14, no. 2 (1984): 43-48; Alan W. Jenks, "Theological Presuppositions of Israel's Wisdom Literature," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 7, no. 1 (1985): 43-75; R. E. Clements, "Wisdom and Old Testament Theology," in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A.*

- Emerton (ed. John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- ³Hubbard, "The Wisdom Movement and Israel's Covenant Faith," 4.
- ⁴A similar survey is found in Gary V. Smith, "Is There a Place for Job's Wisdom in Old Testament Theology," *Trinity Journal* 13 (1992): 3-6.
- ⁵G. F. Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1883).
- ⁶Hermann Schultz, *Old Testament Theology*, (trans. J. A. Paterson; 2nd ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895).
- ⁷Walther Eichrodt, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, (3 vols.; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1933-39).
- ⁸Ludwig Köhler, *Alttestamentliche Theologie* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1935-36). The English translation is *Old Testament Theology* (London/Philadelphia: Lutterworth/Westminster), 1957.
- ⁹*Ibid.*, 7 (English translation).
- ¹⁰T. C. Vriezen, *Hoofdlijnen der Theologie van het Oude Testament* (Wageningen: H. Veenman & Zonen, 1949). The English translation is *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958).
- ¹¹*Ibid.*, 121 (English translation).
- ¹²Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1957-61). The English translation is *Old Testament Theology* (Edinburgh/New York: Oliver & Boyd/Harper & Row, 1962-65).
- ¹³Gerhard von Rad, *Weisheit in Israel* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970). The English translation is *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM, 1972).
- ¹⁴Scobie, "The Place of Wisdom in Biblical Theology," 44.
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*, 47.
- ¹⁶John L. McKenzie, *A Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Geoffrey Chapman, 1974).
- ¹⁷*Ibid.*, 29.
- ¹⁸*Ibid.*, 209.
- ¹⁹Bernard W. Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).
- ²⁰*Ibid.*, 33.
- ²¹Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 335. In his *In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1972), Brueggemann gives a spirited account of wisdom's world-affirming perspective which, he says, contrasts with the modern church's tendency to be world denying.
- ²²Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998). William Dumbrell has a similar approach in his *The Faith of Israel: Its Expression in the Books of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988).
- ²³Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ From Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).
- ²⁴Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes*, 3-4, quoting Goldsworthy *Gospel and Wisdom*, (Exeter: Paternoster, 1987), 142. (Greidanus mistakenly references this as from *Gospel and Kingdom*.)
- ²⁵The NIV stands closer to the Greek here than does ESV and is to be preferred.
- ²⁶Wisdom Christology is discussed at some length in chapter six of James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (London: SCM, 1980).
- ²⁷This threefold schema of biblical revelation is the one that I have adopted as, in my opinion, the best way to get at the biblical theological structure of Scripture. I owe my understanding of it to my teacher, Donald Robinson.
- ²⁸R. N. Whybray, *The Succession Narrative: A Study of II Sam. 9-20 and I Kings 1 and 2* (Studies in Biblical Theology 9 [Second Series]; London: SCM, 1968).
- ²⁹Not everyone agrees that Song of Songs is a wisdom book.
- ³⁰An arrangement that is often obscured in most English translations that provide connectives that are not in the Hebrew.
- ³¹Joachim Becker, *Gottesfurch im Alten Testament* (*Analecta Biblica* 25; Rome: Papal Biblical Institute, 1965) examines the various nuances of "The fear of the Lord" in its ethical, cultural, and cultic contexts in Israel.
- ³²For example: Hans-Jürgen Hermisson, "Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (ed. J. G. Gammie et al.; Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1978); Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM, 1972); Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom*

and Creation: The Theology of the Wisdom Literature (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

³³Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 118.

³⁴Thus William Dumbrell, *The Search for Order: Biblical Eschatology in Focus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), pursues the notion as key to eschatology. So also H. H. Schmid, *Gerechtigkeit als Weltordnung* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1968) finds the meaning of “righteousness” in world order.

³⁵Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 115-18.

³⁶See my *Gospel and Wisdom*, in *The Goldsworthy Trilogy* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2000), 467.

³⁷A useful survey is given in Donn F. Morgan, *Wisdom in the Old Testament Traditions* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988). See also the ninth chapter of my *Gospel and Wisdom*.