

## **A God for Life, and Not Just for Christmas! The Revelation of God in the Old Testament Wisdom Literature.**

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7. When we accept these rather loose-fitting parameters, it follows that the message of Jeremiah for today cannot be defined narrowly. However, the starting point is the book as book; that is, the theologizing that has produced the form(s) of the book known to us is irrevocably part of the communication event bequeathed to history. That being so, modern reappropriations are bound to reckon with its reassertion of the rule of God in history, his incomparable power despite the appearance of the opposite, his irreducible insistence on right, and his will to save, reaching beyond whatever might befall, yet without compromising his readiness to deal with evil. This much should be heard loud and clear within believing communities. "Second audiences" (Walter Brueggemann, Ricoeur) may eavesdrop on this divine discourse and even be asked by believers to exercise an imaginative sympathy with them in hearing the text.<sup>45</sup>

45. Lacocque and Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically*, p. xvii; and see n. 29.

## *A God for Life, and Not Just for Christmas!* *The Revelation of God in the* *Old Testament Wisdom Literature*

Craig G. Bartholomew

### Introduction

It is well known that the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament has had a checkered reception in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>1</sup> The dominant historical interests of historical criticism and the seeming lack of theology in the Wisdom books conspired to foster their neglect. A welcome characteristic of the last third of the twentieth century has been a renewal of interest in the Old Testament Wisdom Literature, and at the turn of the millennium a spate of commentaries on Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes have appeared. Without doubt wisdom is back on biblical studies' agenda!

And so it ought to be! OT wisdom is an indispensable part of the older testament and a vital part of the background to the Jesus tradition of the NT.<sup>2</sup> Neglect of the Wisdom books may say rather more about the defi-

1. See H. G. Reventlow, *Problems of Old Testament Theology in the Twentieth Century* (London: SCM, 1985), pp. 168ff.

2. B. Witherington (*Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 1994], p. 156), for example, suggests that some 70 percent of the Jesus tradition has its background in OT wisdom. Not all NT scholars would agree with Witherington's portrayal of Jesus as a sage, but this gives us some idea of the importance of the OT Wisdom Literature for the NT.

ciencies of our own theologies than about the deficiencies of these books.<sup>3</sup> The Wisdom books are a vital part of *tota Scriptura* and fundamental to a full-orbed view of God and humankind. In this chapter my aim is to reflect positively on how the Wisdom books help us to know and follow God.

### A God for All of Life: Wisdom and Creation

An important element in wisdom's renaissance was W. Zimmerli's 1964 essay on the place and limit of wisdom in OT theology, in which he argued that OT wisdom is theological through and through in its presupposition of the doctrine of creation: "If we now try to characterize the theological attitude of Wisdom, we must say: Wisdom thinks resolutely within the framework of a theology of creation."<sup>4</sup> According to Zimmerli wisdom has no connection with Israel's salvation history, but its articulation of order and active exploration of the world is rooted in Genesis 1. This insight has come to be widely recognized and, as J. Day, R. E. Gordon, and H. G. Williamson acknowledge: "Whatever its special emphases, wisdom as the foremost expression of Israelite intellectual endeavour is, in its more usual manifestations, predicated on a belief in the orderly governance of the world by God. Its character is thus misstated if it is presented merely as a secular alternative to the religious outlook of the rest of the Hebrew scriptures."<sup>5</sup> The relationship of wisdom to the history of Israel will be discussed below. Suffice it here to note that the rediscovery of wisdom as deeply religious and of creation as fundamental to wisdom represents major progress towards understanding the Wisdom Literature of the OT.

3. J. L. Crenshaw (*Urgent Advice and Probing Questions: Collected Writings on Old Testament Wisdom* [Atlanta, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1995], p. 79) says of the earlier neglect of wisdom that "one could hardly find a better example of interpretive bias, the point made so often today by practitioners of literary interpretation. The imperialism of a particular view of theology excluded wisdom literature from consideration. Dissatisfaction with salvation history coincided with revived interest in Israel's wisdom, which had earlier captured the imagination after its intimate connection with Egyptian wisdom literature was recognized."

4. W. Zimmerli, "The Place and Limit of the Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 17 (1964): 148.

5. J. Day, R. E. Gordon, and H. G. Williamson, *Wisdom in Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 1.

In Proverbs there are two major types of wisdom — the wisdom of God and the wisdom of humans — and the bridge between these is the doctrine of creation. In Proverbs 1–9, the hermeneutical key to the book as a whole, there are two key passages in this respect (Prov. 3:19, 20 and 8:22–31).

### Proverbs 3:19, 20

Proverbs 3:13–20 is a wisdom poem positioned between an instruction about right behavior towards God (3:1–12) and an instruction about right behavior towards other people (3:21–35). Proverbs 3:13–18 extols wisdom as leading to prosperity and peace. The reference to the tree of life in verse 18 is intriguing. In the OT it occurs elsewhere only in Genesis 2–3. Proverbs 3:19, 20 contain the theological rationale for wisdom being so valuable and so worthy a goal.

According to this rationale, wisdom is so desirable because it is by wisdom that Yahweh founded the earth and by understanding that he established the heavens. The very things that are the goal of the quest for wisdom in Proverbs (cf. 3:13 — the same two words are used as in 3:19) are the means by which Yahweh created the world in which humans live. The reference to "the earth," "the heavens," and "the deeps" in 3:19, 20 speaks of the entire creation.<sup>6</sup> The entire, complex fabric of the world, as it were, has been woven by Yahweh, so that to attain wisdom is truly to find the tree of life because it positions one to live according to the warp and woof of the world. This understanding of wisdom as shaping the whole of creation should not somehow be spiritualized away from the real world in all its dimensions. Proverbs 3:20 maintains that the entire shape of the world down to the way in which rain falls from the clouds embodies God's wisdom. This wisdom embodied in the fabric of the world has immense practical significance, as R. J. Clifford recognizes: "Whoever lives in accord with wisdom will not go against but with the grain of the world. Such a person will receive all the goods a wisely constructed world can offer."<sup>7</sup>

6. R. van Leeuwen, "Proverbs," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 5 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), p. 53.

7. R. J. Clifford, *Proverbs*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1999), p. 54.

## Proverbs 8

In a much expanded version we find the same emphases in Proverbs 8:22-31. Proverbs 8 is Lady Wisdom's longest speech in Proverbs, and one in which she makes a passionate appeal to God's people to embrace wisdom by elaborating on its many advantages. The precise identity of Lady Wisdom and her relationship to Yahweh, particularly as expressed in verse 22, remain controversial. Is wisdom an attribute of Yahweh? If *qānah* in verse 22 is taken to mean "acquire" or "possess," then this understanding of wisdom is likely. However, if in verse 22 we have the language of (pre)creation, then the identity of wisdom becomes more complex.<sup>8</sup> In my opinion we have a literary personification of wisdom rather than a literal creation of a separate being. This is a highly poetic and metaphoric section, and it would, I think, be wrong to extrapolate details about the Godhead from this section.<sup>9</sup>

However we resolve the identity of wisdom, the important point in this section is that nothing was created without God's wisdom being involved. This, rather than the precreation of the being of wisdom, is, I suggest, the implication of the negatives in 8:24-26.<sup>10</sup> To use the language of Proverbs 3, it is by wisdom that Yahweh creates. How to understand *āmon* in 8:30 also remains controversial. *Amon* has been understood in three principal ways: as "artisan," as "trustworthy friend," and as "ward," nursing.<sup>11</sup> Clifford has recently argued that *āmon* is a loanword from Akkadian *ummanu*, meaning "scribe, sage." An *ummanu* in Mesopotamian mythology is a divine or semidivine bringer of culture and skill to the human race.<sup>12</sup>

8. For a useful discussion of Lady Wisdom's identity see R. E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 133ff.

9. I agree with R. van Leeuwen ("Liminality and Worldview in Proverbs 1-9," *Semeia* 50 [1990]: 116) that "in Woman Wisdom we have the 'self-revelation' of an archetypal normativity built into the cosmos, a *tertium quid* that mediates between God and the world, a something embedded in the fabric of creation, but which is not simply to be identified with created things. This cosmic Wisdom serves to ground and legitimate wisdom teaching." See also van Leeuwen, "Proverbs," pp. 96, 97 for a stronger emphasis on the intermediary nature of wisdom.

10. Cf. Clifford, *Proverbs*, p. 96.

11. See Clifford, *Proverbs*, p. 99.

12. Clifford, *Proverbs*, pp. 99-101.

However we resolve the meaning of *amon*, the point of the passage is clear. It is by and with wisdom that Yahweh creates the world, and this is a process of delight and great joy. The very fabric of the world embodies Yahweh's wisdom, and hence there is great advantage in embracing wisdom in one's life, and great folly in rejecting it. Clifford's understanding of the background of *amon* in the bringers of culture in Mesopotamian mythology is attractive in its focus on the potential for cultural development that is built into Yahweh's creation. This would strongly affirm cultural development (cf. Gen. 4:17-22) while also alerting one to the need for wise cultural development.

This understanding in the OT Wisdom books of the whole of creation as having come into existence by Yahweh's wise activity is similar to the positive depiction of the creation as shaped by God's "Let there be's" in Genesis 1. True wisdom consequently involves discovering and living according to the shape Yahweh has given to the world. This is a delight and not a burden — it is sharing in the dance of wisdom in God's world! It should be noted here that just as Genesis 1 insists that the creation is good and in accordance with God's will, so too wisdom knows nothing of a Gnostic anti-creation tendency. All of creation comes from God and embodies his wisdom.

R. van Leeuwen shows how this idea of a creation ordered by God underlies the main metaphors of Proverbs 1-9, the hermeneutical key to the book of Proverbs as a whole. There are several key metaphors in 1-9: the two ways, the two women, the two houses, and so on. However, at a deeper level the root metaphor is that of a creation ordered by God:

... underlying the bipolar metaphorical system of positive and negative youths, invitations/calls, 'ways', 'women', and 'houses' in Proverbs 1-9, is a yet more fundamental reality which these images together portray. These chapters depict the world as the arena of human existence. This world possesses two fundamental characteristics. First is its structure of boundaries or limits. Second is the bi-polar human *eros* for the beauty of Wisdom, who prescribes life within limits, or for the seeming beauty of Folly, who offers bogus delights in defiance of created limits. Love of Wisdom means staying within her prescribed cosmic-social boundaries. . . . Thus, recognition of cosmic structure or limits is inseparable from proper *eros* or direction. . . . The socio-ethical order of Proverbs

1-9 is grounded in the creation order revealed by Wisdom who accompanied God as he set the cosmic boundaries.<sup>13</sup>

An implication of this theology of creation is that Proverbs assumes that all of life is the terrain for service of God. Proverbs knows nothing of the sacred/secular dichotomy that has dogged the footsteps of theology and Church life in the twentieth century. The debate continues about the *Sitz im Leben* of wisdom.<sup>14</sup> Does it originate in school or court circles? In their quest for the *Sitz im Leben* scholars have noted the diverse parts of Israelite society that are referred to in Proverbs. While the *Sitz im Leben* is not irrelevant, the whole point of wisdom is that it is discernible in every aspect of life as God has made it, and certainly not just in the cultic, royal, educational, or family sphere.

In line with Proverbs's theology of creation, wisdom is pictured as crucial to all aspects of life. Proverbs 1 begins by asserting the great value of wisdom for education. In 1:20 wisdom cries out in the busiest parts of the city, presumably the marketplace and the city gates, home *inter alia* of the law courts. Indeed, there are no areas of life that wisdom does not reflect upon: leadership and royalty, wealth and poverty, economics and law, and justice, marriage, and developing sexuality — they are all here, reminding us that *all* of life is a response to God.

This is not to say that the Wisdom books assume that wisdom provides quick and easy answers to the challenges of life. Job and Ecclesiastes, in particular, witness to the complexity of finding wise ways in our broken lives. However, even in Proverbs wisdom has the nature of a quest. The call of Lady Wisdom has to be responded to, her house has to be entered, and her hospitality has to be taken; the path of wisdom has to be followed; wisdom has to be sought in an ongoing way. Indeed, the fear of Yahweh can be understood as the beginning of wisdom in two ways. On the one hand it is the foundation upon which a wise life is built. On the other hand, the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom in the sense that it is the starting point of a lifelong journey towards wisdom. Proverbs is well aware of the role of tradition and the handing on of wisdom in the community and the family. Its epistemology, as M. Fox rightly points out, is not that of empiricism, although observation of the world through the glasses of Israelite

13. Van Leeuwen, "Liminality," pp. 116, 117.

14. For a useful summary of the debate see Crenshaw, *Urgent Advice*, pp. 79-85.

tradition does play an important role.<sup>15</sup> As Proverbs 26:1-12 makes clear, the wise person has to relate his or her wisdom to the actual situations in life, and that calls for interpretation (see especially 26:7, 9). This is an implication of the antithetical proverbs in Proverbs 26:4, 5. It is no easy matter to know whether to speak up in the context of folly or to remain silent. Each situation has to be assessed on its own merits. In this way wisdom is very much akin to what Lesslie Newbigin said repeatedly of Christ, that he is the clue to creation — the implication being that he is the answer but not in any simplistic way. The clue has to be followed and pursued in all areas of life with all the available human resources.

The fundamental notion of the fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom also helps, I think, to resolve a tension that some see between the availability and hiddenness of wisdom. Proverbs seems to see wisdom as calling out in the streets and everywhere else and to be readily available. In the marvelous poem in Job 28, however, wisdom is nowhere to be found. The repetition in 28:12, 20 focuses on the question, Where shall wisdom be found, where is the place of understanding? Even Abaddon and death only hear a rumor of wisdom (8:22)! The answer to this paradox is that God alone is the source of wisdom; he, if you like, is wisdom. This is why real wisdom starts with existential reverence for Yahweh, rather than just reading off his order from the creation. The order is only known out of such existential relationship.<sup>16</sup> This is what G. von Rad infers in his earlier description of Lady Wisdom:

None the less it is correct to say that wisdom is the form in which Jahweh's will and his accompanying of man (i.e. his salvation) approach man. Wisdom is the essence of what man needs for a proper life, and of what God grants him. Still, the most important thing is that wisdom does not turn towards man in the shape of an "It," teaching, guidance, salvation or the like, but of a person, a summoning "I." So wisdom is truly the form in which Jahweh makes himself present and in which he wishes to be sought by man.<sup>17</sup>

15. See M. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 80, 81.

16. Cf. in this respect Murphy's discussion of von Rad's positions on creation order in *The Tree of Life*, pp. 138, 139.

17. G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), p. 444.

It is this insight that underlies O. O'Donovan's Christian ethics in his *Resurrection and Moral Order*.<sup>18</sup> O'Donovan rightly sees that it is a false dichotomy to set kingdom ethics against creation ethics. Indeed, Christ's resurrection reaffirms creation and its order. There is a dynamic, objective order that graciously presses down on all of creation, but it is only rightly known and discerned out of an existential relationship with God through and in Christ.

This hiddenness and availability of wisdom is connected with wisdom's doctrine of the two ways. The surface metaphors of Proverbs 1–9 — two women, two houses, two roads, wisdom versus folly, life and death — make it quite clear that although creation is carved along a certain grain, humans can direct themselves in two different ways in relation to the grain of creation. All of life is inevitably a response to God, but there is a wise response and a foolish response, a response of obedience that leads to life and a path of disobedience that leads to death. The wisdom books do not refer explicitly to Genesis 3 and the fall of humankind, but the very real possibility of disobedience and folly is assumed at every point in the Wisdom Literature, so that, although wisdom is rooted in God's good creation, the Wisdom books deal with the practical reality of finding wise paths in a world in which folly is a constant threat. Just as it is possible to follow God in all areas of life, so too disobedience is a threat in all areas of life. Theologically we might say that creation and fall are comprehensive realities. Yet so too is redemption. Commenting on the tree of life in Proverbs 3:18 Clifford says, "The Genesis story ends with the tree of life guarded by angelic figures (Gen. 3:24). Proverbs reverses Genesis and ends the sequestering of the tree of life. One who finds wisdom finds life."<sup>19</sup> Amid the threat of folly the Wisdom books hold out the hope of truly finding life in God's good creation. In this respect it is no accident that God is regularly described as Yahweh in Proverbs. Historical critics continue to discuss the extent to which these Yahweh sayings cast their shadow over the wider context of Proverbs. However we construe the origin and development of Proverbs, and it is clearly complex, in its canonical shape it is Yahweh as Israel's redeemer God who is the source of wisdom.

18. O. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

19. Clifford, *Proverbs*, p. 55. Yet cf. R. E. Murphy (*Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary 22 [Nashville: Nelson, 1998], p. 22), who argues that in Proverbs the tree no longer enjoys the original mythological background that it has in Genesis and is here simply a metaphor for the good life resulting from wisdom teaching.

It is no mistake that Proverbs ends with the description of the virtuous woman, for this extraordinary woman embodies the wisdom that begins with the fear of Yahweh. A. M. Wolters argues that the form of this pericope is that of a heroic hymn,<sup>20</sup> a form generally reserved for God! This woman is presented to us as a great hero of the faith embodying the fear of the Lord. What has perplexed interpreters down through the ages is that read literally this woman does not appear to be very spiritual! There is no mention of prayer and cultic activity. Indeed, her activities are very secular. Yes, she is a good homemaker, but she is also an estate agent and a wine merchant (31:16). She manufactures and trades in fabrics of the highest international quality (31:22, 24). Because of all these secular activities interpreters down through the ages have been tempted to allegorize this woman. It was particularly, as Wolters tracks, with the Reformation that it became clear that this woman's fear of Yahweh manifests itself precisely in her daily, "secular" activities.<sup>21</sup> She models for us that wise understanding of all of life as religion.

## A God for Life

### Wisdom and Retribution

Most scholars now agree that OT wisdom is rooted in a theology of creation and that in this sense it is religious and not secular. However, whether or not the OT Wisdom books are in touch with the realities of life remains highly controversial. A view has become commonplace that Proverbs articulates a fairly naive view of the relationship between deeds and their consequences (referred to hereafter as the "act-consequence structure") in which wisdom automatically leads to prosperity and well being. Inevitably this theology of retribution resulted with time in a crisis in Israel's view of wisdom, a crisis that is reflected in Job and Ecclesiastes, albeit in different ways. Now, of course, the whole point of wisdom is that it helps one to negotiate the challenges of life in a happy and successful way.

20. A. M. Wolters, "Proverbs XXXI 10-31 as Heroic Hymn: A Form-Critical Analysis," *Vetus Testamentum* 38 (1988): 446-57.

21. A. M. Wolters, "The Song of the Valiant Woman (Prov. 31:10-31): A Pattern in the History of Interpretation (To 1600)," M.A. thesis, McMaster University, Ontario, Canada, 1987.

And Proverbs is all about encouraging people to embrace that wisdom that is written into the fabric of the world. Thus, there is much at stake if this view of the world and of wisdom is fatally flawed by a naive optimism.

R. E. Murphy refers to H. D. Preuss as a representative example of the presuppositions that many scholars hold about wisdom.<sup>22</sup> In this view:

1. Wisdom is marginal to Israel's faith.
2. The God of wisdom is not Yahweh.
3. Wisdom concentrates on the orders in reality.
4. Retribution is one of these orders. The sages sought to discover this mechanical correspondence between action and consequence, as reflected in Proverbs.
5. A deed-consequence viewpoint is the basic dogma of early wisdom.

Clearly, if one understands early wisdom in this way, then Job and Ecclesiastes will be seen as reacting against this mechanical understanding of retribution, thus embodying a crisis of wisdom. Literary and canonical readings of the Wisdom books are casting new light on the doctrine of retribution in them and on their relationships to each other. The reconstruction of the original naive doctrine of retribution followed by a crisis as reflected in Job and Ecclesiastes depends on reconstructing earlier layers of the Wisdom books and then reading these and determining their relationships with each other. This is clear, for example, in Preuss's reconstruction. However, Brevard Childs's canonical hermeneutic and, since the 1970s, the literary turn in biblical studies have helped us to reappropriate the Wisdom books as whole literary units. This is not to deny complex histories of development — clearly a book like Proverbs has a long and complex history — but it is to insist that the juxtaposition of proverbs and of collections and their editing into a book creates a literary unit that is more than the sum of its individual parts and that is intended to speak in its totality.

Work in this direction is still in its early stages. However, already there is considerable fruit to be shown. Fox has opened up highly creative directions in the study of Ecclesiastes, scholars such as R. Polzin have shown how Job can be read as crafted literature, and in Proverbs's study a spate of highly creative works have appeared. Scholars remain divided over the ex-

tent to which Proverbs can or should be read as a literary whole,<sup>23</sup> and two of the most recent commentaries on Proverbs fail to really explore the shape of the book. Clifford notes that Proverbs does not primarily provide information but rather gives its readers a perspective, a vision for life.<sup>24</sup> However, his superb commentary still focuses primarily on historical and ancient Near Eastern contextual issues in the introduction. There is virtually no analysis of the insights that exploration of Proverbs as a literary unit is unearthing. Sadly, Murphy, for all his excellent work on OT wisdom, has even less to say on these issues than Clifford in his 1998 commentary!

An OT scholar who is alert to the literary shape of Proverbs as a whole is van Leeuwen. In particular van Leeuwen has argued that reading Proverbs casts light on the act-consequence structure. Van Leeuwen points out that there are large groups of sayings in Proverbs that assert a simple cause-and-effect relationship, whereby righteousness leads to wealth and wickedness to poverty. These are examples of the "character-consequence-nexus." However, these sayings do not concern concrete, individual acts and their consequences: "It is the long-term character and direction of a person or group (as 'righteous' or 'wicked') which determines life consequences and 'destiny.'"<sup>25</sup> It is a failure to recognize this long-term character that leads scholars to the mechanical view of retribution in Ecclesiastes.

These proverbs, *when taken by themselves*, are the basis for the view of some scholars that the tidy dogmatism of Proverbs does not correspond to reality and is doomed to collapse under the weight of reality, as happened in Job and Qoheleth. Since the foregoing sayings are not always exemplified in human experience, their falsification presumably led to a crisis of faith in Yahweh's maintenance of a just world order.<sup>26</sup>

However, proverbs are *partial utterances*, and the mechanical approach does not do justice to the many sayings in Proverbs that manifest a more complex understanding of the way God works in creation. Particularly relevant in this respect are the "better-than" sayings in Proverbs (cf. 15:16-17;

23. Crenshaw (*Urgent Advice*, pp. 82, 83, 89) urges caution in this respect.

24. Clifford, *Proverbs*, p. vii.

25. R. van Leeuwen, "Wealth and Poverty: System and Contradiction in Proverbs," *Hebrew Studies* 33 (1992): 27.

26. Van Leeuwen, "Wealth and Poverty," pp. 28-29.

22. R. E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary 23A (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1992), p. lxi.

16:16, 19, etc.). The overall picture is a complex one that van Leeuwen sums up as follows:

*In general*, the sages clearly believed that wise and righteous behaviour did make life better and richer, though virtue did not *guarantee* those consequences. Conversely, injustice, sloth, and the like generally have bad consequences. The editor-sages who structured Proverbs sought first to teach these basic "rules of life," thus the heavy emphasis on character-consequence patterns in both Proverbs 1-9 and 10-15. We must first learn the basic rules; the exceptions can come later. Though very aware of exceptions to the character-consequence rule, the sages insisted that righteousness is better than wickedness. The most fundamental and profound reason for this is that they believed that God loves the one and hates the other. For Israel's sages that sometimes seems the only answer. . . . the sages knew that there are limits to human wisdom. General patterns may be discerned, but many particular events may be unjust, irrational, and ultimately inscrutable.<sup>27</sup>

Van Leeuwen also discerns a future-oriented retribution perspective in Proverbs. Proverbs lacks a doctrine of resurrection and yet insists on the triumph of God's justice. For van Leeuwen this is a hallmark of Yahwistic faith:

The sages' stance is to maintain faith in God's justice, even when they personally cannot see it or touch it, even when the recorded past does not verify it. Here religion provides no escape from the pain or absurdities of existence. The book of Job was inevitable, not because Proverbs was too simplistic, but because life's inequities, as reflected in Proverbs, drive faith to argue with the Deity.<sup>28</sup>

Once one recognizes that Proverbs's understanding of retribution is more complex than a mechanical deed-consequence notion, then Ecclesiastes' and Job's relationship to Proverbs and traditional wisdom has to be reevaluated.<sup>29</sup>

27. Van Leeuwen, "Wealth and Poverty," pp. 32, 33.

28. Van Leeuwen, "Wealth and Poverty," p. 34.

29. Admittedly, van Leeuwen's understanding of this greater complexity is only one

### *Job and Ecclesiastes — Living Wisely amid Theodicy and Incomplete Knowledge*

Job and Ecclesiastes are, I suggest, best understood as complementary to Proverbs. They explore wise living *in the midst* of particular exceptions to the act-consequence structure. For example, although the book of Job does overall affirm this structure, the book focuses in detail on a particular exception to that structure. Even though Job ends up "seeing" God and his prosperity is restored (Job 42), between the introduction and conclusion Job is a story of harrowing pain and bad counsel heaped upon a truly wise and godly person.

Job is deliberately portrayed as a great example of a wise, God-fearing man (1:1, 5). Yet, it is precisely to *this* man that this series of terrible events happen. From the introductory scenes in heaven, we, but not Job, are given some understanding that there is a cosmic dimension to Job's suffering. However, after the Satan's introductory appearances, we never hear from him again, and thus, in the context of Job, we should probably not make too much of the "test" aspect of Job's suffering. Indeed, the logic of Job's suffering remains enigmatic throughout the book. Job's counselors try to close the circle of this logic, but they are not portrayed as examples to be followed (cf. 42:7).

The resolution of Job's enigmatic suffering comes through personal encounter with God himself, and particularly with God as transcendent creator. Indeed, in 38-41 the doctrine of creation functions as the key to theodicy. Somehow, this personal encounter resolves at an existential level Job's desperate struggle with the radical exceptions to the act-consequence structure that he has experienced, and he finds his relationship with God immeasurably deepened and his prosperity restored.

Ecclesiastes struggles with the question of the meaning of life amid many exceptions to the act-consequence structure. "What does man gain from all his labor at which he labors under the sun?" (1:3) is the rhetorical question that casts its shadow over the whole of Ecclesiastes. *Qoheleth* —

possibility among a number. J. A. Gladson (*Retributive Paradoxes in Proverbs 10-29* [Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms International, 1979]), for example, makes retributive paradox a function of pluralism and dissent already present in early wisdom traditions. For van Leeuwen ("Wealth and Poverty," pp. 32-33), by comparison, "whatever their historical origin, within Proverbs they have come to express *one* broad worldview which acknowledges the conflict of dogma and experience, yet maintains both."



portrayed initially as the great, wise Solomon,<sup>30</sup> embarks on a quest for an answer to this poignant question. Adopting a methodology that he calls "wisdom" (1:13, 2:3), Qoheleth embarks on his quest by examining different aspects of life to see if meaning can be discerned there. With his wisdom methodology he keeps coming to a *hebel* conclusion.<sup>31</sup> In my view *hebel* is best translated in these conclusions as "enigmatic."<sup>32</sup> In the light of his methodology, the horrible exceptions to the act-consequence structure that Qoheleth keeps discovering lead him to conclude repeatedly that all of life is utterly enigmatic!

Intriguingly, these *hebel* conclusions are juxtaposed throughout Ecclesiastes with what I like to call the *carpe diem* passages, affirming joy and the shalom of life.<sup>33</sup> There is much discussion among scholars about how the *hebel* conclusions relate to the *carpe diem* passages, with scholars continually trying to smooth out Qoheleth's message in accordance with one or the other of these poles. Either he has a negative message or he affirms joy! I have argued that the positioning of the *hebel* conclusions next to the joy passages, a pattern that is repeated throughout Ecclesiastes, is an example of *contradictory juxtaposition*.<sup>34</sup> This pattern, in which opposing perspectives sit in tension with each other, is common in literature and raises the question for the reader of how the two perspectives relate to each other and how they are to be negotiated in an integrating way.

Qoheleth's method and analysis lead him continually, no matter what aspect of life he analyzes, to the *hebel* conclusion that life is utterly enigmatic. If there is meaning, it cannot be discerned. At the same time he knows from his believing Israelite background that God's world is good, and that it is humankind's lot to live life fully in the creation and to enjoy life and labor under the sun! These perspectives sit in strong tension with each other throughout the main body of the text and epitomize what the book is about. Qoheleth knows that his religious tradition is right — there

is a wonderful *shalom* to life under the sun! Yet, in whatever area of life he examines, examples can be found in which the act-consequence structure is broken. These examples lead him to conclude that all is *hebel*!

Does Ecclesiastes give us any clues as to how this very real and existential tension is resolved? I think it does. There are two main clues.<sup>35</sup> First, there is the clue of Qoheleth's *methodology*. He goes out of his way to describe this as "wisdom," but careful analysis of it shows it to be very different from the methodology of Proverbs. Fox rightly picks up the difference between Qoheleth's methodology and that of Proverbs.<sup>36</sup> Qoheleth is empirical in a way that Proverbs is not. Qoheleth's methodology revolves around experience and logic *alone*, whereas Proverbs's approach is rooted in the tradition of the fear of the Lord. Qoheleth's "empiricism" means that any exception undermines the very possibility of meaning and leads to the *hebel* conclusion. For Proverbs, there are, as we have seen, exceptions, but these do not undermine the overall shape of the act-consequence structure. Thus, epistemologically, Proverbs uses observation but to illustrate and support its views, not to prove or establish them in any decisive way.

This difference is crucial, especially in the practical business of affirming meaning amid apparent meaninglessness. It becomes apparent as one reads on in Ecclesiastes that, ironically, what Qoheleth describes as a method of "wisdom" is folly, especially in the canonical light of Proverbs's fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom. The latter is precisely *not* Qoheleth's starting point, and the result is that he keeps running down to the *hebel* conclusion. In other words, what Qoheleth embodies for us is what happens when we try to find meaning in an ambiguous world without starting from the fear of the Lord — we inevitably conclude that life is utterly enigmatic!

The second clue comes at the end of Ecclesiastes. Normally in Ecclesiastes Qoheleth reaches a *hebel* conclusion, and then this is juxtaposed with a *carpe diem* passage. Right at the end of Ecclesiastes this order is reversed (11:7–12:7/8) — the *carpe diem* passage comes first, and this is followed by one of the strongest passages about death and the struggle with meaning. This change in order is important, as is the exhortation to "Remember your creator . . . before . . . before . . . before . . . !" (12:1-7).

The exhortation to "Remember your creator" must be understood

30. Most scholars agree that Ecclesiastes was not written by Solomon. However, in the early part of Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth is portrayed as Solomon, and this is significant. We are to think of Qoheleth as gifted with great wisdom.

31. Various translations as "meaningless," "vanity," "useless," etc.

32. This is G. Ogden's view (*Qoheleth*, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987]).

33. The joy passages are 2:24-26; 3:12-13; 3:22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:8-10.

34. See C. G. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory*, Analecta Biblica 139 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1998), pp. 237-54.

35. For a detailed discussion of this see my *Reading Ecclesiastes*.

36. See Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, pp. 71ff.

"thickly." It is not just a thin exhortation not to forget, but rather Ecclesiastes' equivalent of Job's encounter with the Creator, or Proverbs's equivalent of that fear of the Lord that is the *starting* point of wisdom. It is as though Ecclesiastes is telling us that if we are to discern meaning amid the ambiguities of life and thus to find joy in life, then we must early on let our entire perspective be shaped by an understanding of the fabric of the universe as our Father's. This will not remove us from the challenges of life — note what follows after the threefold "before"! — but it will enable us to wake each day with a sense of the sweetness of life under the sun (cf. 11:7)!

This second clue, like the first, is confirmed by the epilogue (12:9-14). At the end of it all the answer is to fear God and live in obedient trust before him.

### *Wisdom and the Rest of the Old Testament*

Read as above, it is apparent how richly the OT Wisdom Literature contributes to our understanding of God. Yet how does it relate to God as revealed in the other types of literature in the OT? In OT theology the relationship between salvation history, law, prophecy, and wisdom remains a difficult issue. Law is embedded in narrative in the Old Testament, and prophecy appears to presuppose the historical covenant with Israel. So it is not too difficult to see the connection between salvation history, law, and prophecy, at least on the surface level of the Old Testament. However, the relationship of these three to wisdom is controversial.

Murphy has helpfully suggested that "[t]he problem of the relationship between wisdom literature and other portions of the Old Testament needs to be reformulated in terms of a shared approach to reality."<sup>37</sup> We certainly need to guard against anachronistically imposing modern notions of a sacred-secular dualism upon ancient Israel.<sup>38</sup> Personally I think it is in the area of a shared approach to reality, or what one might call a worldview, that the solution is to be found.

The wisdom and legal traditions in the OT are clearly distinct, and yet

37. R. E. Murphy, "Wisdom — Theses and Hypotheses," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien*, ed. J. G. Gammie et al. (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1978), p. 38.

38. See, for example, J. Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 219.

they manifest some awareness of each other.<sup>39</sup> Both have in common the ordering of the life of God's people. Van Leeuwen argues persuasively, as we have seen, that a notion of creation order underlies the surface metaphors of Proverbs 1-9. He says that the worldview that Proverbs exhibits is a "carved" one in that "cultural and personal exhortation is grounded in the reality of the created word with its inbuilt normativity."<sup>40</sup>

This link of wisdom with creation has long been recognized. What is often not noted, though, is that the order that Proverbs finds in the "carved" creation cannot be simply read out of the creation. This is the point that Fox makes about Israelite wisdom: it is not empirical in the way that Ecclesiastes is; it assumes ethical principles that it supports through observation. This is the sort of position in Genesis 1-2. The ordering of creation is not opposed to instruction from Elohim/Yahweh Elohim. Order and instruction or torah go hand-in-hand, and obedience requires both a good creation and instruction. Similarly Wisdom Literature assumes certain ethical principles that are not just read off creation but are often very similar to the principles found in the law. Van Leeuwen, for example, says that Proverbs 1-9 indicates that it is in "the liquid abandonment of married love" that healthy *communitas* takes place. As van Leeuwen notes, "This reality has its parallel at Sinai."<sup>41</sup>

Thus it can be argued that while wisdom is most closely related to creation, it presupposes instruction. Similarly, when the narrative frame, within which law always occurs, in the final form of the OT is foregrounded, it becomes apparent that the law of Yahweh the redeemer God is also the law of the creator God.

I suggest, therefore, that law and wisdom share an underlying and often tacit presupposition of a "carved" creation order. This is their shared reality or worldview. Instruction from Yahweh would not be seen to conflict with the way he ordered his creation but would provide the ethical principles for discovery of that liminality.

If salvation history and law and wisdom reflect a shared vision of reality, is there an OT concept that embodies this vision? I think there is: *covenant*. In my opinion by far the best biblical theological work done on cove-

39. See van Leeuwen, "Liminality," p. 122, for some of the links between Proverbs and Job and the Pentateuch. Van Leeuwen argues that certain texts in Proverbs and Job presuppose the historical tradition of the gift of the land.

40. Van Leeuwen, "Liminality," p. 118.

41. Van Leeuwen, "Liminality," p. 132.

nant to date is that by W. J. Dumbrell.<sup>42</sup> With meticulous exegesis Dumbrell has shown that there is one major covenant in the OT and that it is rooted in creation and is all about God achieving his purposes for his good creation. Beneath this umbrella the dynamic order of creation, the historical unfolding of creation, instruction about how to live in the creation, and reflection on the creation order are thoroughly complementary and not in the least antithetical. It is modern historicism and not biblical religion that sets creation order against history. Yahweh is, as the second creation narrative reminds us, Yahweh Elohim<sup>43</sup> (as Genesis 1 and 2 so clearly show)!

### Conclusion

In this chapter we have looked at the revelation of God in the OT Wisdom books. The emerging picture is rich and challenging, for the Wisdom Literature confronts us with a God who wishes to be with us and to rule over us in all areas of our individual and communal lives. Truly, *this* God is for life, and not just for Christmas!

Much could be said about the importance of OT Wisdom Literature for contemporary Christian thought. Suffice it here to make two points. First, wisdom stands adamantly against the privatization of religion that characterizes modernity and much evangelicalism. Modernity allows freedom of religion as long as it is kept private and out of the major cultural areas of education, politics, economics, art, etc. Much contemporary Christianity goes along with this and concentrates on building the institutional Church and evangelism while seeing "secular" activities as second rate and distinctly less spiritual. OT wisdom, by comparison, sees all of life as an arena for serving God by being wise in that area of life. Wisdom calls us to follow its paths in education, politics, the marketplace, and so forth.

My second point follows from this. Such a comprehensive understanding of what service of God involves alerts us to the Christian journey as far bigger, more exciting, and daunting than we may have imagined be-

fore. Truly, from this perspective, the fear of Yahweh *is* the beginning of wisdom! The whole of the creation and history opens up before us as the terrain of our journey *coram deo*. Such a journey in this fallen and yet fundamentally good world will require real skill, and the Bible — and in our context the OT Wisdom books — is there as a travel guide to keep us going in the right direction.

42. See especially W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenantal Theology* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984).

43. See Gen. 2:4-9. Gen. 1:1-2:3 refers to God as Elohim; 2:4-9 refers to God as Yahweh Elohim. The implication is that Yahweh (the redeemer God of Israel, see Exodus 3 and 6) is the creator.