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An Overview of the Wisdom Books and Theology

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Among the biblical books that belong to what we call the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament, the book of Proverbs is by far the most important. It is the book that best represents biblical wisdom, its interests, its horizon, and the ideal world of the sages responsible for this intellectual tradition.

The book of Proverbs also best represents the literary genres typical of wisdom—be it biblical or extra-biblical. These genres are the saying and the instruction. Wisdom is not a kind of thinking characteristic or exclusive of Israel's tradition. Rather Israel shared it with other contemporary, indeed with more ancient civilisations of the Ancient Near East, especially Egypt and Mesopotamia.

The wisdom saying is a direct outcome of human observation and experience of reality. It is commonly termed "proverb" but this is rather misleading, since proverbs in normal sense are different. Wisdom saying and modern proverb have in common the fact that they are both a condensed enunciation of an experience. A major difference is, however, that the saying is artistic while the proverb is popular.

Both saying and instruction are the work of anonymous authors but the instruction involves a direct, personal relationship between the speaker and the addressee while the saying is impersonal. The instruction is pronounced by a teacher of wisdom, a sage, and reflects the setting of the school. I think that we have good reasons to suppose the existence of schools for the formation of young people of good family in ancient Israel. In fact already at the beginning of the monarchy the need was likely felt of such schools to answer the necessity of forming administrators, officials and scribes. From the texts come down to us, especially from the book of Proverbs, we learn the teaching was both professional and ethical. Not only had the young people to be trained for the administration and politics but they also had to be prepared as well-formed persons, trustworthy and reliable.

The wisdom teacher echoed the instruction of the family, of the tribe and of the ancient sages. He was a conveyor of wisdom from the ancient sages and a creator of wisdom at the same time.

The instruction is also pronounced by Dame Wisdom, a woman that is the feminine personification of the plan and meaning of creation intended by God the Creator.

Plan before creation = wisdom

•poured on every creature

•Man meets wisdom that speaks to him personified in a woman

Avery solemn figure, Dame Wisdom goes out to meet people, especially untrained youngsters, speaks to them with a double purpose: to instruct them and to counter the negative influence of another, dangerous feminine figure, Lady Folly.

Parents, teachers, personal experience of the sages and one's own experience, Dame Wisdom itself—all these express themselves in the sayings and in the instructions of the Book of Proverbs. All of them are voices of one revelation and faces of one presence—God's revelation and God's presence in reality. This revelation and presence are, at the same time, manifest and hidden, close and elusive, plain and unattainable. They are manifest, close and plain for those who are submissive and capable of listening; on the contrary, they are hidden, elusive and unattainable for those who are arrogant and incapable of listening. Ultimately parents, teachers, sages and Dame Wisdom are voice and face of the One who at the beginning created wisdom and with its assistance created the universe—God.

The teachers of Israel investigated areas of existence that do not show up, or that are treated only marginally, in the Book of Proverbs, such as suffering, work, love, sacred history. Other books of the wisdom tradition, besides the Book of Proverbs, specifically treat these problems, while sharing some of its basic positions.

*Key-note of every wisdom book***Alviero Nicacci ofm**

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(Job)

Suffering might be seen as punishment, but this is not the case with the suffering of the righteous. To focus this problem the story of Job is depicted—a man that “was blameless and upright, who feared God, and turned away from evil,” and still was struck by terrible calamities.

Job

- Relationship God-man with suffering as a test case

Job’s story serves as the framework for a greater theological problem: the relationship between the creature and his Creator. A solution to this problem maintains that man cannot be right before God or claim any right or call upon him to account for his activity. Another solution claims that suffering can be an act of grace because God can send it with the purpose of producing repentance and praise in man. However, no human reason, as much theological it might be, can satisfy the suffering person. The solution to the problem can only come from the vision of God and from the contemplation of his wisdom. God is the one who has created all the mighty beings of the universe and controls everything that remains beyond man’s authority. Only the contemplation of God’s power over the universe can make the incomprehensible suffering acceptable. It can convince man that suffering has a meaning in God’s superior plan.

(Qoheleth)

By meditating on the vanity of human activity, people can arrive to the brim of despair. No trace remains of all man’s work, nor does any advantage come from it. This meditation can bring people to a point where wisdom and folly join and touch one another dangerously. The sage is not able to completely embrace wisdom nor is he able to totally free himself from folly. Qoheleth’s solution is to keep the opposites together in a balance that is, however, painful and even agonizing. Wisdom has advantages but cannot free people from death. Human work is basically a research on God’s works of creation. It is, however, vanity and chasing wind, says Qoheleth. What is left for humans? The final answer of Qoheleth reads as follows: to enjoy when God bestows gladness; to ponder things when God sends suffering. This solution is frequently misinterpreted as hedonistic or opportunistic. It is, however, a wise equidistance from the opposites in a anguishing effort to grasp the moment from God’s hand.

Qoheleth

- Vanity of human activity
- Tension of the opposites
- Enjoy God’s gifts

(Song of Songs)

To the surprise and even scandal of many during the centuries, God’s revelation through creation has chosen as its intermediary the love story of two young people.

Song of songs

- Revelation of God’s love through two young people
- Two ways revelation: creation; Sinai

The boy and the girl open themselves up to life by discovering one another in the framework of the countryside where flowers blossom and trees grow. Through their love God is revealed as Love, the power of life. Interpreted in this way, the Song of songs is not profane at all. On the contrary, hymn love is a sacrament of God. In this perspective the Song of songs can be interpreted in a spiritual and mystical way. In fact, the key passage for the interpretation of the Song of songs is 8:6-7 where Love is exalted beyond everything (as is Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs) as the force of life in the world.

(Wisdom theology)

From Proverbs through Job, Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus), Baruch, the Wisdom of Solomon and some apocryphal writings, there runs a precious thread—perhaps the most precious one in the theology of Old Testament wisdom. It runs through centuries, indeed a full millennium; it grows and enriches itself until its final goal and summit: Jesus of Nazareth, the perfect Teacher of wisdom and the incarnate Wisdom himself.



From Lady Wisdom to wisdom incarnate



Trajectory of wisdom

- pre-existent wisdom
- incarnate wisdom in the world and in the law
 - lives among people, invites
 - rejected, he returns to heaven
 - he will come again as the judge

Jesus is the voice and the face of the invisible God, the fulfilled harmony of the universe. He is the only one capable of reconciling heaven and earth because he is the creator and at the same time a creature and the obedient Son. The trajectory of wisdom that emerges from the texts was a mysterious preparation for the incarnation of the eternal Son of God. He is the pre-existent Wisdom, partner of the Creator, maker and mediator of creation. He is Wisdom incarnate in the creatures of the world and in the precepts of the law of Moses; Wisdom that lives among the humans, invites them to listen to his words and to enter his house to participate in his banquet. He is Wisdom that was not listened to and therefore he returned to heaven. He is to come again as the eschatological judge.

Thus we see that the authors of the New Testament made use of pure wisdom language and categories in order to tell the unutterable mystery of God's incarnation. They drew from wisdom theology the capability of expressing the trajectory of the Son descending from the bosom of God to the earth, again ascending into heaven, and finally coming again as judge at the end of times.

Until today that language and that trajectory represent a valid model of sacramental understanding of reality. They are able to nourish the faith of believers in our world. Indeed, every creature is a sacrament of God, especially the Holy Scriptures and the sacrament of the Body and Blood of our Lord. Through them we can meet God.

Sacred history, or the history of salvation in the Old Testament, together with the great themes of election, covenant and the law, became an object of meditation for the Old Testament sage.

Sacred history, election, covenant, law are not themes of the wisdom tradition until Ben Sira, Baruch and the wisdom of Solomon in the III-II cent. BC

The intriguing neglect of the theme of salvation by the ancient sages was counterbalanced, even totally compensated, thank to the writings of Ben Sira, Baruch and Wisdom of Solomon. Indeed, it is most embarrassing to discover that Proverbs, Job, Qoheleth and the Song of Songs never mention the great works of God in Israel's sacred history. Not only are these works not mentioned, but they are also not included or implied in the horizon of these sacred books. Sacred history is simply not necessary for the interpretation of the older wisdom.

When, in the third–second century BC, Ben Sira and Baruch declared that wisdom is the Law of Moses, they do not intended to deny the wisdom tradition but rather to enrich it. From that time on, wisdom includes the law as a form of revelation and as a model of life. In fact, it is the one and same God that created the universe and redeemed Israel. This wisdom motif also directly reaches the person of Jesus. He is the perfect incarnation of God. He fulfils both creation and redemption up to the point that creation is redeemed and redemption involves a new creation.

From this outline there emerges an integrated and global interpretation of wisdom. However, we have to be aware of the fact that the large majority of the biblical scholars are not of the same idea. For most of them, the Book of Proverbs is optimistic to the point of being dogmatic and forgetting reality. The same is true of Ben Sira, Baruch and the Wisdom of Solomon. Job, on the contrary, appears to them to be too problematic and even blasphemous, while Qoheleth is too devastating in his statements, and the Song of Songs too erotic.

It is not my intention here to disprove these assumption—not an easy task in any case. It is enough for me to outline the basic ideas of my interpretation of biblical wisdom. *Proverbs* is certainly optimistic. From its perspective, Proverbs has all the reasons to be such since God is present in the world with his wisdom and providence. It is God that men and women meet in their experiences of life; he is their provident creator—not destiny or other powers he should be afraid of. The Book of Proverbs is also optimistic because of its pedagogic orientation, in order to persuasively attract young people to the hard way of wisdom.

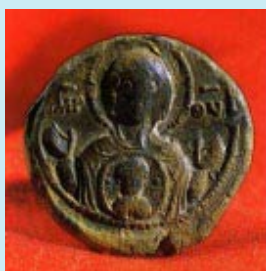
The drama of the Book of *Job*, with all its vehement invectives and scraps of unexpected faith, and finally the contemplation of God's wisdom, force and providence in the universe, is the best possible means to come to help those who are embittered in their spirits. It would be unfit, of course, speak to them in the language of Proverbs. Indeed, God's contemplation proposed by the Book of Job can help those people overcome self-centeredness and look at their problems in God's perspective.

Qoheleth, on its part, represents a unique and powerful proposal for those people who sense the tremendous responsibility of every-day's life—both its importance and vanity. It fits those people

The SBF is today a Roman Catholic Faculty of biblical and archaeological studies in the Holy Land sponsored by the Franciscan Custody of Terrasanta. It is located in the Old City of Jerusalem, in the Flagellation friary at the IInd Station of the Via Dolorosa.

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who wish to get to the bottom of things—especially the meaning of human activity on earth. Qoheleth's solution of keeping the opposites together is capable of encouraging people to fully appreciate the physical reality seen in a close relationship with the activity of God himself in creation. It also helps to perceive its relativity, its risks and deficiencies.

The *Song of Songs*, interpreted literally, needs not to be rejected, nor regarded with suspicion because of its erotic character. Indeed, it *is* erotic, but it is its purpose to show that the love of young people is a special form of revelation for the adults. It is a revelation of God as Love (with a capital L) and as the force of life present in the world. As a consequence, the allegorical and spiritual interpretation, that is traditional both in the Jewish and Christian literature, can be derived from the literal meaning naturally and without any breaks or discontinuities. The reason is simply that the only basis is not the love of two youngsters but God's love—or God as Love—revealed through human love. The different kinds of erotic and of spiritual love are not irreconcilable. They are rather revelatory manifestations of the one and the same Love for humanity.

Wisdom books

- Diversity and unity
- Fear of God and revelation through creation
- Differences depend on the situations in life

Let us listen to each sacred book in what they have to say to us—nothing more and nothing less. Let us not expect them to give comprehensive or dogmatically precise answers. Perhaps more than in other fields, the reader is called upon to reconstruct by himself, little by little, as a kind of a mosaic, the conception of the world, of life, of God in accordance with wisdom teaching.

The unity of diversity in the wisdom tradition is done in the house of Lady Wisdom. The main criteria under which the unity is done are fear of the Lord and revelation through creation. The fear of the Lord is a major principle underlying all the wisdom books—except for the *Song of Songs*. The concept of revelation through creation is present in all the books. This concept is enough to make the *Song of Songs* a wisdom book although God is not explicitly mentioned.

The more deeper we look into the different wisdom books, the more clearly we perceive a profound consonance under a dissonance in their surface. This fact does not mean that the differences are diminished or invalidated. In fact, the differences depend on the situations in life that are specific to the different wisdom books. These are experiences of everyday life (in *Proverbs* and *Ben Sira*) or, on the contrary, strong experiences not representing normality but emergency in life (especially *Job*). Thus, the dissonance is due to this exterior difference while the profound meaning and the revelation that comes out for humankind constitute the consonance.

At a deeper level, the consonance concerns the relationship between humankind and God while the dissonance depends on the different situations in which that relationship takes place. These are, in turn, the teaching of the family or the wisdom teacher, the observation (or the revelation) of creation, suffering, the frustrating reality of human work, love in adolescence, the sacred history.

In sum, wisdom teaches humankind to experience the world as a sacrament—a sacrament that allows meeting God in fear.

Wisdom ethics

- Fear of the Lord
- Proper time

The ethics that derives from this world view is fundamentally concordant, still it bears the mark of the differences from which it derives. Fundamentally, it is the ethics of God's fear. However, it recommends different attitudes from time to time, such as doing something and abstaining; caution, yet not paralysis; moderation that does not prevent people from enjoying the present.

Saying that biblical wisdom proclaims a ethics of God's fear may be not sounding very pleasant to modern ears. One should, however, understand the correct meaning of the well-known wisdom motto "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." In biblical terms, fear is not the opposite of love, nor is a relationship based on God's fear one of submission for fear of punishment. Only those who proclaim freedom at any costs might think in that way. However, they run the risk of proclaiming eradication of mankind from their basis and ground, rather than freedom.

Indeed, the motto of God's fear teaches supreme freedom and at the same time supreme dependence, supreme creativity and supreme submission, supreme greatness and supreme littleness. Wisdom is to keep opposites together.

A characteristic of the wisdom ethics is the proper time. Wisdom ethics knows a constant attitude,

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that is God's fear, but no behaviour fixed once for ever. God's fear is a challenge to constantly live open to the unpredictable God—eyes, ears and heart, exterior and interior must be wide open to him.

Since God is unpredictable, human behaviour can never be unequivocal. It always needs to adapt itself to the changing circumstances or—amounting to the same thing—to God's revelation and will in that specific moment.

Wisdom ethics engages all human capabilities, especially their heart. The heart is the interior casket where every human being find himself and experiences God's sovereign presence; it is the melting-pot of every experience; the seat of revelation and the meeting-place of God and the self. Those who are not ready to engage themselves up to the level of their heart, will never reach wisdom because they will never meet God, although wisdom and God, that are one reality, are all around him and mysteriously embrace him.

Wisdom ethics is, then, the ethics of proper time; yet this does not mean time-serving for the criterion is not human advantage but God's will in a given situation. I'm sure that we can learn a lot from the wisdom books about morality.

Despite all the appearances, wisdom is, then, profoundly theological. The fact that wisdom does not refer to the Sinai revelation is no handicap. Indeed, wisdom possesses a theology, ethics, spirituality and soteriology of its own from its oldest phase.

It would seem that the importance of the Law, covenant and election imposed itself in Israel by the time of the deuteronomistic reform in the seventh century BC. The very fact that the older wisdom does not consider these issues can be seen as a sign of antiquity. To ignore these issues after the seventh century would have been hardly understandable.

Clearly the men of Hezekias that copied and transmitted the proverbs of Solomon according to Prov 25:1, did not find in them anything despicable nor deficient. Probably, in the time of Hezekias the deuteronomistic reform was started. It tried to rebuild the nation on a religious and social levels on the foundations of the covenant and election. The historical occasion was provided by the influx in Jerusalem of the Israelite refugees from the Northern kingdom after the fall of their capital Samaria in 722 BC. Acting as a new Solomon, Hezekias encouraged such an influx. He also proclaimed a common Passover, and built a new quarter in Jerusalem with the intention of reuniting the scattered people and building a united nation anew.

It was, then, a period rich of hopes, new insights and activities. The northern traditions merged with the southern ones. Ancient religious compositions—specifically a large part of wisdom—were studied and copied. Some received their final form by that time. It is certainly not a case that biblical wisdom is especially related to two royal figures—Solomon, the initiator of the wisdom movement and the organizer of the Hebrew state, and Hezekias, the transmitter of the wisdom literature and the restorer of the state and of the national consciousness.

Wisdom appeals to humankind in concrete situations, small or great, of life. It addresses the problems of the individual and the problems of social life that are not addressed by the rest of the OT. It is a secular morality. It is world-oriented without repudiating the temple and the cult. Its temple is, however, mainly the world. From the world comes the will of God that reveals to humanity and goes off to meet people. In the world unfolds itself the task of humanity—in themselves, in the family and in society.

