

Wisdom and the Place of Wisdom Literature in the Thinking of Sages

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Introduction

Among the most prominent thoughts in Christian theology is Wisdom Literature. People often ask what the concept “wisdom” means and if at all there is the place of Wisdom Literature in the thinking of the sages. This article seeks to explore the above question. The paper will do this first, by identifying and discussing the concept of wisdom and thereafter, the place of Wisdom Literature in the thinking of the sages. Among others, it will argue by the use of various scholars, that the sages’ position of Wisdom Literature as a phenomenon is not unique to Israel; it is a universal reality, a creation of God or object of faith, and also as secular or human experiential reality.

The Concept of Wisdom

The term wisdom has a number of connotations. Roland Murphy understands wisdom [*hokmah* in Hebrew and *Sophia* in Greek] as a wider ranging term designating the skill of an artisan [Exod 36:8], loyal judgement [1 Kgs 3:28], cleverness [Prov 30:24-28], proper rules of conduct [Prov 2:1-22], piety [Job 1:1], or a way of coping with life (447).

Scott asserts that wisdom corresponds to what we usually think of today; that is, sagacity, insight and good judgement, in the light of human values and goals. Importantly, there is no sharp lines differentiating wisdom from knowledge as in old times in Ancient Israel as the wise man then was with some special skill and above all a man who could teach others because he had superior understanding on how life ought to be lived and its meaning (3). Scott continues to claim that the primary meaning of *hokmah* is superior mental ability or special skill with no necessarily moral reference. Broadly speaking, the moral and religious element is a later enlargement of the meaning

of the term. Yet somewhere, Scott tells us that in Job 38:36, thus, “who gave the ibis wisdom and endowed the cock with foreknowledge?” Here, *Hokmah* simply means intelligence as affirmed or denied to natural objects (7). Natural objects like stones and plants are claimed to possess neither wisdom nor intelligence. Animals too lack wisdom or reason.

The Place of Wisdom Literature in the Thinking of the Sages

Gerhard von Rad had a special place for Wisdom literature in his writings. He regarded Israel’s wisdom as not unique. He notes that the assumption that wisdom was a religious phenomenon of post-exilic Israel proved to be completely out of place as it was clear that it was a phenomenon common to Ancient East, “a cultural commodity with respect to which Israel was to a greater extent a recipient not a donor” (9). This implies that wisdom Literature was never unique to Israel scholars discovered texts similar to Israel’s in other cultures and traditions.

In an attempt to find the place of wisdom literature in the thinking of the sages, Evode Beaucamp preferred to link wisdom to creation and redemption. He asserts that the Lord by wisdom created the earth and is the principal who placed every mortal in existence. Accordingly, this urges one to acknowledge one of the great truths of the Scripture which asserts that, “one and the same plan embraces creation and human history. The creative act, is the first act of the great drama that terminates in the Redemption” (40). Certainly, wisdom belongs to God and it is through the very wisdom that he created everything that exists. The redemption came through the Messiah who is personified with wisdom. This wisdom existed before creation. This is why, for Beaucamp, the Jews were preparing for the coming of the Messiah and were already able to read in the hymn of Proverbs the statement of St Paul “all things are yours” [1 Cor. 3:22-23] (44). That is to say, we own everything in Christ and this very Christ, who is wisdom itself, is God.

In theological writings Claus Westermann gives a more significant and constructive place to creation and wisdom than other writers. Westermann's theological construction consists of two interactive poles: Soteriology [history] and blessing [creation]. His presentation of history follows essentially Von Rad in setting forth an ancient historical credo that becomes the basis for themes or traditions developed in the Exodus-Sinai complex that later joined with the covenant of Deuteronomy. He sees the Old Testament as eschatological in its basis movement, meaning that the goal of history is the salvation of the world. Within this driving thrust of history, Yahweh saves his chosen people through the means of great acts of Redemption.

The second pole, "blessing", incorporates the divine power that preserves and enhances life and undergirds the continuing order of creation. Divine blessing includes the gifts and continuation of the power of procreation, the provision of sustenance, and support for the structure of life (Perdue 35). In his view of the Old Testament, creation is beyond history, meaning that it does not exist with a temporal movement. While creation is a presupposition of faith, it is not a historical saving act and that is not the object of confession. Creation was not the part of the ancient belief for the Old Testament could not conceive of an alternative to God's creation of the world. In his view, creation theology does seek to secure the present by linking the order of reality to the wellspring of prime origins. Creation theology embraces universalism; just as pointed out earlier that Israel inherited its understanding of divine creation from the Ancient Near East, and like its sources, developed two separate traditions: the creation of humanity and order of the two, and creation of the world.

Subsumed in the pole of blessing [creation], Westermann gives wisdom an important place in Wisdom Literature. Wisdom's gifts are maturity, longevity, reproduction, and general enhancement of life but those come as a result of divine blessing. Wisdom sayings summarize God's power of blessing. Like a larger theme of creation, wisdom is

not specifically limited to the chosen people, rather, it is universal in scope. Wisdom and creation share this universalism for God creates, sustains, and blesses all of life. Wisdom is the power, design, and life enhancing gift of God that shapes and undergirds reality (Perdue 26). This means that Westermann offers at least an approach to theology that gives an important place to creation and wisdom. However, while regarded as an important pole of dialectic with history, creation is still not for him an object of faith but rather, only a given that provides a prologue to an Israelite faith still centred in salvation history (Perdue 26).

In approaching creation theology in wisdom tradition, Childs largely summarizes the work of Gerhard Van Rad's wisdom in Israel. Childs notes that wisdom is not a later tradition on Old Testament but rather belongs to the earliest layer of tradition. While rejecting the characterization of early wisdom as secular, Childs still contrasts old wisdom rooted in human experience with late wisdom's propensity for theological reflection. Childs emphasizes that wisdom looks to nature and not history as its theological reflection. Wisdom, not history is the voice of divine revelation in creation that testifies the divine order that provides the basis for faith and life. He notes that at least this is true until Ben Sira finally includes salvation history within the theology. Childs argue that wisdom offers an important witness, for it demonstrates how divine revelation and human experience could be brought into profound harmony without destroying either testimony (32). This implies that wisdom does not rely on history but on creation. Wisdom has God as its origin and it is the same God who brings order in the world. Moreover, revelation and human experience do not contradict each other but rather remain concord in as far as Wisdom is concerned.

Walther Zimmerli agrees that wisdom theology is grounded in creation. Noting the absence of salvation history in the writings of the wise that made their way into Jewish Canon, he contended that wisdom has its own structure for theological expression, while such

divine names like “maker” and “creator” constantly occur in wisdom text (Prov 14:31), he realizes that God is never addressed as ‘God of Israel’ [...] the book does not bring up the theme of election and salvation history. Jesus Ben Sira writing in 2nd early BC is the first to integrate redemptive history and creation (34). Here, it is clear to claim that creation is truly at the centre of wisdom theology implying that it brings together all the dimensions of God-talk as well as man, morality, knowledge and the society at large. It is inclusive.

Many scholars contended that wisdom Literature is largely a human enterprise with its focus on human nature and function. They argue that at least this is true of early wisdom, if not also for the entire realm of canonical literature. Perdue argues that wisdom is either largely concerned with the individual person or with humanity but not with God and the general theme of Israel faith. This is why Zimmerli, early in his study of Literature of the sages, contended that wisdom was in essence the quest to master life. Accordingly, “wisdom is radically anthropocentric” (qtd. in Perdue 34). Thus, he brought the notion of wisdom as a human enterprise and the theological rubric of creation, stressing the nature and role of humanity. Moreover, Zimmerli referred wisdom to an art of steering and argued that the objective of the wise person is in the mastering of life by the means of coming to the knowledge of the world and in applying such knowledge to any and all circumstances in life of humans by means of human institutions (Perdue 34-35).

In the words and thinking of Perdue, each approach to wisdom theology has something to offer and the tradition of the sages is surely directed to the human beings who are invited to take up the call of wisdom. According to him, this call is issued to those who would live in harmony with God, creation and human society and hope to experience wellbeing. Certainly his stand is that “it is incorrect to regard even the earliest stages of wisdom as largely anthropocentric and secular” (45). He continues to say that wisdom, even from the earliest stages is a teaching grounded in the fear of God, an expression

that points both to worship and faithful affirmation that God is Creator and Sustained of life. This again means that efforts to view tradition as basically individualistic are wrong in his view.

Roland Murphy is of the view that wisdom literature is anthropocentric at its base. He points out that the sages asked about human good, which they viewed to rest in long life, health, wealth, children and reputation. He adds that, the focus was on individual not larger groups or nation itself. Truth was “believed to be universal” (802). This means that even the insights from abroad were equally valid and everyone despite nationality difference was allowed to contribute to the thinking arena. Universality of wisdom here, points out the special place that Wisdom literature has in the thinking of the sages, that is to say, no one can limit wisdom to geographic boundary.

Another sole place of wisdom literature in the thinking of the sages is that of looking at wisdom from an international context. Scott notes that Hebrew wisdom was by no means unique phenomenon in the ancient world, but rather, “its literature has been found to have to have much in common with similar records from contemporary records and older cultures notably those of Egypt and Mesopotamia” (23). This implies that Old Testament wisdom literature bears little marks of distinctively Israel belief found in the Law and the Prophets. We can therefore argue that in their debates about wisdom, the sages realize that wisdom literature is not a unique to Israel only but rather, it is a common phenomenon. The international feature wisdom dominates the thinking of the sages.

Walther Zimmerli sought to legitimize wisdom theology, which he correctly characterized as creation theology (Murphy 4). He anchored it in Gen 1:28. Thus the Lord authorizes human dominion over creation-wisdom’s task. He further raised the question whether the creation doctrine and wisdom experience might be considered as possibly a second source of revelation. He denied this and claimed that “what happened was that Israel opened the entire world of creation and

entered it with its faith in Yahweh, by subordinating the realms it discovered there to Yahweh. This is the locus of wisdom lore, whose international character [...] was well known to Israel” (qtd. in Murthy 4). His view of creation reflects his understanding of wisdom, which required neither revelation nor theological reflection. This is to say that, he placed Wisdom as something secular or profane. Simply put, Israel became a people under the overwhelming name, *YHWH* and it was by this name that they identified with the God of creation and the God of wisdom. There was in fact no other alternative for the true believer. That means there is no mark that they regarded creation and wisdom as outside their faith.

Conclusion

This paper identified and discussed the concept of wisdom and the place of Wisdom Literature in the thinking of the Sages. It defined wisdom, among other definitions as the natural ability to make crucial decisions in a particular situation. The article went on to argue that the sages gave a special place to Wisdom Literature in their thinking. They place Wisdom Literature as not a unique phenomenon to Israel, a universal reality, an object of revelation or faith and as a secular or anthropocentric reality, among others.

List of Sources

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