

ST NINIAN'S POLLOKSHIELDS  
LENT 3, 2005  
OLD TESTAMENT BASICS (4)

ON THE WISDOM LITERATURE

So far in this course on Old Testament basics, we have considered why we bother with the Old Testament at all, looked at the prophets and, last week, thought about history from the perspective of Old Testament writers, as the history of faith and encounter with God over a very long period.

This week we come to discuss a body of material in the Old Testament (and Apocrypha) which biblical scholars invite us to call the “wisdom literature”. In the Old Testament itself this term covers the books of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes; in the Apocrypha (Jewish books generally written in the 200 hundred years or so before Jesus, often in Greek and not the Hebrew of the Old Testament) two further books, The Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus or The Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira or Sirach for short. In addition wisdom-type material is scattered in other parts of the OT, notably in the psalms, but also in the prophets and elsewhere.

What kind of writing is this wisdom? Well, a good starting point is to look at how the words “wise” and “wisdom” are used in the OT. It can mean the “skill” of an artisan or craftsman (Ex 36.8); or it might be the capacity of a king to do justice, as with Solomon: *All Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered; and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to execute justice.* (1 Kings 3.28); or it could be the basis of a pious and religious life: *the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight* (Prov 9.10); or it can cover rules and instruction for right conduct: *My child, if you*

*accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding;.... Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; prudence will watch over you; and understanding will guard you.* (Proverbs 2 selected verses). This gives you a bit of a flavour of the range of these wisdom books from proverbial sayings – pride comes before a fall, that kind of thing – to practical knowledge and skills based on experience of life and observation of how the world is and how society operates; from moral instruction on the good life and the avoidance of evil, to reflection on the relationship between God and human beings; from advice to kings and governors to how to run a business and a home.

Scholars have long argued about the origin of this kind of writing in Israel. Where did it come from? Some of it is undoubtedly the Israelite version of a very common and ancient body of literature found all over the Ancient Near East, not least in Egypt – parts of Proverbs are very similar to Egyptian wisdom texts – which were produced in “wisdom” schools by professional wise men for the use of courtiers, civil servants, kings, governors. There may have been such schools in Israel too, maybe from the time of Solomon in the 900s BC down to the end of the kingdoms in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. But there may also have been a kind of tribal, domestic wisdom developed in Israel long before the monarchy which has left its mark on the literature too. Certainly we find popular proverbs of this sort in the OT – for example, *Is not the gleanings of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?; as the man is, so is his strength.*”; *he who puts on armor should not brag like one who takes it off.*

Three of the books we are looking at - Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and The Wisdom of Solomon are attributed to King Solomon who was proverbial for his wisdom, but they are certainly later than his time – Ecclesiastes is likely to be post-exilic, Wisdom of

Solomon is a first century BC Greek writing, Proverbs collects a large number of sayings from various periods.

In the history of Judaism and of the Christian church a lot of this literature has been used as a source of moral and religious instruction. Proverbs 10.1-10 is entirely typical of this kind of thing and of the literary form: . *A wise child makes a glad father, but a foolish child is a mother's grief.*

*Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit, but righteousness delivers from death.*

*The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.*

*A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.*

*A child who gathers in summer is prudent, but a child who sleeps in harvest brings shame.*

*Blessings are on the head of the righteous, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.*

*The memory of the righteous is a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot. The wise of heart will heed commandments, but a babbling fool will come to ruin.*

*Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but whoever follows perverse ways will be found out.*

*Whoever winks the eye causes trouble, but the one who rebukes boldly makes peace.*

But there is a limit to how much of this sanctified common sense one can take – it does become rather tedious. Fortunately, this literature contains a great deal more than that and I want to spend the rest of this talk introducing just a few of the major themes which I think remain profoundly important to us. Actually, the verses we have just heard introduce the first of these themes, the contrast between wisdom and folly, righteousness and wickedness. It is a constant theme of the wise that we can rely on the fact that God consistently rewards the wise and righteous and punishes, or at least disadvantages, the foolish and

wicked. Reward and retribution are distributed on the basis of virtue and vice - *The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.* In many ways the clearest expression of this teaching is found not in the main body of the wisdom books but in the psalter, in a very famous wisdom psalm, psalm 37. A few verses to give you the sense:

*Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb. Trust in the LORD, and do good; so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.*

*Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart. For the wicked shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.*

*The LORD knows the days of the blameless, and their heritage will abide forever; they are not put to shame in evil times, in the days of famine they have abundance.*

*But the wicked perish, and the enemies of the LORD are like the glory of the pastures; they vanish--like smoke they vanish away.*

It climaxes in verse 25: *I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread.* And it is, of course, at this point, that we should be having serious problems. Is this really true to experience, then or now? Do not the righteous and the innocent suffer? Actually the confident teaching of this psalm – fret not thyself because of the ungodly – is the standard answer to this question among the wise. The corollary of it was that adversity and poverty were evidence of wrong-doing – this is the assumption behind the entirely conventional question asked of Jesus by his disciples in John 9.2: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Of course, it won't do. And a debate develops about it in this wisdom literature. There are three main strategies represented by Ecclesiastes, Job and Wisdom of Solomon. Put

rather too simply, they are these: since the same fate, namely death, awaits good and bad, righteous and wicked, and since the wicked all too evidently prosper, the quest for wisdom is all futile and a chasing after wind – the best you can do is eat and drink while there is time – Ecclesiastes. Job makes the innocent sufferer complain to God, rail against the conventional wisdom of the wise, and demand vindication from the almighty, only to have to repent for his presumption before the mystery of the divine purpose; Wisdom of Solomon asserts that the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them, thus playing the card of eternal life, which was not available to the earlier Jewish writers, to balance the books, as it were. All of these possibilities resonate today – people still ask why their friend who harmed no one gets cancer (revealing, even if unconsciously, an assumption that people who do do harm would deserve cancer as a punishment); clergy still try to help and encourage people by saying that their anger with God can be an expression of faith and even a prayer; and it is only those who are extremely comfortable with this life who can afford to dismiss the prospect of a far better, eternal life which Christianity still holds out to the faithful, especially perhaps to those huge numbers of our fellow human beings whose lives are still nasty, brutish and short. If that is all there is, God is intolerable. And what does Christ, the Wisdom of God, say to it all: *Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him"*. What do we make of that?

I've just described Jesus as "the Wisdom of God" and in doing so I align myself with the New Testament. *But we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and **the wisdom of God***. So Paul in 1 Corinthians. In the developing tradition in the church of reflection upon who Jesus is – what theologians call Christology – the wisdom literature has an important bearing. In Proverbs 1,8 and 9, Ecclesiasticus 24 and

Wisdom of Solomon 7-9 we encounter what scholars call the “personification” of wisdom. Wisdom is depicted as a woman who is around with God before creation, who helps God in the work creation, and who delights to inspire human beings to love God by indwelling them and guiding them to live by her wisdom. In Proverbs 8 she says *The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race. And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. Happy is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD; but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death.* In Wisdom of Solomon 7 we find this even more amazing stuff: *For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness. Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets; for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom. She is more beautiful than the sun, and excels every constellation of the stars. Compared with the light she is found to be superior, for it is succeeded by the night, but against wisdom evil does not prevail.*

Now then, does this passage from the letter Hebrews, which refers to Jesus, ring bells? *He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.* Or this, also referring to Jesus and from Colossians? *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created*

*through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

The Wisdom literature of the OT and Apocrypha, part of the bible of the early church, helped the Christians to understand more deeply the true nature and significance of Jesus and that from a very early date – for that alone, we should be deeply grateful for these writers and their presence in our scriptures.

Let me end by reading to you one of my very favourite passages from this literature, just for the joy of it, and also because I best know it set by William Boyce as one of the most glorious anthems in the whole body of Anglican church music: it is from Job 28:

*"But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? Mortals do not know the way to it, and it is not found in the land of the living.*

*The deep says, 'It is not in me,' and the sea says, 'It is not with me.'*

*It cannot be gotten for gold, and silver cannot be weighed out as its price.*

*It cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir, in precious onyx or sapphire.*

*Gold and glass cannot equal it, nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold.*

*No mention shall be made of coral or of crystal; the price of wisdom is above pearls.*

*The chrysolite of Ethiopia cannot compare with it, nor can it be valued in pure gold.*

*"Where then does wisdom come from? And where is the place of understanding?*

*It is hidden from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air.*

*Abaddon and Death say, 'We have heard a rumor of it with our ears.'*

*"God understands the way to it, and he knows its place.*

*For he looks to the ends of the earth, and sees everything under the heavens.*

*When he gave to the wind its weight, and apportioned out the waters by measure;*

*when he made a decree for the rain, and a way for the thunderbolt;*

*then he saw it and declared it; he established it, and searched it out.  
And he said to humankind, "Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and  
to depart from evil is understanding."*