

# Wisdom – the forgotten Scriptures ?

Bill Weston

More than 50 years ago, T S Eliot wrote –  
Where is the Life we have lost in living ?  
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge ?  
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information ?

If these questions resonated then, how much more so now, in our culture where 'smart' is the high value word for so much, from cars to management philosophy?

For me, being a Reader has generally been a matter of being directed to Bible passages for sermon subjects rather than choosing them for myself. It was this, always salutary, process that some time ago began to wake me up to what the Bible has to say about "Wisdom". The beginnings of the "Wisdom teaching" reach far back in scripture, but most of it was the latest part of the Old Testament to be written, and was evidently well-known to Jesus and the New Testament writers, to whom it would be the most up-to-date of the Scriptures.

"Wisdom" to us is often associated with 'getting it right' by being cautious, circumspect and sober – useful and at times necessary, but perhaps not much fun. *Wisdom* in the Bible means very much more than that. It includes all areas of knowledge, exploration, study and discovery, skill in crafts and trades, artistic and musical gifts, all areas of technology, scientific research and an understanding of humanity, the world and the wider universe. It is about intelligence, intuition and motivation; how creation came about, how the universe ticks, how society is best governed. Scores of references in the Bible fill out this rich and fascinating range of meaning of what the writers were trying to embrace in the word *Wisdom*. It was about all the gifts and attributes that people could acquire to live

God . . . himself is the guide of *Wisdom* . . . We are indeed in his hand, we ourselves and our words, with all our understanding, too, and technical knowledge.

It was he who gave me true knowledge of all that is,  
who taught me the structure of the world  
and the properties of the elements,  
the beginning, end and middle of the times,  
the alternation of the solstices  
and the succession of the seasons,  
the revolution of the year and the positions of the stars,  
the nature of animals and the instincts of wild beasts,  
the powers of spirits and the mental processes of men,  
the varieties of plants and the medical properties of roots.  
All that is hidden, all that is plain, I have come to know,  
Instructed by *Wisdom* who designed them all.

For within her is a spirit intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, active, incisive, unsullied, lucid, invulnerable, benevolent, sharp, irresistible, beneficent, loving to man, steadfast, dependable, unperturbed, almighty, all-surveying, penetrating all intelligent, pure and most subtle spirits;  
For *Wisdom* is quicker to move than any motion;  
She is so pure, she pervades and permeates all things.

She is a breath of the power of God . . .  
Untarnished mirror of God's active power,  
Image of his goodness.

In each generation she passes into holy souls, she makes them friends of God.

She is indeed more splendid than the sun,  
She outshines all the constellations; . . .  
Over *Wisdom* evil can never triumph.

THE BOOK OF WISDOM, CH. 7.

at their best and to work and develop in the world, and also the attitude in which to live – as expressed in “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of *Wisdom*” – receiving and enjoying God-like gifts, but in the right relationship to God.

This *Wisdom* is expressed not only as a collection of qualities, but as more than that, a person, who is always feminine. The words of the extract from Chapter 7 of the Book of Wisdom resound with rich meaning and values, to be savoured as the reader, along with the writer, tries to grasp his sense of the character and activities of *Wisdom*.

In another passage, *Wisdom* is described as God’s companion in the work of creation, the one who was created first, and, in different translations of the extract from Proverbs Chapter 8, God’s craftsman, architect or child, delighting, rejoicing and playing in God’s presence and in the process of creation.

*Wisdom* calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares; . . . blessed is the man who finds *Wisdom* . . . she is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her . . . Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace . . . Do not forsake *Wisdom*, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you. *Wisdom* is supreme; therefore get *Wisdom*. Though it cost all you have, get understanding.

Does not *Wisdom* call out? Does not understanding raise her voice? . . . “To you, O men, I call out; I raise my voice to all mankind”.

*Wisdom* has built herself a house, she has erected her seven pillars, she has slaughtered her beasts, prepared her wine, she has laid her table. She has despatched her maidservants and proclaimed from the city’s heights: ‘Who is ignorant? Let him step this way.’ To the fool she says, ‘Come and eat my bread, drink the wine I have prepared! Leave your folly and you will live, Walk in the ways of perception’.

PROVERBS, CHS. 1- 9.

In other passages, this is taken still further. The most astonishing thing of all, a German theologian wrote, about this *Wisdom*, is not just that it is the key to understanding how God has created and ordered the universe, but that it “steps out of the picture” and actively *addresses* humankind, and with an outgoing, warm and welcoming love. In passages like Proverbs 9<sup>1-5</sup> “*Wisdom* is presented as a woman who calls to men quite openly in the streets and squares and invites them to come to her in her house”. Like the most frank, uninhibited, loving, generous and irresistibly attractive personal relationship imaginable – that is how God is, in offering the gift of *Wisdom* .

*Wisdom* – God’s quality and character; God’s “technology” in creation; God’s intended gifts and resources for men and women.

“Yes, but. . .” – what about the problem of human unreceptiveness to all this, and the harm and suffering to which that leads? The *Wisdom* teaching brought the centuries of Old Testament revelation to the point at which it was then one further step to this question being definitively addressed by God’s further revelation in the incarnation and ministry of Jesus – making the possibility, through his suffering and death, of real forgiveness and renewal; and then offering not just a figurative but a real personal relationship with the risen Jesus for everyone. No wonder Paul was later able to write of Jesus Christ so much in terms of “the one who has become for us the *wisdom* of God”, and the one through whom “the manifold

*wisdom* of God” was to be experienced.

This awareness of the Wisdom teaching of the Old Testament greatly enriches the language of the New Testament, realising the meaning behind the word *Wisdom* which is used so often there: Jesus “filled with *wisdom*” and “growing in *wisdom* and stature” as a young boy; people recognising and wondering at the *wisdom* he showed in his ministry; his parables of *wise* and foolish behaviour; his promise of *wisdom* to his followers; and so much more.

Letting the Wisdom teaching sink in helps us to share much that was familiar to Jesus and those close to him, part of their own foundation teaching. It spells out, in ways that the New Testament writers would find unnecessary because of its familiarity, how intensely relevant God’s character and purposes are to all aspects of human life, work, interests and endeavour, and how ‘people-friendly’ – nothing could be more so than the explicit imagery of Proverbs 9 and similar passages !

*Wisdom*; the risen Jesus as people can know him now; Christ the source of creation as described by St. Paul; and the Holy Spirit as later understood in the New Testament – four different but overlapping ways of expressing the intensely rich and attractive character and purposes of God, which the artwork and accompanying Bible verses are an attempt to express.

Two other attractive features of the Wisdom literature noted by modern scholars are:- “It is the sort of literature that more often than not seeks to persuade by causing the audience to think, rather than simply demanding assent to its world-view”; and, that although there is much reference to the subject of *hope* in other parts of the Bible, there is more in the Wisdom teaching than anywhere else – the implication being that here is where the true foundation for optimism about life and the world is to be found.

How had I missed so much of this for so long ? Partly I suppose because of the natural way in which it is implicit rather than explicit in the New Testament; partly also perhaps because it was not only the Hebrews but also the Greeks (to whom *Wisdom* was “Sophia”) and other civilisations who were becoming aware of similar truths by the time of Jesus, and the early and later church no doubt felt the need to emphasise what was distinctive about Jesus and his Jewish heritage rather than admit converging strands of revelation from elsewhere, although to do so strengthens rather than dilutes the Gospel. But the Wisdom teaching is so substantial in quantity, and fills such a key place in the full story of God’s

I, *Wisdom*, am . . . the inventor of  
lucidity of thought, good advice and  
sound judgement . . . perception .  
. . . strength . . .

Yahweh created me when his  
purpose first unfolded,  
Before the oldest of his works.  
From everlasting I was firmly set,  
from the beginning,  
before earth came into being.  
The deep was not, when I was born,  
There were no springs to gush with  
water.

Before the mountains were settled,  
before the hills, I came to birth;  
before he made the earth, the  
countryside,  
or the first grains of the world’s  
dust.

When he fixed the heavens firm, I  
was there,

When he drew a ring

on the surface of the deep . . .

When he assigned the sea its  
boundaries –

and the waters will not invade the  
shore –

when he laid down the foundations  
of the earth,

I was by his side, a master  
craftsman,

Delighting him day after day,

ever at play in his presence,

at play everywhere in his world,

delighting to be with the sons of  
men.

PROVERBS. CH. 8.

revelation. It is about an intended relationship with God in which people are fully adult and mature. Why, one is bound to wonder, has it been so under-played and so much of it put under wraps in the Apocrypha ?

But – if the Wisdom teaching had over the years been fully emphasised along with the rest of the Gospel – what then ? Perhaps some of the features that have been a problem to the history of Christianity might have had less chance to take root – the idea that there could be conflict or incompatibility between religion and science; or between the ‘spiritual’ on the one hand and the material, practical or secular (including the work and interests most closely associated with men) on the other; the backward-looking, reactionary stance that has so often characterised Christianity at the expense of a witness close to the forefront of technological development and on-going creation; the suppression of what the Bible has to say about the ‘feminine’ side of God’s character, and the centuries of dominance and suppression of the feminine in the church; the attitude that God is revealed only to ‘us’, and that ignores truths coming from other sources; and the charge that the Christian faith allows people to remain immature, escapist and undeveloped; hang-ups about sex, and pleasure: unjustifiable encumbrances to the Gospel for centuries, urgently needing to be repented of and dropped for the sake of a witness that is truer to God.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century humanity, and the planet, face greater and more urgent threats and challenges than ever before. Lord Rees, Britain’s Astronomer Royal and President of the Royal Society, rates the odds of the human race surviving the century as no better than 50-50. James Martin, an international authority on the impact of technology on society, in a recent book takes a sobering and wide-ranging view of these threats, but at the same time is optimistic about human capability and the unimagined technologies that lie in the fairly near future – his word for young people is that today is the best time he can imagine in the whole of human history to be alive. The next fifty years will be, for the human race, like an experience of white-water rafting, fraught with dreadful risk, but with the possibility of fantastic success. The key to that is what he calls – wisdom. “Deep wisdom will be essential . . . A serious problem of our time is . . . science and technology are accelerating furiously, but wisdom is not . . . Wisdom . . . comes from the synthesis of a large amount of knowledge and experience that may take much of a lifetime to acquire. Not everyone can handle such synthesis. We must ask where the broad wisdom about the future will come from. The answer is, *we must set out consciously to develop it.* . . . A mature society should exhibit deep respect for deep wisdom”.

Martin’s journey, from his very different starting point, has arrived at something uncannily like the *Wisdom* of the scriptures, which he might recognise as meeting his definition of “deep” wisdom, and which is given as the foundation for deep and serious optimism to resource the lives of our children and grand-children.

Martin does not write theologically, but he does mention sin, and suggests that there can be no greater sin than the destruction of mankind and the planet. *The Tablet*, following the publication of the Stern Report in November 2006, suggested that these issues are now the topmost priority above all for the church’s witness. More is at stake, and more urgently, than ever before in history. The church’s

message is to draw attention to this, and the Gospel message, the Good News, is that the resources are there for that situation.

References. *Wisdom in Israel*; Gerhard von Rad. *The Making of Sages*; Donn F Morgan. *The Meaning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*; James Martin, 2006. *The Tablet* editorial, 4<sup>th</sup> November 2006. Bill Weston 2006. Bill Weston is an Emeritus Reader in the Dioceses of Wakefield and Europe.