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The Bible is quite clear about the priorities Christians should adopt. We live as strangers in a dying world, and thus we live for the world to come, striving to bring God's rule nearer by our lifestyle and our witness to the Lord Jesus. This leads many Christians to conclude that all else is a matter of indifference; what we do from day to day is either essential (if gospel-related) or irrelevant (anything else). To seek after a 'Christian approach' to mathematics or art or politics is to be dangerously side-tracked, if not deluded. A serious stumbling-block to this view is the presence of 'wisdom literature' in the Bible. Books such as Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes show virtually no interest in topics like covenant, salvation, temple, prophecy, messiah and the like. Instead they focus on practical details of day-to-day life. In this article I want to explore the nature of Wisdom and its implications for the way we live as Christians.

What is wisdom?

i. Order

Perhaps the most profound exposition of the nature and origins of wisdom in the Old Testament is the poem in Proverbs 8. In this poem wisdom is personified and speaks of her early history:

The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old.

Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginnings of the earth.

(Proverbs 8:22-23)

(All quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version)

Wisdom goes on to speak of her involvement in the creation of the universe, saying, in effect, that the intricate ordering and balance of creation was achieved in conjunction with her:

When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep... when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master workman...

(Proverbs 8:27-30a)

The two things, which emerge clearly from this poem, are that God is the source of wisdom, and that creation is the expression of God's wisdom. Wisdom, as seen in this poem, is the ordering principle behind and within our world.

ii. Order in practice

But wisdom is not simply an abstract theory about "the fundamental interconnectedness of all things" (to quote Douglas Adams!). Wisdom can be seen working in the fabric of creation. And so God can say to Job,

Who has put wisdom in the clouds, or given understanding to the mists?

(Job 38:36)

Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads his wings toward the south?

(Job 39:26)

Wisdom then, is not only the 'orderedness' of creation, it is the successful operation of that order in practice.

iii. [Living successfully by that order](#)

How then, can such a lofty concept be used of ordinary people and their ordinary lives? The brief answer to this question is that people are called 'wise' when they strive to perceive order in the universe, and to live in harmony with that order. And it is a basic tenet of the Old Testament that a life lived in harmony with the created order will be a "successful" life.

This is a much broader concept than the one we normally label 'wisdom', and the ways 'wisdom' is used in the Old Testament bears this out. So, we see the word used to mean discernment and good advice (1 Ki 3:9). But it is also used to mean technical skill and practical ability. Bezalel, the chief craftsman of the tabernacle, is called 'wise' because of his skills (Ex 31:3). In the same vein we read of the 'wisdom' of shipwrights and navigators (Ezek 27:8-9). And 'wisdom' is not necessarily honest or moral: the emphasis is on successful living within creation. Even the crafty, sinister advice of Jonadab to Amnon is considered 'wisdom' (2 Sam 13:3). In other words, wisdom is intensely practical. In a nutshell, human wisdom is 'the art of successful living'.

Wisdom is available to all

i. [Back to Proverbs 8](#)

Because all people share the experience of life in God's creation, the recognition of order is a possibility for anyone. If we return to the poem about wisdom in Proverbs 8, we can see this clearly:

Does not wisdom call, Does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights beside the way, in the paths she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portal she cries aloud: "To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live."

(Proverbs 8:1-4)

Wisdom calls not just to the elite but to all and sundry 'by the roadside'. She speaks not from the temple, but in the secular public places. And she addresses not just the people of God, but all humankind. One writer has put it this way: "Man is addressed from creation by a desire for order from which he cannot escape."

ii. [International wisdom](#)

Since all people, believers or unbelievers, are able to perceive order in the world, it is not surprising that wisdom writings have arisen among all peoples. 1 Kings 4:30-31 lists some of the famous wise men of Egypt and other nations surrounding Israel, and though Solomon was wiser than them all, the fact remains that they were still accounted wise in their own right. Indeed, there is a familiar ring to much of the wisdom of the surrounding nations. Try, for example, these proverbs from Egypt, written around 2000 BC (I have suggested some parallel proverbs from the

Bible by way of comparison):

Be not evil: patience is good. Make thy memorial to last through the love of thee...

(cf. Proverbs 29:4)

Lift [your enemy] up, give him thy hand; Leave him in the arms of the god; Fill his belly with bread of thine, So that he may be sated and may be ashamed...

(cf. Proverbs 24:17)

Spend no day in idleness or thou wilt be beaten. The ear of a boy is on his back, and he hearkens when he is beaten.

(cf. Proverbs 19:18; 22:15)

So what do we make of all this? If there is nothing special about Israelite wisdom, what is it doing in the Bible? The first thing we can say is that part of being God's people is being, simply, people. As far as our humanity and our existence in creation are concerned, we are all in the same boat, subject to the same experiences and the same powers of observation and reason. God's people, though redeemed uniquely, are created commonly with the rest of humanity, and the presence of wisdom literature in the Bible is an affirmation of the significance of that side of our existence. Every-day life may be flawed and temporary, but it is nonetheless significant and worth the thought and effort we accord it.

Having said that much, there is another factor that marks Israel's wisdom out from that of her neighbours, but before we consider it, I want to spell out some of the characteristics of wisdom writing that flow from what's been said so far.

Characteristics of wisdom #1: observations from experience

What we have seen so far is that God has created an ordered universe, and the controlling principle behind its order is wisdom. Thus when humans search for wisdom, they are trying to discern this order so that they can live in harmony with it. But how is this order discerned? There is no philosophical attempt to make a theory about the meaning of the universe; neither is there a systematic science to explain the world's workings. Instead, we are given (especially in Proverbs) a large collection of observations from experience. They are concrete rather than abstract, particular rather than general, concerned with the natural rather than the supernatural, with everyday life rather than national history. In a word, the wisdom of Proverbs is empirical. It observes life, it classifies what it sees, and it generalizes from experience.

The down-side of all this is that we are hard pressed to find integrating ideas and themes in Proverbs. They seem thrown together in a distressingly random fashion. But in spite of this they manage to convey the impression that the world is not chaotic but ordered. They do this by describing, in a few simple ways, the relationships between things and the regularities observable in the world. Although many proverbs make moral judgments, many others simply describe things as they are:

'It is bad, it is bad,' says the buyer; but when he goes away, then he boasts.

(Proverbs 20:14)

Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.

(Proverbs 16:18)

Proverbs 16:18, for example, is not a theological statement (God judges the proud), nor is it a value judgment (pride is bad); it is simply a description of a perceived order (trouble normally follows pride). The net result of these observations is to give the impression that everything we experience is part of one great system. The world is not chaotic but ordered. And there are, in the end, only two kinds of people: the wise and the fools. The wise person recognises the order that God has established in the world and lives in harmony with it. This leads to well-being for them and others. The fool, however, is unteachable. He or she refuses to recognise God's order, and the result is disaster for them and those who associate with them.

Having got to this point, we need now to step back and look at the big picture again, because there are major elements in the Bible's wisdom literature that we have not yet taken into account. For example, if wisdom is open to all people, believers or not, what do we make of exhortations to trust in the LORD (Pr. 3:5) and to honour the LORD (Pr. 3:9)? Or again, if empirical knowledge can perceive the world's order, what do we make of the wisdom books of Job and Ecclesiastes with their failure to find order or meaning behind the tragedies of undeserved suffering and the futility of endless cycles of history? To answer these questions, let us turn to another great wisdom poem, Job 28.

Limitations of wisdom

i. The ultimate secrets of wisdom are beyond us

Job 28 is a poem that compares the search for gems underground (vv. 1-11) with the search for wisdom (vv. 12-22). Despite our technological abilities, we are unable to find wisdom:

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.

(Job 28:12-13)

The end of the poem (vv.23-28) provides the answer and the reason:

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.

(Job 28:23-24)

Only God can understand the order and meaning of the universe in its entirety, because he is the only one who has all the data, let alone the ability to understand and integrate it. Job had no idea that he was suffering because God was actually proud of his righteousness and allowed Satan to test it; Job was ignorant of this fact to the day of his death. The poem in Job 28 ends with the inevitable conclusion – if God is the only one who knows all, then in the face of our ignorance we are left with only one wise option, and that is to trust and obey God himself:

Behold, the fear of the LORD, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.

(Job 28:28)

Where does this leave us, then? Do we abandon the search for wisdom because we can never know everything? Is the book of Proverbs a futile attempt to know the unknowable?

ii. The fear of the LORD

Somewhat surprisingly it would seem, Proverbs shares the conclusion of Job 28. Running through the book as a constant refrain is the phrase, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Pr. 9:10; 15:33; cf. 1:7; 2:5; 8:13; 19:23; 23:17). What is meant by the fear of the LORD? Firstly, the LORD (Yahweh) is the covenant name of God and reminds us of his promise to bless his people and to restore perfect order to his creation. Secondly, fear and trust are the response of God’s people to his saving acts:

And when Israel saw the great power which the LORD had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

(Exodus 14:31)

In other words, the phrase “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” tells us that a true understanding of the universe only comes within a framework of response to God as redeemer. For Israel, the fear of the LORD was both the foundation and the goal of wisdom, and this accounts for the truly distinct features of Old Testament wisdom, despite its many shared features with wisdom of other nations. For although all people can see and live in harmony with the world’s order, it is only when we realise that it is the LORD’s universe that we realise the true nature and significance of this order. Patience, generosity, kindness to enemies – these are actions that the Egyptians recognise as wise. But it is only the people of God, who have seen God’s own patience, kindness and generosity and who know what God’s goal is for the redeemed human society, who really understand what these things mean.

When operating at the level of immediate meaning, all people can be equally wise. But when it comes to ultimate meaning, all human wisdom turns to foolishness unless beginning from the fear of the LORD.

Characteristics of wisdom #2: value judgements

Earlier we saw that wisdom writing is characterised by observations about experience. But there is a second technique used in Proverbs: making explicit or implied value judgements. ‘A’ is better than ‘B’; certain behaviour is good, other behaviour bad. This vast array of value judgments is given order and coherence by constantly applying one simple criterion: is this wisdom or folly? The simple criterion is all-embracing. It can be applied to the use of the tongue, to table manners, to teaching, or to trading. It can be applied to the actions of princes and peasants, paymasters and pensioners, principals and parents. The result is a division of humanity into two classes – wise people and fools. Since the entire moral realm is understood in terms of one, simple, consistently applied criterion, we get a coherent description of the human world emerging from hundreds of diverse proverbs. And of course, the moral assessment of ‘wise’ or ‘foolish’ is made from the perspective of the fear of the LORD. It is because Israel knew the God of righteousness, faithfulness and justice that she was able to label such qualities ‘good’ and ‘wise’ (Pr. 2:1-15).

Conclusion: wisdom as a theology of creation¹

This brief examination of wisdom in the Old Testament suggests two things. Firstly, that the wisdom writers were card-carrying Israelites. They operated within a framework of the fear of the LORD. Secondly, despite this mind-set, the wisdom writers found that their subject matter and their method of approach did not involve them in specific concerns of the covenant and God's saving acts. Rather, they looked at humanity in the world at large. Another way of putting this would be to say that wisdom is concerned with a theology of creation rather than a theology of redemption.

Of course, this distinction between creation and redemption is not as great as we might think. God created a world order in which man and woman related perfectly amongst themselves, and lived harmoniously under God's rule. Since the destruction of this perfection in the fall, the goal of God's redemptive activity has been the restoration of his rule in a new creation. His choice of Abraham, the exodus from Egypt, the coming of Jesus Christ; all are intended to achieve this goal. We can understand, then, why some writers maintain that the real heart of the Old Testament is not salvation history but the creation of an orderly universe.

This idea is supported by the way the words 'righteousness' and 'justice' are used in the Bible. Not only are they linked with redemption and covenant faithfulness, but they are used of the restoration of creation itself. Isaiah, for example, looks to the day when

...the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field becomes a forest. Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. And the effect of righteousness will be peace and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.

(Isaiah 32:15-17)

Here 'justice' and 'righteousness' mean that nature and humanity are restored to harmony as a result of the saving acts of God. That is, righteousness refers to universal order; and its moral and redemptive meanings are a subset of this. Goldsworthy comments on the implications of this perspective: "The fact that God is the Creator of the world means that even those areas of human action which appear to be ethically neutral or which do not come within the scope of the revealed law of God or of the law of society, are within the scope of righteousness. In so saying, wisdom points to the truth that there are no neutral actions, no neutral thoughts." (Gospel and Wisdom, p.138)

Therefore, there is no human activity irrelevant for a Christian's concern. Science, art, industry, literature, and politics: all are areas upon which the Christian should cast the light of wisdom. In the buildings we build, the music we write, the experiments we conduct, the investments we make, we should seek to create in a way, which is in harmony with the order of God's creation. To do this would be seen as 'wise' in the categories of wisdom thought, whereas to do banal, chaotic or unimaginative work would be seen as 'foolish'. One of the tasks of the Christian is to think wisely about such things, transient though they may be. Wisdom literature gives us the principles; the details are up to us.

References

¹This section comes mainly from Gospel and Wisdom by Graeme Goldsworthy (Exeter: Paternoster, 1987), chapter 10.