

CHAPTER FOUR

Wisdom in Ancient Israel

The people of Ancient Israel, like the people of the surrounding nations (indeed, like people everywhere) looked up to men and women who were perceived as being wise. We all want to get on in the world, but we have to learn how best to respond to the situations in which we find ourselves. Life is complex and we know from experience that some decisions we make lead to outcomes that work for us and for our neighbours; other decisions lead to consequences that are unpleasant, and worse.

A farmer needs to be able to read the seasons and to manage unseasonable weather, drought, grasshopper plague, and much beside. Some things are completely beyond our control and we just have to accept and make the best of misfortune. But in ordinary circumstances managing a farm has to be learned, so we seek the advice of an experienced and wise farmer. It is the same for raising a family and managing a home. Husbands and wives seek advice, then as now, and they seek out a wise person to direct them along a path that works. Parenting, too, is a skill that can be learned. Similarly with getting on with one's neighbours and contributing to the community of the village rather than being a neutral or destructive presence.

It is here that we should look for the origin of many of the wise sayings found in the Older Testament. These sayings are, for the most part, the fruit of experience. They became part of the oral tradition. They had a lesson for everyone, but were used especially to prepare the young to help them avoid falling into the many pitfalls that life presents, by instructing them how to live in such a way as to find personal fulfilment, as well as to contribute to the welfare of the community. There are hundreds of memorable one-liners in the oldest sections of the oldest book of Israelite wisdom, the Book of Proverbs (see Proverbs 10:1 - 22:16 and 25:1 - 29:27).

Of course, the Wisdom Books are the product of literary activity. We should not be surprised to find that brief and memorable one-liners from the oral tradition are sometimes expanded by scribes eager to direct the student's attention to consider a specific application of the wisdom contained in the saying or proverb. They did this by adding one or two sentences to motivate learning and to draw out consequences of heeding or disregarding the lesson.

As the tribes of Israel moved beyond subsistence farming, formed a state and built up the complex systems needed to manage a state and to relate to surrounding states in a way that worked to their own advantage, many skills had to be acquired. Statesmen, military commanders, and public servants, can make foolish decisions. They can make wise decisions. Israel needed people who had successfully applied their intelligence to learn from their experience how best to make decisions that benefited the nation.

Many of the 'wise sayings' in the various books of Israelite wisdom focus on teaching keen young men who were aspiring to a career in government or administration, and many of these sayings were influenced by the experience of cultures that were much older than Israel, cultures such as Assyria and Babylonia, but especially Egypt.

The origin of these sayings is literary. They function as manuals for the instruction especially of the young. They are not statements that briefly indicate a value. They instruct a pupil, telling him what to do and what not to do to have a successful career for himself, as well as to make a contribution to his community.

So far we have been focusing on sayings and instructions that are based on experience, whether it be the ancient experience of everyday life the origins of which are lost in the mists of time, or more recent experience that came with the development of the city-state and interaction with foreign nations. Much of the material found in the books of Israelite wisdom has its basis in these experiences. Much of it, however, is based on faith in God and on the religious traditions of Israel. The wisdom teachers of Israel are integrating wisdom with religious commitment. In Egyptian wisdom literature the stability and continuity of the state relies on respect for divinely established order. In Israel wisdom is seen as a gift of YHWH. The aim of wisdom is to live a good, productive life. The people of ancient Israel knew that such a life has its source in God, the Creator, and has as its goal a life of communion with God, a communion experienced in nature, in communal living whether in the country or the city, and in the events of daily life.

What sets the teachers of wisdom apart from the priests and prophets is that their primary focus is not the Torah, or obedience to divine inspiration, but shrewd observation of life experience. Day to day running of a farm or managing a family cannot wait for prophetic revelation or priestly instruction. People need to apply their mind honestly to what is happening in their lives and behave as mindfully as they can, learning from the wise. God has given us intelligence so that we will think things through. Decisions should, to use a modern term, be evidence based. The teachers of wisdom respected the Torah (and at times relied on it), but this respect could not substitute for mindful living. A person who is faithful to the Torah but who stumbles from one foolish decision to another is a prisoner of circumstances.

Wisdom liberates. It opens a person up to possibilities of living well. A wise king, a wise statesman, a wise administrator of justice, a wise public servant, a wise farmer, a wise artisan, a wise trader, a wise grandmother, a wise teacher, are blessings from God. But wisdom does not come automatically or cheaply. It is the fruit of living a thoughtful, intelligent life in the real world. The aim of the books of Israelite wisdom is to help educate people in how to do this, by sharing traditional and current wisdom. The instructions and most of the wise sayings state how a person is to behave in his personal life or public career. They aim to teach, but more importantly to get people to think about their lives. Traditions, however wise, cannot be inflexible. New situations require new thinking and new decisions.

The Introduction to the Book of Proverbs opens with the words: ‘The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel’(1:1). In the Book of Kings we read:

Solomon composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five.

– 1Kings 4:32

God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore.

– 1Kings 4:29

King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom.

– 1Kings 10:23

We find this tradition continued in the Newer Testament.

The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!

– Matthew 12:42

In the Hebrew Bible, the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes are also attributed to Solomon, as is the ‘Wisdom of Solomon’ in the Septuagint (the Greek Older Testament). In each case the material is linked to the man whom tradition saw as the wisest of men. The editors are claiming that these books offer authoritative wisdom.

As is clear in Ecclesiastes, and in Job, what was considered wise behaviour in earlier times was judged to be inadequate in the changed circumstances of post-exilic Judah. The destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, and the end of the monarchy, called much of traditional wisdom into question. Traditional ‘wisdom’ that saw God as rewarding the good with success and punishing the rebellious could not satisfy people’s questions. Prosperity and success could no longer be thought of as necessarily indicating divine blessing. A new understanding was required. Exilic and post-exilic wisdom literature stresses the fact that we cannot comprehend God. We must apply our minds as honestly as we can, but ultimately wisdom shares in the mysterious transcendence of God. We must trust. We must also live a ‘righteous’ life. The English word ‘righteous’ picks up an important nuance. It derives from two words: ‘right’ and ‘wise’. To be righteous (rightwise) is to be wise as to what is right: right with God primarily, and also right with the world. As Dermot Cox writes in his *Proverbs* (Michael Glazier, 1982, page 60):

‘Wisdom’ is clearly an art to be learned by all who are caught up in daily affairs – the art of choosing the right way, of knowing how to distinguish, in each situation of life, what is right, what is conducive to the good.

While wisdom is essentially practical, and evidence based, its goal is for the individual and the community to enjoy ‘peace’ (*šālōm*), a fullness of life that can come only as a gift from God. Trust in the important enterprise that is the seeking of wisdom is founded on the belief that God ‘knows the way of the righteous’ (Psalm 1) – a knowing that implies intimate communion.

That is why ‘fear of YHWH’ is seen as the foundation for wisdom (see Proverbs 1:7, 9:10, 15:33). Perhaps the ‘of’ is better translated ‘from’. The ‘fear’ is seen as a gift from God. In the words of Isaiah:

The spirit of YHWH will rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of YHWH. His delight will be in the fear of YHWH.

– Isaiah 11:2-3

The Psalmist states:

The fear of YHWH is the beginning of wisdom.

– Psalm 111:10

Happy are those who fear YHWH, who greatly delight in his commandments.

– Psalm 112:1

Happy is everyone who fears YHWH, who walks in his ways.

You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands; you shall be happy,
and it shall go well with you.

Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots around your table.

Thus shall the man be blessed who fears YHWH.

– Psalm 128:1-4

Job declares:

Truly, the fear of YHWH, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.

– Job 28:28

In the Newer Testament, as a response to God as revealed in Jesus, John can write:

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.

– 1John 4:18

Prior to Jesus it is understandable that God was at times seen as an object of fear. The expression ‘fear of YHWH’, however, focuses more radically on a gift received from God, the source of all wisdom: a sense of the sacred at the heart of the world, a sense that inspires awe and wonder and an openness to mystery. It is this reverence that expands our experience of the every day. Relying on God, and putting our trust in God, we have the courage to explore experience, knowing that, however easy or hard our circumstances may be, God, who has chosen us as his own, is at the heart of the world that God transcends.

This is also why ‘Wisdom’ is at times personified – something that appears to be unique to Israel. To quote Cox again (page 74):

Wisdom is a channel by which God can reach out to humanity, and draw humanity to himself, led by the voice of creation and its inherent mystery.

We cannot comprehend God, and we cannot comprehend life. God appeals to us through ‘Wisdom’ to live reflective lives. In this way we will play our part in ordering the world for God and in building communities that will bring about the reign of God in this world.

There are a number of wisdom books in the TaNaK: Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and some of the Psalms. We will look at Job in Chapter Sixteen, and the others in Chapter Seventeen. There are also a number of wisdom books in the Septuagint: Sirach, Baruch and Wisdom. These we will examine in Chapter Eighteen.