

Session 7: The Wisdom Tradition

D. Wisdom outside the 'wisdom' books

The Old Testament's 'wisdom literature' encompasses Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. But the characteristics of the wisdom 'outlook' – the emphasis on character, a divine providence underlying events, universalistic scope, interest in universal human problems, and particularly in the problem of suffering – occur in several other parts of the Old Testament.

Activity 7.3

Read the following and try to identify the 'wisdom' elements there:

The Joseph Story in Genesis 37 and 39 to 50

The book of Ruth

The Isaianic tradition of prophecy: Isaiah 10:4-19; 36 and 37; 45:1-7

1. With its consistent and distinctive style, the Joseph story stands out from the rest of the book of Genesis as another separate source document like the Succession Narrative, this time incorporated in the Pentateuch, the books of Moses. Moreover, its content displays several of the features of the wisdom tradition:
 - Joseph is a typical wise man: an interpreter of dreams, a counsellor of the king, with the ability to put his brothers through a complex test of character
 - But he has to arrive at this situation through patience in suffering. Through it his character is moulded so that he makes the journey from arrogant brat to the ability to forgive his brothers. The key to this development is the fear of the Lord: resisting Potiphar's wife, the thing he refuses to do is to 'sin against God' (39:9).
 - At the end of the story, Joseph sees the hand of God in everything that has happened. His brothers intended to harm him, but 'God intended it for good' (50:20).
2. Ruth is another narrative with a message, also displaying features of the wisdom outlook.
 - It is noteworthy for its universalism: Ruth is a Moabitess, but chooses loyalty to Naomi and to the Lord. The purpose of the book may have been to combat a spirit of exclusivism.
 - Ruth stands out for the qualities of her character: her loyalty, faithfulness, willingness to work hard, and gracious speech. She becomes known as a 'woman of worth' (3:11) and is commended as such by Boaz, who is himself a 'prominent man' (2:1) otherwise a 'man of substance' or 'man of worth'.
 - The book also commends the institutions of ancient Israel that protect the poor: the law of gleaning through which the destitute like Naomi and Ruth are allowed to survive; the law of levirate marriage through which family continuity is maintained; and the 'go-el' or 'redeemer', the man whose role it was to stand protector to members of his family to save them from destitution.

- Behind the whole story is the sense of the providence of God, who brings Ruth into contact with Boaz, and rewards both Ruth and Boaz with a son.

3. Finally, in the book of Isaiah we find a very strong sense of God's ultimate control over the destinies of human beings. In chapter 10 the prophet discerns that Assyria is 'the rod of God's anger'. God is using Assyria to punish Judah, but after he has accomplished his purpose Assyria itself will be punished. Assyria is the axe, Yahweh the hewer. In 37:21-29 it is Yahweh who plans the rise and fall of nations. In 45:1-7 it is Yahweh who calls the emperor Cyrus and calls him 'messiah' or 'anointed' even though Cyrus does not acknowledge him. Against the Babylonian religion of Zoroastrianism in which the good force of light was in perpetual struggle with the evil force of darkness, Yahweh is sovereign over both. he 'forms light and creates darkness', he 'makes weal and creates woe' (45:7)

Israel's wisdom is not like the Greek type of wisdom with which we are most familiar. In the Greek tradition, wisdom operates from a point of observation outside the world of experience. From this outside point of observation, the philosopher derives rules for behaviour and these rules, worked out in the abstract, are then to be put into practice. Theory and practice are separate and wisdom is arrived at by contemplation rather than action.

In Hebrew tradition, wisdom is derived from practice. There is no point of observation outside the world. There are rules for behaviour, but they do not work in the way the Greek rules work. Rather, they are 'schemas' or 'exemplars', 'spectacles' through which to view experience. The wise person is the one who knows how to apply these rules in the concrete situation. There are no hard and fast rules for doing so: it is a matter of experience. Above all, to be wise we need the fear of the Lord because he will examine our motives, prevent us from becoming arrogant and guide us in our decisions.

Proverbs 3:5-8

Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.
Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.
It will be a healing for your flesh
and a refreshment for your body.

Preparation

The key Bible passages for session 8 are:

Genesis 37, 39-47

Jeremiah 1, 11:18-23, 12:1-6, 15:10-21, 17:14-18, 18:18-23, 20:7-18

Lamentations

Ecclesiastes 1 – 4, 9

Psalm 1, 37, 38, 73, 90

Habakkuk

Job 1-9, 28, 38-42