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The Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament

Many discussions on literacy, both as it was in antiquity and as it is now, fail to distinguish between the absolute inability to read and write and the lack of readiness to use these skills because of want of opportunities to exercise them. I do not know whether any effort has been made to estimate the number who were able to read and write in the ancient Near-East. We may be certain that it varied much from century to century and from land to land. It will have depended not only on whether it was a period of peace and prosperity, but also on the form of writing used. The simpler and more alphabetic forms of writing will always have found a higher proportion of the population capable of using them.

But even where under Hellenistic influence and post-exilic Jewish preoccupation with the Law of Moses certain parts of the Near-East must have shown a very high proportion of literacy in the strict sense, we may question the real ability of many to make active use of the ability they theoretically possessed. This was due to two closely connected causes. The cost of a book, whether tablets or cylinders of baked clay, or rolls of papyrus or parchment, was, even in New Testament times, when tremendous advances had been made in the techniques of manufacture and copying, beyond the ability of the mass of the population to acquire, unless there existed an interest great enough to cause an act of genuine self-sacrifice. Then, though libraries, in the sense of collections of documents, records and literary texts, had existed from early times at temples and courts, they were not readily accessible to the general public. It is not likely that the famous Hellenistic libraries at Alexandria and Pergamum could have been used by any who could not establish their claim to scholarship.

This confining of true literacy in antiquity to a small proportion of society had very important consequences. Even today, when literacy is taken for granted, except perhaps with the mentally defective and the children of the bargee and of the gipsy, we are painfully aware that there is literacy and literacy; where some profit much from their schooling, some have profited not at all. This cannot be changed by all eleven-plus examinations, comprehensive schools and similar edu-

cational experiments. How much greater must have been the gulf between the truly educated and the bulk of the population in the past. Jesus ben Sira, writing about 190 B.C. puts it quite bluntly, when he says:

The wisdom of the wise depends on the opportunity of leisure;
and he who has little business may become wise.

How can he become wise who handles the plow,
and who glories in the shaft of a goad,
who drives oxen and is occupied with their work,
and whose talk is about bulls?

He sets his heart on plowing furrows,
and he is careful about fodder for the heifers.

So too is every craftsman and master workman
who labours by night as well as by day;
those who cut the signets of seals,

each is diligent in making a great variety;
he sets his heart on painting a lifelike image,
and he is careful to finish his work.

So too is the smith sitting by the anvil,
intent upon his handiwork in iron;
the breath of the fire melts his flesh,
and he wastes away in the heat of the furnace;
he inclines his ear to the sound of the hammer,
and his eyes are upon the pattern of the object.

He sets his heart on finishing his handiwork,
and he is careful to complete its decoration.

So too is the potter sitting at his work
and turning the wheel with his feet;
he is always deeply concerned over his work,
and all his output is by number.

He moulds the clay with his arm
and makes it pliable with his feet;
he sets his heart to finish the glazing,
and he is careful to clean the furnace.

All these rely upon their hands,
and each is skilful in his own work.

Without them a city cannot be established,
and men can neither sojourn nor live there.

Yet they are not sought out for the council of the people,
nor do they attain eminence in the public assembly.

They do not sit in the judge's seat,
 nor do they understand the sentence of judgment;
 they cannot expound discipline or judgment,
 and they are not found using proverbs.
 But they keep stable the fabric of the world,
 and their prayer is the practice of their trade.
 On the other hand he who devotes himself
 to the study of the law of the Most High
 will seek out the wisdom of the ancients,
 and will be concerned with prophecies;
 he will preserve the discourse of notable men
 and penetrate the subtleties of parables;
 he will seek out the hidden meanings of proverbs
 and be at home with the obscurities of parables.
 He will serve among great men
 and appear before rulers;
 he will travel through the lands of foreign nations,
 for he tests the good and evil among men.

(Ecclus. xxxviii. 24-xxxix. 5)

The further back we go in the history of the ancient Near-East the greater must have become the gulf between the educated man, able to read and write without difficulty and familiar with the records of the past, and the warrior, whom Ben Sira does not even trouble to mention, the farmer and the skilled artisan. We find them in all the centres of culture and civilization and they are called 'scribes' or 'the wise'. Especially in Egypt the two terms seem to be virtual synonyms. Though, as might be expected, we often find them linked with the temples, and not a few of the Wise may have been priests, there was the early tendency for the two to diverge.

The Wise will have had their place in Israel from the institution of the monarchy, and especially from the setting up of the ornate court of Solomon. It will not be chance that the first mentioned as holding the office of royal scribe, or secretary, and apparently called indifferently Serariah, Sheva and Shisha was, if the name is a guide, a foreigner. In Jeremiah xviii 18 the Wise are mentioned as a separate class alongside the priest and the prophet, and in Jeremiah viii. 8, 9 they are, quite understandably, identified with the scribes. They are mentioned too in Isaiah xxix. 14, and are implied, though not expressly so called, in Proverbs xxv. 1.

We are not here concerned with their role in society, which will be sufficiently indicated by two quotations. 'The role of the sages and the public estimate of them were very similar in all lands. They were the schoolmasters and the court counselors.'¹ 'The scribes then are mediators of an international culture in the same manner as modern academicians.'² In the light of these quotations it is particularly noteworthy that it is said of Solomon, 'Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men; than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman and Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol' (1 Kings iv. 30, 31). We can compare only like with like so, however superior it may have been, Solomon's wisdom was considered to be of the same type as the Egyptian and that of the nomads of the desert as well as that of Edom or Canaan. The names Ethan, Heman, Calcol, Darda have generally been linked with Edom, which was famous for its wisdom, cf. Jeremiah xlix. 7, Obadiah viii. Albright, however, claims that these are Canaanite names.³ He maintains on the basis of the Ugarit discoveries that the Hebrew wisdom literature has its roots in that of the Canaanites. The recent announcement that wisdom material has been discovered in the recent excavations at Ugarit will enable this claim to be tested. The resemblance between much of the extant Egyptian wisdom literature and that of the Old Testament has long been known. In particular it is claimed that Proverbs xxii. 17-xxiii. 12 is based on *The Instruction of Amen-em-Ope*,⁴ but a strong argument can be made for the Egyptian being derived from the Hebrew.⁵ This is not a question that should be answered *a priori* on the basis of theories of inspiration. In any case borrowing, on whichever side the priority, shows the basic similarity of outlook and method. As might be expected the links with the Accadian wisdom literature are much slighter. It is worth noting that the earliest extant Egyptian examples go back to the third millennium B.C.

'The core of the general cultural viewpoint held in common,' says

¹ Rylaarsdam, *Revelation in Jewish Wisdom Literature*, p. 9.

² Bentzen, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, vol i, p. 171.

³ Canaanite-Phoenician Sources of Hebrew Wisdom in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, p. 13.

⁴ For *The Instruction of Amen-em-Ope* and representative extracts from Egyptian wisdom literature, see Pritchard, *Ancient Near-Eastern Texts*, pp. 412-424.

⁵ So Young: *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 303 ff, but see Baumgartner in *The Old Testament and Modern Study*, p. 212.

Rylaarsdam, 'rests on the conviction that existence is fundamentally rational and moral. The divine rule, to whatever deity assigned, is held to be constant and intelligent. The divine order rewards those who discover and obey it; it punishes those who transgress it—life is morally interpreted.¹ The rest of this paper is concerned with how this pattern is worked out in the Old Testament.

The first impression we gain from the reading of the three Hebrew wisdom books in the canon, Proverbs, Job and Qoheleth (there are two examples in the Apocrypha, Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira, and the Wisdom of Solomon, which will not be considered here), is that while they claim to be expressing the truth underlying human life, they do not claim divine inspiration in the way the prophets do. With all the marked differences between the books and the various sections of Proverbs, x. 1-22; xvi. 25-29 are attributed to Solomon; chapter xxx to Agur, xxxi. 1-9 to the mother of Lemuel; i. 7-ix. 18; xxii. 17-xxiv. 22; xxiv. 23-34; xxxi. 10-31 are anonymous—all the authors are God-fearing, convinced that the wisdom on which they rely is a gift of God, springing from 'the fear of the Lord'.

With the exception of Agur (chapter xxx) the writers represented by Proverbs approach their task without any doubts. It is clear that to them life offers few mysteries. God is the originator of all phenomena; hence the general outcome of human actions can be foretold with confidence. There are two ways which a man can walk: the way of wisdom and the way of folly; the paths of uprightness and the ways of darkness (ii. 13); the way of life and the way of death; the high way and the way of thorns (xv. 19). In common with so much in the Old Testament it is assumed that the righteous will prosper and the evil will suffer and perish. But this prosperity is not automatically equated with riches. On the one hand it is clearly recognised that wealth does not always abide (xxiii. 4, 5), on the other many things are valued as being more precious than wealth, e.g. wisdom, the fear of the Lord (xv. 16), righteousness (xvi. 8), a good name (xxii. 1), integrity (xix. 1).

There has been a tendency to depreciate the spiritual level of Proverbs. Gunkel considered that Israelite wisdom was in its first stages purely this-worldly and judging actions by the happiness and gain they would bring. Such criticisms fail to understand the essential nature of this wisdom. It is neither revelation nor a deduction from revelation. It is an effort based on the *a priori* assumption of the moral nature of Yahweh and His conformity to moral law to discover how

¹ *op. cit.* p. 14.

His dealings with men work out in the uniformities of experience and history. Of necessity then it has to concern itself with the individual actions of which the average life is composed, and it is forced to judge the outcome of men's actions by external criteria which are discernable to human observation. 'The Lord looketh on the heart', but the wise must judge by the externals in which the consequences of a man's life have been expressed. The resultant judgments may seem superficial, but that does not of necessity mean that they are invalid. Human wisdom, if it commences in the fear of the Lord, will not claim to penetrate as deeply into the nature of the relationship of God and man as does the inspired prophet. But it is clear that the writers of Proverbs claim to have penetrated to the truth, even if not into its depths.

Even in Proverbs itself there is one voice raised in protest against this assumption. Agur introduces his teaching with apparent self-depreciation:

Surely I am too stupid to be a man.
 I have not the understanding of a man.
 I have not learned wisdom,
 nor have I knowledge of the Holy One. (xxx. 2, 3)

We shall always do well to treat such language with reserve, especially in the mouth of an oriental. What he really means is that if his companions among the wise can really answer his questions, then he in comparison with them must be an ignoramus. He challenges them with five questions:

Who has ascended to heaven and come down?
 Who has gathered the wind in his fists?
 Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment?
 Who has established all the ends of the earth?
 What is his name, and what is his son's name?
 Surely you know! (xxx. 4)

The obvious inference is that with all their study of human life as it is lived out on earth the wise had never penetrated to God Himself. In addition, since they could neither control the powers of nature nor understand how they were controlled, they could not reasonably claim to explain God's control of men.

This general thesis is supported by an appeal to many common things in nature and life which the mind of man cannot readily understand or fathom. In other words Agur challenges his friends and

suggests that in fact they have over-simplified the problems facing them and have attributed to human wisdom powers which in fact it does not possess.

For our purpose today it is of no importance by whom and when the book of Job was written, nor what its relationship to the original story may be. What is important is that though Job is far more than just a wisdom book—Pfeiffer rightly says that ‘it does not fit into any of the standard categories devised by literary criticism’¹—yet Job and his friends have been depicted in the poem as in many ways typical representatives of the wise, and their discussions, though doubtless far more emotional and passionate than the wise would approve of, are yet discussions on just those points that concerned the wise.

When we so consider the book, we see that, whatever other purpose it may have had, it is a blunt and unhesitating rejection of the main position taken up by Proverbs. Job himself denies most emphatically that there is any basis in human experience for the thesis that the good prosper and the evil suffer and perish. Indeed he claims that the reverse is more often true, and his friends are utterly unable to meet his claims. When we come to the Divine voice in the thunderstorm, we find that it is no revelation of the mysteries of Divine action, no justification of the ways of God with man. Though it rebukes and humbles Job, it brushes aside his friends’ defence of the position of orthodox wisdom even more drastically. In fact we are called on to consider the overwhelming greatness of God as seen in His creation, and in the light of that greatness to realise that the wise were dealing with something too wonderful for them really to know.

We shall postpone the discussion of the validity of the position taken up by Agur and Job and look at that taken up by Qoheleth or Ecclesiastes. So far as I know there is no responsible conservative scholar who today supports a Solomonic authorship for this book. It cannot even be fairly called a pseudepigraph, for any closer study will show quickly and convincingly that the author is using a transparent literary device, which he does not expect to be taken literally. Qoheleth is fairly generally dated not much before 200 B.C.

Since the author was an older contemporary of Jesus ben Sira, who made no bones about revealing his identity in his book, there must be a reason for the anonymity of Qoheleth. The most obvious reason, and one that goes far to account for a certain unevenness in outlook, an unevenness that has all too readily been explained by appeals to one or

¹ *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 684.

more editors, is that the author is deliberately putting himself into the shoes of Solomon, the wise but yet foolish, the pious but yet apostate king of Israel, in his old age. We should be unwise to assume that the author of necessity agrees with all he writes. These are the imaginary meditations of one who was very wise but lost the fear of the Lord.

Qoheleth is unique in the Old Testament and indeed in Jewish literature until the modern period. While it is pervaded with a deep and reverent belief in God, it is also in the true sense of the word agnostic. It has often been claimed that the opening section with its conclusion:

What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
and there is nothing new under the sun, (i. 9)

shows the influence of Greek thought. We need not go so far afield. We are here in the realm of the concept of the cyclic nature of life which dominated the religions of the Fertile Crescent and which was challenged and denied by the whole Israelite concept of history as moving to a goal of God's choice, which is reiterated in the prophetic message. This cyclic concept involves a denial of all moral purpose in nature and in human life.

Qoheleth knows that God controls everything, and that because the happenings of life come from God they must have a meaning and purpose, but he is completely unable to understand God's goal or purposes. In other words he challenges the outlook of Proverbs as completely and as drastically as does Job, though from an entirely different angle. If we take the linking with Solomon seriously and not merely as a threadbare literary device the reason is not far to seek. Solomon was wise above all who had gone before him, and the wisdom had been given him by God, but it did not prevent his being led astray by his many wives into apostasy. Qoheleth is surely intended to show us the impotence of wisdom divorced from God. It is quite incapable, like modern science, of understanding the Why? of things, however well it grasps the How?

It is only when we look on Qoheleth in this way that we can understand its being taken up into the canon of the Old Testament, while the much more orthodox work of Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus) was refused. The latter was not needed, for it adds but little and that of doubtful value, to Proverbs. Qoheleth, on the other hand, was needed, if the

canon was to include a rounded picture of the abilities and limits of human reason, as it seeks to understand the ways of God with man.

When we compare Proverbs and Job, we shall have to agree without hesitation that the former gives us a truer picture of *normal* life. The wise were correct in their general delineation of human life and in their estimate of the normal outcome of certain lines of conduct. There must be thousands of Christians whose external life and experience fits into the framework of Proverbs—as we have already seen, the wise by the very nature of things had to concern themselves with the predominantly external. Furthermore, in normal times, when justice sits enthroned on its seat, the righteous are apt to flourish and the wicked to perish.

But we are not able from human experience to argue back to God and to lay down a pattern to which His acts and purposes must conform. In spite of so much exaggeration on Job's part, he is fully correct in this, and even God's glories in nature proclaim that a grasping of His purposes will elude us without the aid of revelation. In addition Job is a flaming protest against the idea that God must conform to men's concepts in His dealings with His creatures. Job's friends were wrong about him, not only or primarily because they had formed their theories on insufficient evidence, but because Job was an example of God's freedom to act without reference to precedence and law. No explanation is ever given to Job or us for his sufferings. In them Satan is merely an instrument for the working out of the undisclosed purposes of God, for he cannot even mention Job's name until the Almighty gives him a sign. This means that while we may expect a general norm in God's dealings with us, we may not demand that He conform to it, nor may we use this general norm as a yard-stick with which to measure and judge the exceptional, or those whose experiences are the reverse of ours.

The three-fold cord is completed by Qoheleth. It is not merely that human reason stands in uneasy tension between the normal and the exceptional, between the discernible and explorable on the one hand and the unfathomable depths of the power and wisdom of God on the other. Qoheleth takes with deadly seriousness the aphorism of the wise, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge', or 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom', for the two are treated as synonyms. Where this fear does not continue to control human life and thinking, the wisdom and knowledge it originally created becomes strangely unsatisfactory. It enables great works to be undertaken, but it

fails to give them an adequate meaning which could make them the cause of lasting satisfaction. It enables life to be observed scientifically and accurately, but makes the knowledge so gained valueless, for the clue as to the inner meaning of it all is lacking.

Though the Old Testament is primarily a revelation of God through Moses and the prophets, yet no aspect of legitimate human life and experience is ignored by it. Human married love finds its glorification in the Song of Songs and the broken heart its expression in Lamentations. Even so human reason comes into its own in the Wisdom Books, Proverbs, Job and Qoheleth. But if we are to understand what human reason can legitimately undertake in its study of God's ways with men and what are its limits and what the perils associated with it, we need the threefold approach of the three books we have considered. It is only as we put them together and seek to create a synthesis of their message that we shall be freed from either undue trust in human reason or on the other hand undue depreciation of it.