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REFLECTIONS ON WISDOM*

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WISDOM literature, with the exceptions of Job and Koheleth, has never been the most thrilling area of biblical study. It has not elicited scholarly writing in modern times comparable in volume with the books and monographs on the historical and prophetic books. In the Hebrew canon the wisdom books are classified with "the writings," a designation which one might paraphrase as "the other books." In the Greek and Latin canons they are classified with such strange associates as the Psalms and the Song of Solomon. The wisdom books attract readers from the general public which reads the Bible, whoever they may be, no more than they attract scholars.¹ It is not my intention in this address either to suggest that wisdom literature is more thrilling than it appears to be or to announce a forthcoming major work on wisdom literature. The purpose, besides the obvious purpose of fulfilling an engagement to this Society, is to share with you some of my personal inadequacy and discontent with my own approach to wisdom literature. It has long been clear to me that I am out of touch with the world of ancient Israel to the extent to which I do not appreciate wisdom literature. Perhaps we do not really understand the historians or the prophets either, but there is no such glaring lack of sympathy as we feel when we turn to the maxims of the sages.

In Pritchard's standard handbook the earliest Egyptian piece of wisdom is dated by John A. Wilson about 2450 B.C.; and Pritchard's collection is only a sample of the extensive wisdom literature of Egypt.² The Mesopotamian wisdom compositions are more difficult to date with precision; but the Sumerian works go back at least to the early third millennium.³ The literary tradition of wisdom endured in both Egypt

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¹ But B. W. Anderson believes "most of us are more at home in the wisdom literature than in the historical literature of the Bible" (*Understanding the Old Testament*², 1966, p. 489). This is not the impression gained from my experience; and see B. Gemser, *Sprüche Salomos* (HAT, 1937), pp. 7-8.

² *ANET*, pp. 412-14.

³ S. N. Kramer, *From the Tablets of Sumer*, pp. 152-53.

and Mesopotamia until the death of these civilizations. During this period Israelite wisdom appears; its relations with foreign wisdom and its dependence on foreign wisdom in both form and content are abundantly clear and demand no comment. My point here is that a literary tradition of such enduring power must have responded to a need of which we are not aware, and it is here that our historical imagination fails us. In the second century Jesus ben Sira felt no embarrassment in producing a personal collection of wise sayings which had not changed substantially in form or even in content from the sayings of Ptah-hotep; and Jesus ben Sira stands slightly closer to us in time than he did to Ptah-hotep.

Wisdom is viewed too narrowly when it is viewed as wisdom literature. We study wisdom literature because that is all we can study; but we do not by this study learn what was the living tradition of wisdom. Wisdom was to a degree bookish, as we all know; the sage and the scribe were often the same person. But not always, and very probably not most of the time. We are aware of the high incidence of the wisdom style in other books of the OT, and the more one studies any particular book the more one recognizes these allusions. We are less well aware of the high incidence of the wisdom style in the NT. I can explain the exchange between Jesus and the mysterious Syro-Phoenician or Canaanite woman, for instance (Matt 15 21-28; Mark 7 24-30) only as a typical wisdom duel of wits; yet modern commentators do not take it in this way. The debates between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees are generally couched in wisdom style, and this is not surprising. The scribes were the heirs of the wise men, and Jesus, who can be designated by no word typical of any class within the Jewish community, was a teacher — that is to say, a wise man. He was entirely at home in the discussions of the wise, much more at home than I think he would be at a congress of biblical scholars. The epistle of James is almost pure wisdom, and it is one of those irrational accidents of history that it is written in some of the best Greek of the NT. Paul wrote no epistle in which he did not make generous use of the wisdom style, for it was in this style that he had been educated.

This heavy wisdom flavor in the entire collection of Jewish and Christian sacred books suggests that wisdom is much more than a literary form, much more than a way of life, as it has often been called. It was also a way of thought and a way of speech, which was by no means limited to the schools and the writings of the sages. It was the common way of thought and speech, in which those who were called wise excelled. It was an approach to reality. In saying all these things I come close to calling it a philosophy, which it was not; but it dealt with some questions which philosophy also handles, and as a technique of discourse it served the purpose which philosophical discursive reasoning served in Greek thought. The parallel should not be drawn closely; wisdom belonged to everyone,

while discursive reasoning was the skill of the intellectual. But when Joab could find no means to bring David to change his mind towards Absalom, he invoked "a wise woman" (II Sam 14 1-21). The wise woman trapped David into accepting the principle of forgiveness by a parable, exactly the same technique which Nathan employed to convince David of his sin (II Sam 12 1-15). The professional sage was one who had a wealth of *meshalim*, of riddles such as those by which Samson outwitted the Philistines, of pertinent maxims for any situation. But this was the same technique by which the ordinary Israelite solved his problems as well as he could. To return to Samson for a moment, his place in biblical legend is scarcely that of the sage; yet the point of the stories of Samson is less his extraordinary strength than that the peasant of Dan in every encounter with the stupid Philistines outwits them. His one failure comes when he does not act like a wise man, certainly not like the wise man of Prov 5-7.

We are familiar with wisdom as a way of life and action; this wisdom is set forth in Proverbs and in wise sayings scattered through the other books of the OT. The same wisdom appears in the epistle of James and in most of the Pauline epistles, and in a number of sayings of Jesus in the synoptic gospels. There are some obvious developments in the wisdom of the NT from the wisdom of the OT which could be discussed and debated at great length, but this debate is not the point of interest here; all I wish to point out is the survival of the form and content of the wisdom tradition in the books of the primitive Christian community. It is commonly said by interpreters of the OT wisdom books that the morality of these books is practical and pedestrian, reflecting enlightened self-interest more than it reflects the categorical imperative.⁴ Such value judgments really do not come under the competence of the interpreter, although as a man he can hardly refrain from making them. When we compare the sages with the prophets, the sages usually come off a poor second. They preserve much of the secular wisdom which we find in Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts, and do not show that inspiring vision of the moral will of Yahweh which we find in the prophets. And this is a point where the modern interpreter is most keenly aware of his lack of sympathy with the wise men.

It is my personal opinion that we are usually unfair to the wise men, and that we take their moral code out of context. The traditional wisdom moral thinking is criticized by Job and Koheleth, but it is not the code itself which is called into question. This again is not the point of interest; I am more concerned with the way of thought on which the code is founded than with the moral values of the code itself. This way of

⁴ See B. Gemser, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8. This evaluation is rejected by R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs-Ecclesiastes (AB)*, p. 25.

thought is a firm belief in the validity of experience.⁵ The sages were convinced that a man cannot achieve good by doing evil; they were as well aware of the moral will of Yahweh as the prophets were. The collective experience of mankind attests this, and only the fool doubts it. When Job and Koheleth question the traditional wisdom, they do not question the validity of the distinction between good and evil; they question the naive correlation of virtue and prosperity, which does not reflect experience. For Job at least the experience of the sages did not include a sufficient penetration into the reality of Yahweh. But the moral code of the sages seems to be capable of producing a peaceful life in community; it is the morality of the little man whose life is normally peaceful. It does not withstand crisis, and here it is untrue to experience.

The principle which the traditional wise men held in common with Job and Koheleth was that insight is gained by reflection on the human condition. The difference lies in the profundity of the reflection. Job and Koheleth exhibit the same breakdown of traditional wisdom which can be seen in the Egyptian dialogue of the man with his soul and in the Mesopotamian *Ludlul bel nemeqi* and the dialogue of the man with his slave.⁶ The traditionalists had no moral insight for catastrophe; but it is only fair to them to admit that man cannot live in a constant state of crisis. But both the traditionalists and their critics agree that the human condition cannot be understood unless Yahweh be recognized as present and active in the human condition. What man is and can be is not understood by the exclusive consideration of man; and here the sages part company with the secularists.

As Job and Koheleth point out, a naive reflection on God is as misleading as a naive reflection on man. No one could accuse the traditionalists of shallow optimism about man; they clearly show a shallow optimism about God. Their blind spot, we have noticed, is crisis. What man is we learn from what man has done; what God is we learn from what God has done, and this knowledge must be gained by a more subtle analysis. Here we encounter a feature of Israelite thought which is less frequently associated with wisdom, but which does reflect the wise man's conviction that knowledge must be based on experience. This feature is the historical consciousness of Israel, from which arose a collection of historical narrative unparalleled in the ancient Near East.

We know that wisdom literature is associated with scribal schools in Egypt and Mesopotamia, and we can assume that the same association existed in Israel. But the scribal schools of Mesopotamia did not produce a collection of historical narratives like the Israelite books, although the

⁵ Already suggested by Gerhard von Rad, *Theology of the Old Testament* (ET), 1, pp. 418-41.

⁶ *ANET*, pp. 405-07, 434-38.

Israelite scribes produced collections of wise sayings like the Egyptian and Mesopotamian collections. The origins of this literature have been placed by critics in the age of Solomon or in the following century. It has been my personal conviction, which I have never presented to my colleagues in approved form, that this date is too late. The unification of Israel is to be attributed to David, and it is altogether probable that the unification of Israelite traditions is likewise to be attributed to him.⁷ It is difficult to think of another who had both the motives and the means to bring about this work. We accept the hypothesis that the first Israelite to produce a historical work of more than anecdotal scope was the person or the school whose work we know as the Jahwist. The original Jahwist work certainly began with the creation of man, and very probably came down to the accession of David. Obviously this includes more than the J of the Pentateuch, and obviously also it must have been the work of several men who shared in a common enterprise. This is arguable; but I beg leave to set this hypothesis and to discuss the wisdom way of thought and way of speech as it may be illustrated by this hypothesis.

To these scribes, in modern terms, was given the task of answering the question: what is Israel? By implication they had also to answer the questions: who is the God of Israel? and how did Yahweh and Israel become united? To answer these questions they had a wide assortment of tribal and clan traditions, of legends from various and even unknown sources, and some mythological material. This material could simply have been compiled and transcribed as it stood. Evidently it was assembled by a much more complex process, which we have not yet traced. Perhaps we have not understood the process because we have forgotten that these were wise men as well as scribes. Their general purpose was to answer the questions set forth above, and what they did can usually be understood in the light of these questions. As wise men they were convinced of the validity of experience; and they knew that wisdom arose from reflection on experience.

We must begin where they began; and they seem to have begun with the belief that Israel was the creature of Yahweh, and that the history of Israel must be the recital of the acts of Yahweh. What Yahweh is they could learn by what Yahweh had said and by what Yahweh had done. It was obvious that Yahweh acted with a purpose; and all that had gone into the creation of Israel must reflect this purpose. Plainly not all of the material which they had clearly reflected this purpose; indeed, it is possible that very little of it did. But reflection on the human condition made it clear that this purpose could be discerned. The wise men began with a faith which was not the product of wisdom; it was the product of the collective experience of Israel and its ancestors,

⁷ Recently suggested also by R. B. Y. Scott, *op. cit.*, pp. xxx ff.

and it was the function of wisdom to reflect upon this collective experience and draw conclusions for life. Hence they felt justified in conceiving and in formulating the traditions at their disposal in such a way that the insight of experience was reflected.

We do not think of these scribes and sages asking themselves questions about the historical value of the material which they had. They could not ask themselves even where much of the material came from. Their use of it was dictated by their conviction of the validity of experience. What men have said is an important part of the fund of experience; and if many men have said something for a long time, it seems to be as well attested as any item of experience can be. Obviously this is not a critical attitude; but their attitude was not totally uncritical either. We have no way of knowing how much of ancient Near Eastern mythology was available to them; that some was available is evident, because they used it. That some was rejected is highly probable; that some was rewritten is clear. There was nothing in the nature of their task as we have conceived it which would have impelled them to carry their reflections back to the origins of the world and of man. If scholars have correctly identified the work of the Elohist, not all the wise men went back to the beginnings. But the Jahwist writers seem to have felt that they could answer neither the question of the identity of Israel nor the question of the identity of Yahweh unless they dealt with the identity of man and the creative deity. For if Israel was the people of the one God Yahweh, where did other peoples stand in relation to him?

This question led them to affirmations about the human condition in general. I have elsewhere attempted a few considerations about the use which the Israelite wise men made of mythology, the only ancient pattern of thought which touched such problems as these.⁸ The wise men appear both derivative and creative, a conclusion which will hardly surprise the world of scholars. The use of the deluge myth was certainly derivative; its use as a means of proclaiming the righteousness of Yahweh was certainly creative, for the sources as we know them contain no similar reflections. They accepted the story of the deluge as a massive piece of human experience which had not been understood by those who reported it. We are less sure of the derivative elements in the account of the origins of man; here the Jahwist writers achieved a work of originality and of subtlety which has lost nothing of its admirable literary and theological power. The culture myths have been woven into a sequence of events in which the progress of culture marches with the growth of human pride and wickedness. One is tempted to compare this explanation of culture with the myths of other peoples in which the discovery of the arts and crafts are linked with the rebellion of men against the gods, or

⁸ *Myths and Realities*, pp. 146–200.

with the betrayal of divine secrets by one of the gods; but the comparison can be only superficial. That man's conquest of nature is a temptation of God is an extremely common idea, not unknown in modern times, and it can be expressed in a number of ways. For the wise men of Israel this belief was firmly grounded in experience; all the cultural advances of the ancient world were made by people who committed the folly of worshipping false gods.

When we turn to the traditions of the patriarchs, the exodus, and the settlement of Canaan, we see that the work of the wise men was far more complicated. If modern critics are correct, the scribes had at hand a vast assortment of local, clan, and tribal legends of diverse provenance. That they imposed unity upon this material is evident; they produced a reasonably smooth narrative of the encounter of Yahweh with Israel which has still not been analyzed into its components. The historian is inclined to say that they imposed a false unity upon the material; but the historian is a stranger to the wisdom approach to reality. All of these traditions had met in historic Israel, the people of Yahweh, and each item was an episode in the recital of the acts of Yahweh. The kinship of Abraham and Jacob may be a fictitious construction of the sages, but the union of the groups who recognized these men as their ancestors was a historical reality, a reality of experience. Who was involved in the Egypt and Sinai experiences we do not know and probably never shall know. Neither, it seems, did the sages, but they were convinced that the union of all those who worshiped Yahweh had not happened by chance, and it should not be narrated as if it had happened by chance. It is again the principle of experience; the scribes could answer their questions only by reflection upon the narrated experience of the groups which formed Israel.

These questions are not of small importance, for we know no other ancient people who asked them. In seeking the answer to the questions the scribes, beginning with the Jahwist writers, elaborated an idea of history which was entirely new, an explanation of an existing situation by tracing its origins in the past. The idea of history created, as it seems, in the reign of David, was maintained by the later scribes who found themselves faced with the task of answering almost the opposite questions: how had Israel fallen under the judgment of Yahweh? The question could be answered only by an appeal to experience; and experience here included the prophetic interpretation of events. The words of the prophets had been vindicated by experience, and nothing but these words gave an insight into the catastrophe which had befallen Israel. I said earlier that the traditional wisdom had no moral insight for catastrophe; but these scribes were not limited to the traditional wisdom. They had learned another scribal principle, that the wise man has a fund of wise sayings for any situation, and that these wise sayings should

reflect collective experience. The sayings of the prophets furnished the pertinent wise sayings, and they too should be collected and preserved.

Evidently I have identified the wise men of Israel with the historians, and thus effectively designated the historical books as wisdom literature. The late Canon Chaine classified the first eleven chapters of Genesis as wisdom literature; and in fact the designation of the Pentateuch and the former prophets as "historical" has been a misleading designation for at least a hundred years. These books are not so much historical narrative as reflections on the human condition, the explanation, as I have called it, of an existing situation by its origins. The narrative literature of Israel was surely composed not for information but as a guide to decision; from the events of the past and the wise sayings of the elders the Israelite might learn how to meet the present reality, which was still the encounter of Yahweh with man.

The scribes of Israel who were also the sages of Israel were not the first to collect in writing the memories of their people. The libraries of Nippur and of Ashurbanipal were obviously deliberate efforts to collect entire literary traditions. It is not without interest that both collections were made shortly before political collapse; and one wonders how much scribal activity was instigated by Josiah, who attempted a revival of the Davidic monarchy. But the libraries of Nippur and Ashurbanipal, as far as we know them, did not have the unity of view and purpose which we think we find in the books of Israel. This unity may be attributed to the character of Israelite wisdom, which had a more profound respect for experience than the Mesopotamian sages did. The Mesopotamian sages never produced the history of a people, perhaps because they did not know what a people is. The Israelite wise men who were the scribes of Deuteronomy knew that the past is not meaningful unless it is continuous with the present; thus they insist in the book of Deuteronomy that "you" — meaning the Israelites for whom they wrote — were present at the covenant ceremony, experienced the desert journey, received Yahweh's miraculous blessings, and felt his judgments. You should know, because you have experienced it — not in person, but in the traditions of the past which we have preserved for you.

We have come some distance towards summarizing the wisdom way of thought and speech, the wisdom approach to reality. I have called it a conviction of the validity of experience; and experience is not personal experience but the collective experience of one's group, indeed of mankind as far as it is possible to assimilate it. The Israelite sages obviously did not refuse foreign wisdom as a whole, but selected from it those materials which they tested and found valid.⁹ The wise man must know as well

⁹ Besides the examples of foreign mythology cited above, the borrowing from the "Instruction of Amen-em-ope" is well known (R. B. Y. Scott, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21).

as he can what has happened; they saw no reason why men should repeat the mistakes of the past, and they would no doubt approve the saying that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it. Their respect for experience implied that the story of the past can be made intelligible and meaningful; they interpreted the story of the past in their own way, which is not always ours. But the presence of this assembly of men and women professionally dedicated to the study of their interpretation of their past is some testimonial to the permanent validity of their interpretation. Had we reflected on our past as they reflected on theirs, we would not now be living in a balance of terror. And I believe that they would approve the efforts of scholars to know the history of Israel in more detail than the wise men could have known it. For the wise men show an uncompromising respect for truth. Wisdom is not the knowledge of things which are not so.

It is a temptation of all students of the humanities to overidentify with the object of their study. In this we all witness to Collingwood's dictum that the historian must rethink the past. One can even acquire a liking for Latin literature or a sympathetic feeling towards Oliver Cromwell. Thus one who fears that his attitude towards Israelite wisdom is a blind spot may compensate by giving the sages of Israel a respect they do not deserve. If the usual pattern is followed, one will grow to greater liking for the sages by attributing to the sages the same ideals and objectives which are one's own. If this happens, one will then misunderstand the sages more profoundly than one did when one was merely unsympathetic to them. Experience does not answer all questions, not even those questions which the sages posed. It easily falls into mere traditionalism, as Job and Koheleth recognized. It is possible to make the past meaningful by distorting it. A recent writer has called Augustine's theology of history a disaster precisely for this reason.¹⁰ Yet I doubt that Augustine had that respect for experience that I have attributed to the sages. Training in Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought does not prepare one to respect experience. The modern student of Israelite history and literature must ask questions which the wise men did not ask and answer them in terms which the wise men never used and very probably would not approve. Yet if we are to rethink the thoughts of the wise, we must find some points of community.

I have asked you to share my own inedequacy and discontent with my attitude towards the wisdom literature. I now have the boldness to ask you to share this effort towards deeper sympathy and understanding. The request is made with doubts about the value of the effort; and I present it with gratitude that our protocol does not permit the discussion of the presidential address.

¹⁰ G. M. Keyes, *Christian Faith and the Interpretation of History*, 1966.