

WISDOM AND EDUCATION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

by Terry Collins

In the ancient world 'Wisdom' was a composite many-sided notion. It included all the different aspects intellectual activity and practical skills. Today these are separated out into distinct disciplines and their branches. Wisdom was knowledge, understanding and judgement. It included various distinct kinds of knowledge: knowledge how to make things (craftsmen, builders, architects, merchants), knowledge about the world (natural history, astronomy, mathematics, medicine) knowledge of human nature (morality, psychology, statecraft) knowledge of letters (reading, writing, literature.)

The wise man was what we today would call 'the well educated man'. Consequently, wisdom was especially connected with the scribes, who could devote their lives to study. The pursuit of wisdom was seen as a whole way of life, in which discipline led to the acquisition of knowledge; knowledge led to insight and understanding; then finally insight led to sound judgement. In the Second Book of Kings, Solomon is presented as the ideal man who achieves success in all these areas of knowledge, although his judgement came unstuck at the last hurdle. He was what would in later ages be referred to as 'the renaissance man', an ideal that our highly specialised age has largely lost sight of or no longer believes to be possible.

The biblical view, typified in the Book of Proverbs, is that wisdom cannot remain purely theoretical. It must translate itself into activity. Sound judgement produces wise behaviour. Wise decisions produce a wise lifestyle. This in turn leads to prosperity, contentment and happiness. There is a strong ethical content to wisdom, which proclaims that there is a right way to live, and a wrong way; and that we are under an obligation to choose the right way.

There is also a social dimension to wisdom, which affirms that what is good for each individual is good for the people (for society as a whole). Wisdom produces a well-ordered society. Consequently it is especially necessary in rulers and judges. Conversely, the wisdom writings also have something to say about the causes of evil in the world. Unhappiness is the result of evil conduct, which is the result of "foolishness" (a lack of wisdom and a lack of discipline, knowledge and judgement). By their lack of wisdom, individuals and societies bring about their own ruin and downfall. Wisdom is the difficult choice, but it is better for all in the long run. The fool is impatient and incapable of accepting the discipline which leads to wisdom.

Wisdom is the goal of education as practised in Old Testament times. The acquisition of wisdom is a laborious process involving many years of work. Hence it must be started when one is still young. The older generation, which has acquired wisdom, has a duty to pass it on to the young for the sake of society and the future. Admittedly, it was what we would call an elitist education, aimed at producing people fit to govern wisely for the good of all.

The wise man of the ancient world was also a good teacher, one who had skill with words and could compose wise teachings, both oral and written. (Eccles 12:9-10). The pedagogical nature of wisdom can be seen in the literary forms it adopts, especially the father-to-son style of address giving advice to the young. (Prov 3:1. "My son do not forget my teaching".)

WISDOM IN ANCIENT ISRAEL- ILLUSTRATIVE TEXTS

Its origins lay in the folklore which is a natural part of tribal society and of village/family life. Prov 13:1 a wise son hears his father's instruction. It is especially related to the king and his counsellors.

- Prov 25:1 tells of the writing activity in Hezekiah's court (cf. 2 Kgs 18:18)
- 2 Sam 14:20 (the wise king), Prov 31:4-9 (advice for a future ruler), Jer 18:18 (counsel/statecraft is the preserve of the wise men), 2 Sam 15:31-37 and 17:23 (the counsel of Ahitophel), 2 Sam 17:14 (the counsel of Hushai).

- Gen 41 The Joseph story is a major illustration of the importance attached to wisdom in an administrator. (41:33 and 39). It also underlines the comparison with the wisdom of Egypt. The book of Daniel is also relevant in this connection, with its assertion of the superiority of Israelite wisdom over that of the Chaldeans.
- Ex 35:30 to 36:1. Bezalel's wisdom-skill as a craftsman is a gift from God.

SOLOMON'S WISDOM

- Political skill (1 Kgs 2:9): "you will know what to do".
- Legal wisdom of judgement (3:16-28); difficult cases.
- Administration (4:1-28).
- General knowledge and skill with words (4:29-34).
- Diplomacy and bargaining (5) + (10:1-22).
- Building projects (6-7) + (9:10-24).
- Trade and commerce (9:26-28; 10:26-29).

The results of the king's wisdom are seen in the prosperity of the country under his rule and his international 'fame', which redounds to the glory of the nation (1 Kgs 10:22-25; 4:20ff.).

Wisdom in the Old Testament is not usually explicitly religious, but it is always implicitly so. It leads to recognition of the order that prevails in the universe which originates from God. Wisdom brings people into harmony with the mind of the wise Creator. In the context of the O.T. this meant that wisdom was inevitably drawn into a relationship with the Mosaic Law.

Thus in 1Kgs 3:1-15, the story of Solomon's dream and request for wisdom is a theological reflection on the source of his wisdom as a gift from God. Everything is lost when Solomon's heart (mind) is turned away from God. He begins to act foolishly (1Kgs 11).