

# THE WISDOM BOOKS OF THE BIBLE-- PROVERBS, JOB, ECCLESIASTES, BEN SIRA, WISDOM OF SOLOMON



**THE WISDOM BOOKS OF THE BIBLE –  
*PROVERBS, JOB, ECCLESIASTES, BEN SIRA,  
WISDOM OF SOLOMON***  
A Survey of the History of Their Interpretation

Sean P. Kealy

With a Foreword by  
Martin McNamara

The Edwin Mellen Press  
Lewiston•Queenston•Lampeter

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Kealy, Sean P.

The wisdom books of the Bible : Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Ben Sira, Wisdom of Solomon : a survey of the history of their interpretation / Sean P. Kealy ; with a foreword by Martin McNamara.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7734-2601-6 (hardcover)

ISBN-10: 0-7734-2601-9 (hardcover)

I. Wisdom literature--Criticism, interpretation, etc.--History. I. Title.

BS1455.K43 2012

223'.0609--dc23

2012002728

*hors série.*

A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

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The Edwin Mellen Press  
Box 450  
Lewiston, New York  
USA 14092-0450

The Edwin Mellen Press  
Box 67  
Queenston, Ontario  
CANADA L0S 1L0

The Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd.  
Lampeter, Ceredigion, Wales  
UNITED KINGDOM SA48 8LT

Printed in the United States of America





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Fathers and mothers have lost the idea that the highest aspiration they might have for their children is for them to be wise – as priests, prophets or philosophers are wise. Specialised competence and success are all that they can imagine....When a youngster like Lincoln sought to educate himself, the immediately available obvious things for him to learn were the Bible, Shakespeare and Euclid. Was he really worse off than those who try to find their way through the technical smorgasbord of the current school system, with its utter inability to distinguish between important and unimportant in any other way than by the demands of the market?

Allan Bloom, *'The Closing of the American Mind'*

Despite Solomon's example, however, I suspect that few of us, if given the same opportunity, would make the same choice today. Wisdom has gone out of fashion. The very word is one of a number in the English language that we find frequently in works of literature but seldom in everyday life. For the half-century that has passed since I reached the use of reason, I can scarcely remember ever having heard a philosopher, statesman or indeed anyone else described as wise. Our most common terms of approbation tend to be 'intelligent', 'clever', 'astute', 'shrewd' or 'high powered'. The skills of our rulers lie in reading the runes of focus groups and opinion polls, and the image they want to project is of someone vigorous, forceful, youthful, dynamic – not wise. In the academic world, professors are appointed for their specialist knowledge, not their overall sagacity, and university chancellors are chosen more for their abilities as administrators and fundraisers than as the elders of their people. Even philosophers, who, from the etymology of the word that denotes their



calling (love of wisdom), might be expected to give it some meaning,  
are no longer wise...

Piers Paul Read in *Revelations*, 2005, pp191-2

All our wisdom is lost in knowledge  
All our knowledge is lost in information.

*T.S. Eliot*, Chorus from the *Rock*

The deepest, the only theme of human history, compared to which all  
others are of subordinate importance, is the conflict of scepticism with  
faith.

Goethe

Only the suffering God can help.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his Nazi prison cell, 1944

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle,  
willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of  
partiality or hypocrisy.

James 3:17

The habit of the active utilization of well-understood principles is the  
final possession of wisdom.

Alfred North Whitehead

## FOREWORD

Fr. Sean Kealy has already treated the reading public with a fine presentation of the understanding of the four Gospels down through the centuries in volumes very well received as indicated by revisions and reprints. He has now, in this work, turned his attention to the Near Eastern and Israelite Wisdom tradition. In this volume, he gives an excellent introduction to the wisdom tradition itself and to each of the five Wisdom books, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth), Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus), and the Wisdom of Solomon, ending with a very thoughtful 'Afterword.' Sean has read widely and wisely on his subject. The index lists about three hundred authors. His method is to give, together with his own insights and reflections, abundant apt citations from, and references to, the leading authorities on the subject, mainly contemporary. The reader is thus introduced both to the subject of Wisdom and the message of the five individual wisdom books and the understanding of these by the leading lights of contemporary exposition of the subject. We are thus introduced to this rich tradition in its original setting and in its bearing on modern cultural and ethical questions. This is a writing that should enlighten researchers, biblical students, theologians, and the general reader for decades to come.

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## INTRODUCTION

Modern scholars use the term “wisdom” literature to include the books of *Proverbs*, *Job*, *Ecclesiastes*, some psalms and also *Ben Sira*, the *Wisdom of Solomon*. Such books differed clearly from the rest of the OT in style and find their closest parallels outside the Bible, especially in Egyptian and Mesopotamian literature. Generally they are marked by the artistic use of parallelism, the balanced and symmetrical use of phrases peculiar to Hebrew poetry. In particular scholars note that the word “wisdom” is popular in all the books of the Wisdom Literature – found 183 times in *Proverbs*, *Job* and *Ecclesiastes* and over 100 times in *Sirach* and *Wisdom of Solomon*. It is found some 42 times in *Proverbs*, 18 times in *Job*, 28 times in *Qohelet*, 60 times in *Sirach* (a total of 91 times including derivatives), and 30 times in the book of Wisdom. However, as Richard J. Clifford S.J. points out in his introduction to Wisdom Literature (*The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 5, p2), there is quite a variety of distinct literary genres included as each genre develops in a distinctive way:

Proverbs includes the distinct genres of wisdom poem, instruction, and proverb. Job is a dialogue on divine justice set within a narrative; Qohelet is (among other things) a royal pseudo-autobiography; Sirach is a vast compendium of instructions and proverbs and the book of wisdom is a philosophical exhortation to a way of life.

It should be noted also that the OT words for wisdom and wise do not correspond exactly to the English words used to translate them. Therefore English translations sometimes use English words such as “ability” and “skill” to translate words such as the Hebrew “hokmah”. Wisdom is more likely to be used with “the humble” or with “those who listen and take advice” than with the proud and insolent (11:2; 13:10). The wise listen to warning (15:31) and cherish precious things (31:10). They wear themselves in efforts to become rich (23:4) but turn back anger (29:8,11). They have the basic qualities of a good leader or judge (8:15-16; Deut 1:15). They pay attention to counsel, good advice and teaching (8:33; 12:15; 13:10; 19:20). Intelligence lets a person see beneath the surface of behavior (20:4; 28:11) and to learn from correction (19:25; 20:5). The goal of a wise person is to bring humans into tune with the divine so that the Spirit of the Lord will rest on them:

Those who oppress the poor insult their maker,

But those who are kind to the needy honor him (14:31).

St. Jerome (+420) attributed the unity of these books to their (somewhat loose) connection with the biblical patron of wisdom, Solomon. St. Augustine and Western tradition after him would use a wider horizon and read the whole 73-volume Bible, the fruit of many cultures from three different continents, as a source of true wisdom for all people – a view based on such bible texts as 2 Tim 3:15-16; Prov 10-15, 28-29. Some others in the Catholic tradition included Psalms and Song of Solomon (a collection of love poems) to make seven wisdom books. Here we will follow the narrower grouping. This in theological history became somewhat isolated from the full canon because it did not emphasise such historical traditions as exodus, covenant, conquest, prophecy and exile. Other biblical books have been widely recognised as containing similarities to wisdom literature: Gen 2-3 on sin and creation, Gen 37-46 the story of Joseph, the introductory four chapters of Deuteronomy, the Song of Moses in Deut. 32, the succession Narrative of David in 2 Sam 9-20, the model story of Solomon in 1K

3-11; Amos the prophet from wisdom circles; Ezek 28 on the king of Tyre; the Song of Songs and some psalms including Ps 1,19,49,73,111,112,119. Laurence Boadt, writing in Eerdmans' *Dictionary of the Bible*, (p1381) notes that, even though the wisdom books are different in form and style, they have certain elements in common:

- 1) Little interest in the history of Israel or such aspects as the torah as a body of laws, the covenant, the possession of the land, the temple or cult.
- 2) Strong interest in the order of the universe and its rules of cause and effect, the nature of time, the limits to human mastery of the world and the ability to find God revealed in creation.
- 3) A willingness to explore the difficult and painful mysteries of life experience: death and divine reward and punishment, the inequity of fate and destiny in people's lives, the apparent arbitrariness of divine blessing.
- 4) The inscrutability of God's intention and plans
- 5) The education of the young in the tried and true ways of tradition
- 6) An interest in developing skilled administrators, leaders and good citizens
- 7) Cultivation of a life of prudent behaviour and virtue.

For Boadt certain literary genres are prominent: the proverb (Proverbs, Sirach and Ecclesiastes); the dialogue (Job, Wisdom); didactic lesson (Proverbs 1-9 and Ecclesiastes); the metaphor or allegory found often in hymns and poems (Prov 8-9; Wis 7; Sirach 24; Ezek 28).

For Walter Brueggemann (*Theology of the Old Testament*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1997, p680) perhaps the most important thing to note about the sage is "that the sage is included at all along with Torah, king, prophet and cult".

He summarizes the current consensus among scholars in six points:

Wisdom theology is theology reflecting on creation, its requirements, orders and gifts.

The data for such theology is lived experience that is not, for the most part, overridden by imposed interpretative categories or constructs.

Experience is understood and seen to have a reliability, regularity and coherence.

The reliability, regularity and coherence of lived experience has an unaccommodating ethical dimension.

The valuing of lived experience as a coherence of ethical requirement and ethical assurance is seen to be something like “natural theology”.

As “natural theology” this deposit of sustained reflection is indeed revelatory; it reveals and discloses the God who creates, orders and sustains reality.

The Common Theology of the Ancient Near East

In 1950 J.A. Pritchard edited the results of some 30 years of unprecedented archaeological discovery, *‘Ancient Near Eastern Texts Related to the Old Testament’* (third edition, Princeton University Press, 1969) , a volume which would become a basic source book for Biblical study. In a provocative study *‘The Common Theology of the Ancient Near East’* (J.B.L. Vol 77, 1952, pp135-147) Morton Smith, of Brown University, published a seminal dissenting article. In this he concludes that Israel had far more in common with the beliefs of the ancient Near East than contemporary proponents of the uniqueness of Israel’s salvation history were granting. To demonstrate this claim he relates the theological material in Pritchard’s collection to that of the Old Testament. Smith concluded that there was a common theology shared by Israel and the ancient world. Particularly in pre-exilic times, Smith added, one cannot draw a clear boundary between the religion of the Israelites and the religion of its surrounding peoples. While the cult of Yahweh is the main focus and concern of the O.T. it may not have been the main concern of the historical Israelites. In fact, the standard assumptions and religious claims of the Near East included the following six points:

- 1) All worshipped a god who was flattered in worship as the only god, even if he or she were a minor member of the pantheon.
- 2) This god is claimed to have power in all areas of history, nature and morality both legal and civil.
- 3) This god is represented by symbols of power such as sun, bull, father, king.
- 4) This god is just and merciful, deserving love and fearful obedience.
- 5) This god rewards and punishes human actions according to a strict pattern of retribution – there is a direct relationship between obedience/disobedience and the fortunes of people.

- 6) Prophets were quite common. They critiqued the relationship between God and the people and announced appropriate rewards and punishments.

One should also mention Bertel Albrektson's *'History and the Gods: an Essay on the Idea of Divine Manifestation in the Ancient Near East and in Israel'* (Lund:Gleerup, 1967) , which shows that all the main cultures in the ancient Near East saw history as directed by their gods.

According to Robert Gnuse (*'Heilsgeshichte as a Model for Biblical Theology'* University Press of America, New York, 1989), this debate concerning the uniqueness of Israel in ancient Near East "has gone through two diametrically opposed stages of evolution since World War II" (p3). At first biblical scholars with their "salvation history" emphasised the radical differences. But in more recent times German scholars stress the essential continuity between the two cultures. A growing body of archaeological, literary and linguistic data shows Israelite culture to have been a subset of West Semitic culture and religion. Israel, with beginnings barely distinguishable from Canaanite culture, was heir to a great heritage. "It effected a creative advance", a slow development of monotheistic values, an evolutionary move forward, (a punctuated equilibrium as it is sometimes called). Israel does not mean all the people but rather "that revolutionary vanguard of Yahwistic prophets and priests whose minority religious views prevailed at last only with the Babylonian exile of the sixth century B.C. (p3) The "Yahweh only" movement may have been a late and not at first entirely successful movement. This means that only a small minority of the pre-exilic Israelites were developing monotheistic ideas. They quite likely went through different stages until they became consistent monotheists in the Babylonian era. Some scholars even suggest that pure monotheism was a completely post-exilic phenomenon.

Further, this shared Near Eastern tradition was not confined to what Smith described as theological material, which focused on a god and the god's actions. From Egypt to Mesopotamia to Asia Minor there was a shared ethical tradition



which stressed the importance of peace, social justice and harmony between all. The collection of 30 sayings in *Proverbs* 22:20, which reminds us that the Lord will plead the cause of the poor who are robbed or cursed, derives, it seems, from the *Egyptian Instruction of 'Amen-em-ope* (of which the British Museum got a copy in 1888). In this manual of behaviour for officials in that dangerous world of the royal palace, the legal moon-god Thoth is pleading the cause of the poor against the oppressors. Rulers were expected to make sure the law was carried out justly and that evildoers were punished. But it was also expected that they would protect the needy, especially the "widows and orphans". Even the Assyrians, who were notorious for their treatment of their enemies, had a long tradition in which the test of a good king was the care of the defenceless. This Middle East tradition was clearly not shared by all cultures elsewhere. However, this discovery of the connection between *Amen-em-ope* and *Proverbs* led scholars such as J.H. Breasted in his study *'The Dawn of Conscience'* (London/New York, Scribner, 1933) to some unexpected conclusions. In his preface (pxi), he tells how he had been educated to believe that the key insights of morality had first been revealed to the ancient Hebrews and then passed to the rest of humankind. Now he realised that the Egyptians had possessed a standard of morality far superior to that of the Decalogue, over a thousand years before the Decalogue was written. He concluded that the Egyptians had developed a social conscience and become aware of the importance of individual responsibility and of the need in society for a moral order, what he calls "the democratisation of moral responsibility". The biblical writers also had recognised that wisdom was international in scope (1K 4:30-31; Jer 49:7; Obad 8-9).

## B. THE BIBLICAL WISDOM LITERATURE

Probably the main difficulty in evaluating the common theology of the O.T. lies in the Wisdom Literature. The books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach have been identified traditionally as wisdom literature. The name comes from the Hebrew word for wisdom (*hokmah*) which is found more

frequently in these books than elsewhere in the O.T. As a title the word is a modern scholarly designation because no such division is found in the Hebrew Bible. A similar literature is found in other Near Eastern cultures especially in Egypt and Babylonia which seemed to have, at some points, influenced Israel's own wisdom development. Stuart Weeks in *An Introduction to the Study of Wisdom Literature* (T&T Clarke, London, 2010, p2) rightly points out that although the English word wisdom is "loaded with overtones of thoughtfulness and experience", the underlying Hebrew word *hokmah* "means something rather simpler and is actually closer in sense to the English "skill" or "knowhow". Weeks provides some very practical examples: in Exod. 28:3 it describes skill in sewing and Exod. 35:26 it describes the ability to spin wool; in 1Kgs 7:14 it describes Hiram's ability to work bronze. In 1K 2:6 it describes political judgement; in Ezek 28:5 business acumen and in Is 10:13 military skill. Further the adjective *hakam* is used for magicians, skilled craftsmen, boatmen, professional mourners (Ex 7:11 2Chron 2:6; Ezek 27:8; Jer 9:16). In general, according to Weeks, they mean nothing beyond intellectual or practical ability even when it is God who possesses such a skill. (Ps 104:24; Prov 3:19; Jer 10:12) But as we have mentioned already, wisdom plays a key role throughout the Bible (Jer 31-29; Ezek 18:2) and finds a key theological significance in the N.T. However, the specific wisdom books lacked explicit reference to distinctive Jewish events and personalities. e.g. the promises to the Patriarchs, Moses and the Exodus, Sinai, the promise to David (2 Sam 7). These are not found except in such late texts as Sir 44-50 and Wis 18-19. The style and form were quite different even from those of the prophets. Wisdom used such kinds of literature as proverbs, numerical sayings, riddles, fables, allegories, autobiographical passages, dialogues, lists (which can be described as efforts at a primitive scientific analysis by scholarly *listenwissenschaft*), polished literary poems, but it had little reference to specific laws or commandments. Much of the literature is attributed to Solomon: just as his father David was credited with the authorship of many

psalms, so also Solomon became the favourite pseudonymous author of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon and the Wisdom of Solomon.

As early as 1936 Gerhard von Rad, one of the leading German O.T. scholars of the twentieth century, in *'The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays'* (Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd, 1966, pp142-3) found that wisdom literature presented a different theological emphasis: "A quite different strand of religious influence entered the Yahwistic faith in the form of wisdom-lore, a highly naturalised mode of speculation concerning divine economy in this world which we may regard as being of Egyptian origin. At this point we were faced with unequivocal, self-justified statements of belief concerning creation."

Von Rad identified some six proverbs in the book of Proverbs which deabsolutize the system of deeds-consequences which is found in much of Proverbs (16:2,9; 19:21; 20:24; 21:30-31). Perhaps the best known example is 16:9: "the human minds plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps." Many tend to be a mixture of practical observation, vested interest and inscrutability.

The influential American scholar John Bright in *'Authority of the Old Testament'*, London, 1967, p136, could say in 1967 that "the place of Wisdom books in the theology of the O.T. has always constituted a noble problem. Proverbs is indeed peripheral to Israel's faith". He remarks that while Proverbs seems only peripherally related to Israel's distinctive understanding of reality, some books such as Ecclesiasticus question some of its essential features. Nevertheless the Wisdom section of the Bible is the most international and even modern type of reflection in the O.T., particularly because it is based primarily on the wide human experience of ordinary everyday living and not directly on the cultic belief of the people or on its unique historical experience.

Further, according to R.E. Murphy, in *'The Tree of Life'*, Doubleday/Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1996, p7f, the approach of its three dominant forms, the saying, the admonition and the wisdom poem (Prov 1-9), is not so much to command, but to seek to persuade and to provoke the reader into a reflective

mood.

From the early twentieth century, wisdom literature from Egypt to Mesopotamia became available for comparison. Roland Murphy asserts (p16) that the “discovery” of biblical wisdom literature in recent decades is really a rediscovery. He notes that the popularity of Proverbs/Job/Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom (also Song of Songs) has been brilliantly researched by Jean Leclercq and Beryl Smalley – in the twelfth century, some thirty works were dedicated to the Song of Songs alone. Particularly since Gerhard von Rad’s bold and attractive thoughts appeared in his *‘Wisdom in Israel’*, wisdom has been a lively area of research. At present “there are several different notions about the historical and theological development, no one definition of wisdom capable of winning consensus, much disagreement about the social setting and class of wisdom, and a lack of uniformity about the nature and development of some fundamental literary forms in the wisdom tradition.” D.F. Morgan, *‘Wisdom in the Old Testament Traditions’*, Atlanta, 1981, p16). Von Rad (Old Testament Theology, II, Edinburgh, Oliver & Boyd, 1965, p306) claimed that “the real matrix from which apocalyptic originated ... is wisdom”. J.L. Crenshaw (*‘Old Testament Wisdom’* Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1981, pp17-25) concludes that the diverse nature of wisdom is threefold: a world outlook, a teaching position and a folk tradition. The complexity and variety of O.T. wisdom demonstrates why an adequate definition still escapes us. This is evident from Crenshaw’s collection of recent definitions in the supplementary volume of *‘The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible’* (1976, p152):

Wisdom is the art of succeeding in life; practical knowledge of laws governing the world based on experience; the totality of experience transmitted by a father to his son as a spiritual testament; ability to cope; the right deed or word for the moment; an intellectual tradition.

No wonder scholars disagree as to the influence of wisdom traditions in the O.T.

My former professor of O.T., L. Alonso Schokel, once commented that he found wisdom elements in Gen 2-3 (“knowledge of good and evil”, “the serpent’s shrewdness”) where the wise author tried to solve the problem of sin and death. Eichrodt claimed that the divine speeches in Job as well as the hymn of creation in Genesis 1 “are a decisive protest against a theodicy which, by ostensibly seeking to justify the Lord of the world, placed him on the same level as the world and made him into an object of knowledge” (*Theodicy in the Old Testament* ed J.L. Crenshaw, Fortress Press, Philadelphia and London, 1983, p36). For Gerhard von Rad the story of Joseph, who is wiser than the Egyptian sages, is a didactic wisdom story. John L. McKenzie described the historians as wise men. Wisdom motifs were also found in the Deuteronomist History, in prophets such as Amos and Isaiah and particularly in the Psalms – significantly in the opening first psalm. Further, the term wisdom is a collective one, in fact a modern scholarly one which does not correspond precisely to any of the traditional divisions of the Bible. Nevertheless its early use is found in such titles as “The Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach” and “The Wisdom of Solomon” and in the Roman Missal heading for certain readings: “Lectio Libri Sapientiae”. Robert Davidson in his fascinating study *The Courage to Doubt* (S.C.M. London 1983) insists that the only theme of religious history is the conflict which arises when faith realises that it cannot live without scepticism and scepticism acknowledges that it cannot live without faith. In *Wisdom and Worship*, London, S.C.M. 1990, Davidson expounds his own long fascination with the dialogue between faith and doubt which takes place within the experience of those who believe. He mentions the temptation to assume that the search for meaning is something quite new in history. He insists that there has always been a potential clash between belief and experience which some solve by asserting the priority of belief over experience while others emphasise the priority of experience over belief.

However, there is widespread agreement that wisdom literature both inside and outside Israel took two rather irreconcilable forms and that certain books clearly

belonged to these categories. They frequently use terms such as 'wisdom' and 'wise' and aim to communicate divine wisdom as revealed to the wise people of the past.

The first type of wisdom is called by Bruce Vawter (C.B.Q. July 1986, p461) simple philosophy. According to this, human reason and observation- by definition deprived of any other enlightenment than that derived from its own nature- can penetrate the why and wherefore of human existence, because this wisdom is God's creation built into people. This rather positive, practical and utilitarian literature is found in the Bible in Proverbs, Ben Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon. This wisdom formed human character and ranged from critical thinking to disciplined study, to spiritual meditation and ethical behavior. All five biblical wisdom books shared an acceptance of the superiority of reason and experience in determining what is true.

The oldest Egyptian examples are three manuals from the Old Kingdom, dated roughly fifteen hundred years before the time of Israel's patron of Wisdom, Solomon. One attributed to Ptah-hotep, a warrior of the Fifth Dynasty, portrays him looking back over a long successful life in the king's service. He is reminding his son that 'no-one is born wise'. Strict discipline, hard work and good manners are the recommended way to success. Personal responsibility, fair dealing and justice are commended because 'wrongdoing has never brought its undertaking into harbour.' Such wisdom obviously was valuable as contributing to a stable, moral political order and was of value in the Israelite covenantal society. The treatise of the minor official from the twelfth or thirteenth century, Amen-em-ope has a recognisable influence on Prov 22:17-23:14; Jer 17:5-8 and Psalm 1. Prominent here as in Proverbs is the ideal of the silent, self-controlled person in contrast to the hot-tempered or passionate person.

For Vawter a very different concept of wisdom or rather of anti-wisdom is found in Job (cg 28) and Ecclesiastes. Such a wisdom forever eludes a person's grasp. Or if one grasps it, it proves to be illusory. These texts, which conclude on high

pietistic notes, do not see human wisdom as an adequate guide for human destiny. They insist that a person's mind is incapable of comprehending the meaning of life whether because of native incapacity (Job) or simply because of the expected normal "damnabilities" of human existence (Ecclesiastes). This critical and occasionally pessimistic literature is reflected in the Egyptian '*Dispute over Suicide*' and the '*Song of the Harper*' from the late third millennium after the end of the Old Kingdom – a troubled period of widespread questioning of the teaching on material success. In the '*Dispute over Suicide*' a man tired of life dialogues with his Ba (alter ego, or soul) in his perplexity:

To whom can I speak today?  
 There are no righteous.  
 The land is left to those who do wrong.  
 To whom can I speak today?  
 There is lack of a trusted friend;  
 One has recourse to an unknown to complain to him.  
 To whom can I speak today?  
 There is no-one contented of heart;  
 'The one with whom one went, he no longer exists.  
 To whom can I speak today?  
 I am laden with wretchedness,  
 For lack of a trusted friend.  
 To whom can I speak today?  
 The sin which treads the earth,  
 It has no end  
 (ANET pp407f.)

While the questioning of God's justice seems to be unknown in Egyptian literature, it is found in Mesopotamia. In a Sumerian variation of the Job motif, "Man and his God" from the first half of the second millennium, an innocent young man, whose associates blame his sickness on sin from his birth leading to God's anger, finds salvation in confessing his sins. Unlike Job he does not question God's justice. A similar situation is found in the Akkadian school poem: "I will praise the God of wisdom" (c. 1500-1200B.C.). There a man tells how he called to his gods for help in his distress but they did not respond despite his life

of piety. Eventually in a dream a young man is sent by Marduk and restored him to health: “the Lord took hold of me, the Lord set me on my feet, the Lord revived me”. Then all of Babylon acclaimed Marduk. In the Sumerian tradition the most effective recourse is to keep glorifying God, and to continue wailing and lamenting until God, who is his intercessor in the assembly of the gods, turns a favourable ear to his petitions. Such writings and constant questioning led to a crisis in wisdom in Mesopotamia, Egypt and later in ancient Israel.

In the later more speculative “*Babylonian Theodicy*”, also named “*The Dialogue about Human Misery*”, there is a dialogue between an innocent suffering person and his gentle friend. The friend replies that the intentions of the gods are inscrutable, yet in the end the wicked will be punished. However the text lacks the passion and sharpness of the biblical Job. The innocent one is accused of impiety. One must be faithful to one’s God. Curiously there is the admission that the gods made the human race sinful, an admission which is not found in the Book of Job. The proper response to suffering is piety towards the Gods. The poem ends with a prayer of the sick person for mercy from the Gods. This in fact is the only text which is comparable to the Book of Job. It also deals with the problem of justice which it declares to be incomprehensible. In the Keret epic, from the Bronze Age, there is a description of a king (words missing from top of page) who regains his lost family by the help of the gods. The Akkadian text ‘*Dialogue of Pessimism*’, from the first millennium, describes how various courses of action are proposed by a master to his encouraging slave. All are rejected by him, including the consolations of religion, and the only satisfactory course left to him is to commit suicide. Some scholars take this as a serious dialogue while others such as E. Speiser see it as a farce.

In the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* there is “The Protestation of Guiltlessness” – such a protestation was part of the Egyptian burial rites. There (not unlike Job 31) a person protested the sins which they had not committed and concluded as follows:



I have satisfied a god with that which he desires. I have given bread to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, and a ferry boat to the marooned. I have provided divine offerings for the gods and mortuary offerings for the dead. So rescue me, protect me. (ANET, p36)

That the Israelites were well acquainted with the wisdom of the people they encountered seems evident. We do have references in the Bible to Babylonian (Jer 50:35); Canaanite (Ex 28:3,17); Edomite (Jer 49:7; Ob. 8; Job 2:11); Egyptian (Prov 22:17 – 24:22); Ishmaelite, in the words of Agur and Lemuel (Prov 30-31); Aramaic wisdom in 'The Words of Ahigar'; and in Proverbs.

According to Norbert Lohfink S.J. (*Great Themes from the O.T.*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1982, p105) the philosophy of a relentless law, connecting actions and reward/punishment, had penetrated the whole of the ancient Orient, even as early as the second millennium B.C. The educated could find it in their school texts:

Only in comparatively late Wisdom literature do we find factual basis for the universal conviction being called in question and contrary conceptions proposed. Job clung to the unfathomable greatness of God; Qoheleth the preacher abandoned himself to the blessings of the moment; the Wisdom of Solomon looks for a just settlement beyond the grave. But in earlier times Israel had accepted as law a connection between action and reward- and what is more, in this life.

### C. THE REDISCOVERY OF WISDOM

At least three developments in scholarship in the twentieth century have led to an increased emphasis on Wisdom Literature: Herman Gunkel's form criticism, the recovery of wisdom literature from Egypt and Mesopotamia and the rejection by Walther Zimmerli and Gerhard von Rad of the theological bias against wisdom literature. This rediscovery of wisdom literature, which gradually brought wisdom back to the centre of O.T. discussion, has taken place against the background of

the increasing emphasis among scholars on the final form of the whole biblical text as we have it. Davidson (*Wisdom and Worship*, p14) rightly comments that:

There is no justification for taking the most critical and cynical comments from the wise in Mesopotamia, Egypt or Israel, ignoring their cultural context, and interpreting them in the light of modern secularist assumptions. As L.G. Perdue in '*Wisdom and Cult*' has rightly claimed, it is wide of the mark to view the wise in Israel or elsewhere in the ancient Near East as "internationalist" cosmopolitan humanists and secularists who functioned with empirical and rational epistemologies, were indifferent to the sphere of the cult and its demand for confrontation and participation, were often disdainful of cultic observance and participants, and negatively criticised matters of cult

Further, there is a shifting away in O.T. theology from the dominant covenant/creed trends set by such scholars as von Rad and Eichrodt towards the creation/wisdom models of Paul Hanson, Samuel Terrien, Claud Westermann, James L. Crenshaw and Walter Brueggemann. For Crenshaw the covenant model is too particularistic and neglects the more comprehensive categories. But as Brueggemann, introducing a study of James L. Crenshaw ('*A Whirlwind of Torment*', Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1984, pvii) points out:

the convenantal modes of faith become increasingly alienated from the realities of human pain, doubt and negativity...those human experiences which are raw, nonconformist and do not fit the grid of explanation.

Crenshaw explores five texts which are liberating and corrective of a one-sided formal model, showing a growing animosity on God's part which varies with one's experience: "Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac portrays a deity who trifles with what humans consider most precious; the confessions of Jeremiah depict a God who deceives one who has faithfully proclaimed the divine word; the Book of Job

paints a disturbing picture of a distant ruler, who toys with human lives to prove a point in argument; Ecclesiastes presents an indifferent creator who dwells in remote regions of space" (p. ix f.). Crenshaw's fifth text, Ps 75, shows a fleeting example in which the one who is being tested has a feeling of the presence of God in the ordeal.

For Leo G. Perdue (*Wisdom Literature*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2007 p15) the salient themes of wisdom theology (creation, providence and wisdom) have been the stepchildren of salvation history, election and covenant since the origins of modern biblical theology in the Reformation. These received subordinate status because of the dominance of Karl Barth, and the American theologians, who found the biblical emphasis in history and God's saving acts in history. In addition, theology was often distinguished from the history of the Israelite tradition. Also the theology of wisdom literature was influenced strongly by ideas about creation, providence and wisdom.

The revolution against the dominant biblical theology movement can be traced back to the 1960s to the rather iconoclastic study of James Barr (*Semantics of Biblical Language*, Oxford University Press, 1961). Barr insists that the movement, which emphasised the acts of God in history and which sought external corroborating historical evidence, should be supplemented, if not replaced. Two works from 1970 contribute in particular to the changed atmosphere: Gerhard von Rad's "*Wisdom in Israel, a new Approach*" published in the last year of his life (in England in 1962 and 1965) and W. McKane's *Proverbs* (O.T.L) which had the significant subject title "*A New Approach*". Von Rad had written as early as 1936 that creation was not a primary theme in the faith of Israel but a marginal one as it had been articulated late in Jewish history. Thus von Rad's last work was, in fact, a reversal of his earlier work.

Von Rad concludes that it was wrong to think of even the earliest Israelite wisdom as essentially secular or profane. He insisted that there was always a religious dimension because in the world of Israel the reality and activity of God

was always accepted. Thus "The fear of Israel is the beginning of knowledge" was not a late theological development but belonged to wisdom at an early stage. In the O.T. Theology, von Rad emphasises that wisdom is a revelation of God even if through creation. In *Wisdom in Israel* he has a chapter significantly entitled "Self-revelation Of Creation" where he describes wisdom as much more than a mere attribute of God. What was distinctive in Israel was the effort to describe the limits of human beings in their efforts to master life and its incalculable elements (Prov 16:1ff; 19:14). In this von Rad disagrees with other scholars who see apocalyptic as a child of prophecy. Prophecy with its foretelling the future was a natural historical development of the present. Apocalyptic, with its concern for fixed ages and its interest in what lay beyond history, was in sharp contrast to history and to prophecy. It was not surprising that the Book of Daniel, the earliest Jewish apocalypse, was based on a wise man who exemplified many of the characteristics and ideals of the wisdom literature.

McKane sees three levels in the development of the O.T. wisdom. The earliest was pragmatic, international and theologically neutral and set in the framework of the schools with their old wisdom which aimed at educating individuals for a successful and harmonious life. The development involved a twofold process. Thus wisdom was set in the context of Israelite society. Thirdly, it was thoroughly qualified by the addition of sentences expressive of a moralism which derived from Yahwistic piety.

In an interesting study, Lennart Bostrom (*The God of the Sages*), *Coniectanea Biblica O.T.*, 29 Stockholm, Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1990) concludes that the God of Proverbs is the Creator God, who in hidden ways ordered the world and presided over that order. Further he challenged the views of such scholars as McKane, Fox and Whybray that there was any secular thinking in the ancient world or that there are therefore differences between wisdom and the rest of the O.T. because of a lack of religious emphasis. He concludes that, while the God of Proverbs is transcendent, sovereign, omniscient, omnipotent and

righteous, nevertheless God is personal, immanent and active in the world, with a caring role similar to that in the other O.T. traditions. Therefore one cannot conclude that wisdom traditions are an alien theology in the O.T.

Laurence Boadt '*Reading the O.T.*' Paulist Press, New York, 1984, p491, concludes his wisdom survey by insisting that wisdom is not opposed to the Law or the Prophets. Rather it helps to unite teaching and reality, to integrate the reality of everyday doubt and uncertainty with the ideals of faith. He lists ten major achievements of this literature:

- 1) The importance of order for understanding God's creation and the role of humans in God's plan.
- 2) The importance of cause and effect – everything has its reasons.
- 3) The importance of time for the people. Israel's sense of history was strongly oriented to the future. Most other nations were orientated towards the ideal first moment of creation in the past. But Israel was a people of hope that God would always act again at his chosen moment.
- 4) The revelation of God in creation. Wisdom's discovery of order and meaning shows how reasonable faith is.
- 5) The personification of wisdom as a woman shows that our mysterious God actually communicates and can be appreciated in a personal relationship – it is not likely that Israel thought of wisdom as a real divine being.
- 6) The fact that suffering in the hands of a good and merciful God has some meaning. It is either the result of evil done or a testing of faith to deepen it.
- 7) The positive nature of life and the clear ability of enjoying it. Creation is good and under control. The lessons of experience help us plan for the future.
- 8) The responsibility of people for the world as co-creators with God. They should use their talents and responsibilities wisely and prudently.
- 9) God's plan is a gift beyond human control or total understanding. Wisdom is the person of God who asks us to imitate him. It is moral and fear of Yahweh requires honesty, humility, justice, etc.
- 10) The recognition that wisdom has its limits. The key virtue of the wise is trust based on a firmer commitment to Yahweh.

Laurence Boadt in Eerdmans *Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan,

2000, p1382) describes how wisdom as a major category “gave way to Torah study in postbiblical Jewish reflection, but it was never excluded from the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures because it is identified with the restless human search for God, respect for the mystery of God’s freedom, and awareness of the vast moral sphere of decision-making beyond formal cultic worship. Even Qoheleth the sceptic could be brought into this vision by adding a final editorial note” (Eccl. 12:13-14).

One can conclude that the Bible is incomplete and can easily lead even the scholar to distortion without the essential corrective contribution of wisdom and its emphasis on experience. A very useful example of this view is Leslie J. Hoppe’s study of the biblical theme of poverty in “*Being Poor*” (Michael Glazier, Wilmington Delaware, 1987, pp92f.) For Hoppe, the prophets, although aware of original sin, blamed poverty simply on the greed of the rich. They had little or no hope for a change, no criticism of the poor as such or legislative programme to improve the situation. For the Priestly and Deuteronomic traditions, poverty was a result of disobedience to the covenant law, whereas the Jubilee legislation was a practical way of remedying the situation. The wisdom literature has a different approach as it tries to warn young men against the consequence of a lifestyle without self-control. They believe that people were to a large extent in control of their lives, their choices and the consequences involved. They denounce, in particular, both drunkenness and laziness as the cause of so many problems. Nevertheless, in their fuller picture (Prov.30:7-9) the wise insist on compassion and justice towards the poor (Prov.21:13; 29:14) and in Job provide a wonderful model to be followed. As Norman Gottwald once pointed out, the voice of the poor and needy sounds throughout the Bible more persistently than in any other classical literature, repeating again and again that something must be done if this is to be really God’s world. However, the full picture of the Bible must be seen, particularly the contribution of the wisdom literature with its insistence on compassion and justice.

Perhaps, for readers of the Bible, one should make a brief mention of the two types of imagination described by Chicago theologian, David Tracy, who examines the classics of the Christian tradition in *'The Analogical Imagination'*, 1981. He finds two imaginations (analogical: catholic and dialogical: Protestant). The Catholic uses a rain forest of metaphors to describe God while the Protestant tends to emphasize the absence of God, and God's distance from the world. For Tracy, neither is superior to the other and each requires the critique of the other. The risk for one is superstition while for the other it is a bleak, God-forsaken world. For Protestants such as Marcus Barth, the only sacrament is Jesus Christ and him crucified. Catholics on the contrary seem to find sacraments everywhere. Thus Bernanos comments at the end of *A Diary of a Country Priest*, "everything is grace".

#### D. A FAITH VIEW OF WISDOM

As John H. Hayes points out in his "*An Introduction to Old Testament Study*" (Abingdon, 1979, pp347ff), the character and content of O.T. wisdom created problems for some biblical, particularly Protestant, theologians. The priestly and prophetic traditions clearly claim a divine source and authority for their pronouncements (Lev 19:2f; Am 1:3) Likewise the Deuteronomic tradition, although recording the words of Moses, makes clear that these words were in fact God's words to Moses and Israel. The authority of the wise was in the skill with which they communicated aesthetically attractive proverbs. They showed little or no interest in the unique history of Israel or in its political events. Neither miracles nor supernatural events are recounted but the typical issues which humans encounter everywhere. Matters of sin, guilt, judgement, forgiveness are not central. There is a tendency to describe the world and human affairs as they are.

Nevertheless, as the prophetic texts Jer 18:18, Ex 7:26 and 15, 16:23 indicate, the words of the wise came to be seen as on a par with those of both priests and prophets. The wise constituted a social group (Jer 8:8; Prov .1:5; 22:17; 24:23;

Job 15:18)) who played their part in the administration of the court and temple and were educated in the different schools. They were scribes, advisors to rulers, teachers in wisdom schools. The school had in fact prepared students for scribal and official positions in government and temple. Their numbers seemed to have increased in the Second Temple era because of the expansion of literacy.

Further, as Roland Murphy insists ("*The Tree of life*" second ed., Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1996, p125), the wisdom experience should be seen as a faith experience, a dialogue with the God who was worshipped as creator and redeemer. Even though the covenant relationship to the Lord does not figure directly in the wisdom experience, it is bracketed but not erased.

The shaping of Israel's views of the world and of the activity of God behind it and in it, was done in an ambience of faith, and was characterised by trust and reliance upon God. Moreover, the sages penetrated into the divine mystery in a manner that even the prophets never equalled. God drew the people through their daily experience of themselves and creation, into the mystery of God's dealings with each individual being.

Murphy differs from many scholars who note how secular the wisdom writings are. He insists that wisdom is basically a religious quest for life and a practical rather than an abstract one. However, paradox and ambiguity are central to wisdom concerns:

Trust in the Lord did not eliminate a lively respect for the mystery of divine activity....the basic paradox of wisdom appears: on the one hand, wisdom is something acquired by discipline and docility, but on the other hand, it is a gift from God. Sayings about the Lord appear cheek by jowl with sayings about human experience (pp114-115).

Although much of the wisdom literature deals with the mundane and practical, a clear theological activity can be seen in the following four ways, as Roland



Murphy (p114) and John H. Hayes (p349) point out:

Ultimately wisdom is never purely secular or resting on presuppositions alien to faith in Yahweh. The wisdom teachings were open to experience and verification but only to a certain point. Beyond that lay the mystery of Yahweh's free activity (Prov 16:9; 19:21; 20:24; 21:30f; Job 11:7-8; Is 40:13-28). Just as a prophet like Jeremiah could insist that a wise person should not glory in their wisdom (Job 9:23), likewise the writers of Proverbs are well aware that there is more hope for a fool than for a person wise in their own eyes (Prov 26:12; 28:26; 3:17). Thus the common dichotomy between proverbial wisdom and the more "Jewish" parts of the Bible is not of necessity accurate. The idea of a search for wisdom in God's well-ordered universe became a leading theme in the later books (Prov 1:5; 2:1-15; 4:1; 6:6-11; Job 28:12-28; Sir 14:20-27; 43:27-31). The suggestion occasionally made that the idea of limits and divine uncertainty is due to the influence of Yahwism is inaccurate. Similar ideas are frequent in Egyptian wisdom. Thus Amen-em-ope (19:16) says: "One thing is the words which men say, another is that which the god does" (cf Prov 19:21; 16:9). Again in Amen-em-ope (19:13) we find: "Man does not know what the morrow is like" (cf Prov 27:1). A Babylonian proverb insists that "The will of a god is difficult to find out" (John Mark Thompson, *The Form and Function of Proverbs in Ancient Israel*, the Hague, Mouton (1971, p121).

The 'first principle', 'the fear of Yahweh', which is central to the wisdom literature, is an attempt to think systematically about the relationship between wisdom and Yahwism. According to Joseph Blenkinsopp (*Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament*, Oxford, 1983, p25):

The evidence for adaptation and development within the book (i.e. proverbs) leads to the conclusion that collections of proverbs expressing the common ethos of the scribal schools have been modified and supplemented by religious teachers after the Babylonian exile. Characteristic of the latter is the fear of Yahweh

as epitome of the moral life (e.g. 10:27), the belief in Yahweh as the sustainer of the moral order (e.g. 10:3), the description of certain types of conduct as “an abomination to Yahweh” (e.g. 11:1,20), the use of specific religious categories like sin, prayer and sacrifice, and the contrast, monotonously repeated, between the fate of the righteous and the wicked.

The phrase does not mean emotional agitation in the face of danger but extreme reverence/awe, the attitude which one should display before Yahweh. It is not mere belief or assent to a doctrine but trust in Yahweh the Holy One. Its opposite is not ignorance but foolishness. It is basic to Israel’s religious traditions from the earliest times (Gen 22:12;28:17; Ex 3:6; 20:18) and dominant in the Deuteronomic literature for performing religious duties – the verb ‘fear’ is found in Akkadian literature meaning loyally serving God and king. It should not be seen as psychic fright, terror or horror but interpreted within von Rad’s broad range of biblical meanings from awe to obedience to commitment to Yahweh. Obviously it is far from being a hedonistic principle even though Sir 1:10 can describe it as gladness and a festive crown and Sir 2:15, sees it as a synonym for love. Thus only the one who reverences Yahweh will have true living knowledge. “Fear of the Lord” is the nearest phrase in the Bible to “religion” or religious duty as it is often meant in Proverbs. This faith in Yahweh is the foundation and basic starting point for true knowledge. In Paul also fear can mean a healthy attitude, an essential aspect of faith which encourages reliance on the power of the Spirit (1 Cor2:4; Phil 2:12).

What has been described as the most striking personification in the whole Bible is the apparently later description of wisdom as a woman (Prov 1:20-33; 8:1-35; 9:1-6). In the opening chapter of Proverbs, wisdom is described as a woman who goes throughout the city seeking disciples – she is frequently contrasted with Lady Folly, who tries to seduce the simple into her discipleship (9:1-6). In ch 8 wisdom speaks at length in her own name, as she cries out in the marketplace, going

beyond what any prophet would have promised. She offers life to those who listen to her: “Long life is in her right hand; in her left, riches and honours.” She is described as created in the beginning before the world was established. She is God’s craftsperson (8:30), providing God with the plan of creation, God’s delight, playing before God and “finding delight in the sons of men”. If wisdom is so close to Yahweh and so involved in creation, then the obvious conclusion is that there can be no gulf between wisdom and Yahwism. Clearly, all wisdom comes from Yahweh. The well-known ch 28 in Job asks: “where can Wisdom be found?” and speaks of not finding Wisdom. The Abyss and the sea insist that they do not possess it. Abaddon and Death say they have merely heard of it. In the end the answer is given that God alone knows where it is but no human person can discover where it is.

The reason that Wisdom is personified as feminine in the OT has long baffled interpreters, even modern scholars such as Roland Murphy (*The Tree of Life*, p146) who can find no satisfactory answer. Kim Paffenroth (*In Praise of Wisdom*, New York, Continuum, 2004, p37) however insists that “This feminine portrayal of wisdom imagines a divine presence that is much more vulnerable and accessible than the masculine of father, judge, warrior, and king more usually applied to God in the Bible, and it is an enormous and valuable addition to the biblical concept of God.”

The traditional exegesis in the Tannaite Rabbis and church fathers up to recent times does not find in Wisdom an independent divine reality. Rather it is a literary device, an example of Hebrew personification - a development from the feminine form “*hokmah*” (Wisdom) or a representation of what Patriarchal men find most enticing. The Rabbis see a personification of the Torah. Christians see a dramatization of one of God’s qualities. Another interpretation is becoming prominent today especially among the feminist theologians, who see Sophia-Hokmah as a kind of feminine deity. Some claim she was a Canaanite divinity, others an early Israelite divinity which was a casualty of the development of

monotheism. The closest is the Egyptian goddess Ma'at who has such common aspects as existence before creation, the darling of God, the wooing of individuals and the holding of life in her hand. Ma'at is a key notion, a virtually untranslatable word in Egyptian wisdom, embracing such ideas as cosmic order, truth, righteousness, justice and law. It includes both the task and the promise; also the reward which awaits one on fulfilment.

Further development of the personality of Wisdom is found in Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon. There Wisdom is described as a divine being created by God, his associate in making and governing the world, the guide and teacher for his people - these writings are very influential in later Christological controversies. For Paul, wisdom is Jesus Christ crucified. For John Wisdom/Word became incarnate.

Eventually Wisdom was fully baptized into Israel's faith. Thus Wisdom was identified with Torah (Psalm 1) and the spirit of Yahweh (Wisd 7). This wisdom included the whole of known scientific knowledge. The latter is paradoxically a gift of Yahweh, yet it is acquired by discipline and docility. This identification with the Torah (Sir 24:3-23; Wisd 7:17-22) is already evident in one of Moses' speeches in Deut 4:5f:

Therefore I teach you the statutes and decrees. Observe them carefully, for this will you give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations, who will hear of all these statutes and say, this great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people...

An issue of the periodical *Interpretation* (April 1992) devoted to the Psalms stresses that "the final shape of the Psalter, with its dominant wisdom elements" suggests that the Book of Psalms reached its present final form at a time when "the sages had the upper hand in restructuring the community's perception of these cultic traditions." (p138). Following the criteria set by Gunkel to distinguish wisdom traditions, one should look for such indications as 'blessed be' formulas, comparisons, admonitions, 'son' advice, 'better' sayings, alphabetic structures.

But one should also observe such wisdom themes as contrasts between two ways or two types (just and wicked), practical advice, the problem of retribution, fear of the Lord. On such bases, Roland Murphy concludes that Psalms 1,32,34,49,112,128 are authentic wisdom Psalms (*The Tree of Life*, p103). In 1926 H. Gunkel had identified eight Wisdom Psalms (1,37,49,73,112,128 and 133). Some scholars increased Gunkel's eight to fifteen, while still others had contracted the list to three.

There is widespread agreement among scholars that Psalm 1, with its sharp contrast between the happy righteous and the wicked, was deliberately placed at the beginning of the Book of Psalms. It invites the community to be open to all the following Psalms as a source of God's instruction, especially Psalm 2 with its teaching that Yahweh reigns, which is the central teaching of the Book of Psalms. However, Roland E. Murphy (*Responses to 101 Questions*, Paulist Press, New York, 1994, p25) rightly remarks that Ps 1 is often singled out for saying more than it does as it is unusual within the Psalter where there are not many beatitudes. The main activity of the righteous is audible meditating (an oral, not mental, recitation) on the law of the Lord who watches over the way of the just. One should remember that the questioning voice is found more often in the Psalms than in the book of Job.

In the Psalms the search for wisdom and happiness takes place against a background of storms and bad harvests, of wars, sickness and death, of envy, fear, hatred and cursing, of waiting, of thanksgiving, of joy and of failure, of answered and unanswered prayers. The happy righteous are those who are open to the lessons taught by the laments, the hymns, the royal and enthronement psalms. The Book of Psalms begins in a call to delight and to obedience (Ps 1) and ends with a universal call to praise (150). The contrast between the righteous and the wicked pervades the psalter. The happy are those who recognize what is wrong with themselves and their world, with all its limitations and failings. This leads them to find refuge in the God who reigns. The heart of wickedness is autonomy, self and

peer instruction in wisdom, by people who are self-centred and self-ruled. For Brueggemann, Psalm 73, which is a centre or pivotal point for the whole Psalter, provides a model which Israel should follow, a path found in all the psalms, a path which moves from obedience to praise, by way of protest, candour and communion. In Ps 73 the psalmist solves his problem both by visiting the temple and taking part in the discussions of the close-by wisdom schools. This Psalm is full of contrasts and tensions and the repetition of such words as “indeed” (e.g. vi,13). The Psalmist even admits that he is full of envy at the healthy, carefree, proud, popular, arrogant who are in fact evil people totally dismissive of God. He confesses that he does not understand a god who holds on to his right hand (v22-23). God found him and did not leave him to go it alone. For the Psalmist doubts and questioning are not the enemies of faith but the catalyst of a deeper faith. This is a bold, transformed faith in a quite different God who is present in “participating in and attentive to the darkness, weakness and displacement of life” (*The Message of the Psalms*, p52). The same problem haunts the book of Job where ch 20-21 describe the conflicting arguments of Zophar and Job which show that life does follow the traditional theological script. Brueggemann believes, in contrast to Eichrodt and other scholars, that the O.T. has no single central theme running through it, no more than his own work, but a dialectic between the “legitimation of structure and the embrace of pain.” He finds a similar dialectic in the biblical writings of Terrien, Sanders, Hanson, Levenson, Gottwald, Belo and Westermann.

The final form of the Book of Psalms, according to Gerald H. Wilson (*Interpretation*, April 1992, pp138f.), as it moves from lament to praise, from individual to community, recognizes that: “The reality of human suffering, plumbs the depth of agony in the face of the hiddenness and admits to the darkness, anger and outright evil that continue to abide even in the heart of the faithful; nevertheless it still points to an alternative view of reality in which there is room in the human heart only for praise....in which the presence of God has

become so real that anger has no point, pain has no hold and death has lost its sting.”

#### E. COMMON THEOLOGY AND THE EMBRACE OF PAIN

In the first part of his essay *A Shape for O.T. Theology* (C.B.Q. 1985,395ff), Walter Brueggemann argues that O.T. faith fully shares in the common Near East theology as described by Morton Smith. For him the only sure thing about O.T. theology is that the approaches of Eichrodt and von Rad are no longer sufficient while there is no real consensus concerning what comes next. He finds that what is new in Israel's theology is the capacity to embrace pain, whereas what was prominent in the common theology was the legitimation of socio-political and religious structures. Because Israel saw its foundation in the exodus of slaves from Egypt, there was always a crucial minority who kept the story alive and encouraged resentment of oppressive structures. There emerged, in the telling of their faith story, an unbearable incongruity: an angry Yahweh committed to structure sanctions on his people yet yearning for a wholesome relationship with them (Gen 6:5-8:22). The laments or rather 'complaints' are Israel's primary and distinctive departure from the common theology, its way of articulating its restlessness. They are not indicative of disobedience but of a new kind of obedience, "a bold protest against a legitimacy that has grown illegitimate because it does not take into account the suffering reality of the partner." (p401)

This refusal to settle for the way things are or to believe that all authority is ordained by a god who is "above the fray" is pervasive in Israel. It begins with Moses and his radical and dangerous prayer of protest challenging God to do a new thing (Ex 32:31f; 35:15; Num 11:10-15). The Psalms continue this way of protest – especially the most dangerous and hopeless Psalm 88 with its description of the dark night of the soul, "unrelieved by a single ray of comfort or hope" (Weiser), and its blunt accusations. Brueggemann also quotes from the prophets the intense personal speech of Jeremiah (20:7-12) and from the wisdom literature the harshness of Job, who unlike his friends, spoke what is right (Job 9:19-24;

42:8).

In his refreshing study *The Courage to Doubt* (London, S.C.M., 1983) Robert Davidson noted the extent to which ‘the search for meaning’ and the worthwhileness of human life, is built into both Wisdom and Psalm literature, raising questions, particularly the agonised ‘why’s?’ and ‘how long’s?’ of the Psalms and Job. He is deeply suspicious of any liturgy or approach to faith which deals only with answers and certainties and not with questions and perplexities. Abraham in the Bible represents a faith that boldly seeks understanding, a faith strong enough to doubt. In a second study, *Wisdom and Worship* (S.C.M. London, 1990, pp70, 124), Davidson targets the type of worship which excludes doubts and difficulties. He points to three ancient biblical efforts to avoid the issue of theodicy:

The legacy of the polytheistic background such as in Job’s prologue, where the initiative does not come from God but from one of the ‘sons of God’ (see also Psalm 82)

The denial that there is a problem, by insisting with Job’s friends that the good flourish and the wicked perish (Ps 37:25; Ps 34)

The approach of Qoheleth in which God is not only remote from this messy world but his purposes are unknowable and we can only see facts:

“One more thing I have observed here under the sun: speed does not win the race nor strength the battle. Bread does not belong to the wise, nor wealth to the intelligent, nor success to the skilful; time and chance govern all. Moreover no man knows when his time will come; like fish caught in a net, like a bird taken in a snare, so men are trapped when bad times come suddenly”  
(Qoh.9:11-12)

Davidson comments on the fact that the question ‘why?’ is more common in Hebrew literature than ‘Hallelujah’. He wishes to show that early wisdom books combine honest probing with worship. Thus he quotes the famous 1867 poem



“*Dover Beach*” of the Victorian poet Matthew Arnold which according to many gives “classic expression to the relentless retreat from religious certainties and dogma in the face of advancing knowledge” (p124).

The Sea of Faith  
 was, once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled;  
 But now I only hear  
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar  
 Retreating, to the breath  
 Of the nightwind, down the vast edges drear  
 And naked shingle of the world.

But John Habgood, Anglican Archbishop of York, (*Confessions of a Conservative Liberal*, London, 1988, p206) insists that “Matthew Arnold got it wrong. God is not away there in the retreating sea, an ever more distant vision leaving us stranded on the shingle. God is in the turbulence which rages inside us. God is in the questioning, in the agonising.” Davidson finds little evidence of this God in the questioning and agonising in our modern approach to worship – further reflections on this silencing of questioning are given in *Concilium* 169 (1983, pp8-12) and *Modern Theology* (1989, pp257-270).

#### History of Exegesis

One of the convictions which I have garnered over the years is that when studying a biblical book it is very important to research the story of the particular book down through the ages. There is a great interest in such research today. However, the necessary research on the five wisdom books which we will study in this text is far from complete. Nevertheless works, like John H. Hayes, *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, 2 vols Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1999, provide a very useful basis from which to begin. I intend to provide as much historical information as I can conveniently gather. Recently I was in contact with Kim Paffenroth (*In Praise of Wisdom, Continuum*, New York, 2006) and found his

emphasis on reading and discussing Christian literature to be thought-provoking, especially his comment in the preface:

While I find the foundation of my theological reflections in Scripture, I usually find the fullest elaboration or the most helpful illustration of that foundation in later literature. When I first read about Lady Wisdom in Proverbs, I found the image beautiful and intriguing, but I don't think I really knew what it meant until I met Gretchen in Goethe's *Faust* or Monica in Augustine's *Confessions*. And to be quite honest, I had always found the description of folly in Proverbs rather unbelievable and unlikely, a straw man or bogey man one could never meet, at least not until I met Fyodor Karamazov and the narrator of *Notes from Underground*, two utterly believable characters who show us how far we will go to perpetuate our foolishness and lose ourselves and our pain in our folly. And as compelling and true as I found Job's suffering, Lear and Ahab are a good deal more complex and rounded, and they have helped me understand the original story in the light of them, while at the same time Job has helped me to understand and frame their trials. This learning and connecting need not be confined to great literature... (ppxi-xii).

Dating Wisdom Literature.

The problem with dating Wisdom literature is that it seems timeless – a discipline which the most prominent wisdom scholar of recent times, Leo G. Perdue, defines in his classic study *The Sword and the Stylus* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000, p8), as a “discipline that fashions human character, ranging from thinking critically to disciplined study, to spiritual meditation, to ethical behaviour”. This was produced by a professional group of scribes and sages who were both teachers and royal administrators. Perdue, however, insists that, far

from being timeless, it was a product of the lively political and social situations of the Age of Empires, to quote his sub-title. He boldly emphasises the social and political contexts and highlights each chapter as follows:

Wisdom during the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah: Proverbs

Wisdom during the Neo-Babylonian Empire: Job

Wisdom during the Persian Empire: Wisdom and Psalms

Wisdom during the Ptolemaic Empire: Qoheleth

Wisdom in the Seleucid Empire: Ben Sira

Wisdom during the Roman Empire: Wisdom of Solomon – here Perdue attacks the mystery cults, the emperor cult, the social values of Hellenistic society in first century A.D. Egypt when Jews were being persecuted. Perdue also includes chapters on Apocalypticism and Wisdom, Apocalyptic Wisdom in Qumran and a rare chapter on wisdom literature in the Rabbinic tradition as the wise continued their work. Thus, in masterly fashion, Perdue places the wisdom texts within the historical and cultural context of the eastern Mediterranean world, from the Iron Age (The Monarchy) to the first century A.D. He admits that the precise dates and settings are open to debate but “there is little question that wisdom literature responded to the changes and developments in the social history of Israel and early Judaism” (p412)

Recently I had the privilege of reviewing a very fine study of the interpretation of *Sacred Scripture* by Richard N. Soulen (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

One passage in particular made me think:

Does the Bible have a center? Physically, it does. Open the Bible at the middle and you find yourself in the book of Psalms. From there one can work backward to the Pentateuch and historical books or forward to the Wisdom literature and the Prophets. This is a handy trick to know, because otherwise the sheer size of the Bible makes

it hard to find one's way around. (p.113)

Many biblical scholars have helped me in my struggles with biblical wisdom. In my notes and references, I have done my best to include them all. John Geary with his incisive comments has often saved me from errors both grammatical and otherwise. Professor Dan Watkins most kindly read some of the chapters and made many helpful suggestions. However I have great pleasure to dedicate this work to Rev Liam Kehoe, C.S.Sp. who has just been ordained Deacon and to wish him many happy years of service in the vineyard of the Lord.

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## CHAPTER ONE: PROVERBS

Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) the famous English philosopher and author once said: "The genius, the wit and the spirit of a nation are discovered in its proverbs". One has only to examine programmes like that of AA to see how important, if not essential, proverbs are in our lives. Yet Proverbs, a book which was, traditionally highly valued by Christians and Jews, was marginalised by modern critical scholarship and, despite Von Rad's more positive approach, has only recently begun to enjoy the revival of interest which began in the 1960s. The well-known American scholar Walter Brueggemann in his provocative study *In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith*, John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1972 was one of the first American scholars to welcome the newer trend in biblical studies in the United States. Surprisingly, he concentrated on the book of Proverbs. He found the theology of the wisdom teachers to be consistent with the major thrust of Jesus' teaching which is the culmination of other traditions but also of the wisdom tradition. Jesus likewise invites people to adopt a style which is life-affirming and life creating:

The Kingdom of God is, he proclaimed, a realm of wholeness, freedom, responsibility, and security where men can be the men God intends them to be. Indeed, to affirm that we do live in that kind of world is a close approximation of the world in which the wise said we lived. Jesus' teaching, particularly in Matthew, has

remarkable confidence in man's capacity to be free, safe, whole and responsible. He affirms that men are responsible for the future they choose (cf, Matt. 25: 31-46). He celebrates man as one who is especially precious and loved (Matt. 6: 25-33). His teaching has the same buoyancy, confidence, and openness as that which characterizes wisdom teaching at its best.... To speak of Jesus in terms of atonement of course stacks the cards in terms of man's helplessness and need. But insofar as Jesus does make a difference in the lives of persons, it is to invite them to join in his style of manhood, which is life-affirming and life-creating. He does not ponder long the failure of man but invites him to change and act as a wholly healthy person. He embodies what the wise men said was possible (p21).

For Brueggemann: "The defensiveness in the church today against radical theology is not because of the transition in God-talk. Rather, offense is taken at the man-talk which wisdom nurtures. The man of Proverbs is not the servile, self-abusing figure often urged by our one-sided reading of Scripture in later Augustinian-Lutheran theological traditions. Rather he is an able, self-reliant, caring, involved, strong person, who has a significant influence over the course of his own life and over the lives of his fellows. This kind of man-talk of course has implications for God-talk. Proverbs is not atheism, humanism, or secularism. It does not speak of the death of God but it has no patience for a god who only saves sinners and judges sins. The God affirmed here trusts man, believes in him, risks his world with him, and stays with him in his failures. The man envisioned by Proverbs is not a cosmic orphan nor a protected baby but a beloved son in a joyous home" (Prov. 3:12). The name of the God of Israel is, in fact, found 87 times in Proverbs, a God to be feared and trusted yet we are not provided with any narratives about him.

Katherine Dell, a senior lecturer in the University of Cambridge in *Seeking a Life*

*that Matters*, Darton, Longman, Todd, London, 2002 finds *Proverbs* of far reaching significance for making choices in our modern life, concerning family, society, and the natural world.

Somewhat wider in meaning than our “word” or “aphorism”, the Hebrew word *meshal* can also mean a parable (Ps 78:2), allegory (Ezek 17:2), riddle (Prov 1:6), taunt (Is 14:4) or oracle (Num 23:18). *Proverbs* is mainly an anthology of such one-line maxims but it also includes longer compositions such as the personification of wisdom in 1:20-33; 8:1-36; 9:1-6 and the well-known poem on the ideal housewife at the end (31:10-31). It deals with the whole of life from farming to metallurgy, from politics to economics and psychology. The tone is different from that of the other biblical books. It has neither the blunt “you shall not” of the Law nor the urgent “Thus says Yahweh” of the prophet, nor the calmer comments of the Wisdom teacher who challenges the reader to think hard and humbly.

John Collins in his excellent *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1997, p2) brings out the contrast with Torah and the Prophets: “From a literary point of view, *Proverbs* is neither narrative nor law nor prophecy. Neither is it liturgical poetry such as we find in the Psalms”. It is a collection of sentences which are sometimes joined by catchwords or a common theme but in general defy continuous reading. Collins finds the attitude of the book articulated well by Bildad the Shuhite in Job: “Inquire now of bygone generations, and consider what their ancestors have found; for we are but of yesterday, and we know nothing, for our days on earth are but a shadow” (Job 8:8-10).

The proverb (a concise memorable statement), curiously absent from today’s pulpits, is a major biblical form, making the Bible as a whole the most aphoristic book ever written. It is provocative, makes one think frequently and reverses what one expects. Based on practical experience and universal applicability, it is familiar in most cultures and marked by brevity, concreteness and rhythm, which



lead to its retention in the oral mind for thousands of years. The Hebrew proverb used metaphors drawn from daily life and the characteristic poetic parallelism (synthetic, antithetic and synthetic) which is typical of O.T. poetry (e.g. 22:11; 10:11; 11:22). The English poet Francis Thompson once described the Bible as “a treasury of gnomic wisdom. I mean its richness in utterances of which one could, as it were, chew the cud. This, of course, has long been recognised, and biblical sentences have passed into the proverbial wisdom of our country” (*Literary Criticisms* ed. Terence L. Connolly, New York, Dutton, 1948, p543). Thus proverbs are found throughout the Bible: “being our brother’s keeper” (Gen 4:9); “working by the sweat of your brow” (Gen 3:19); “sin will find you out” (Num 32:33); Rom 13:1; Gal 6:7 1Th 1:3). Leland Ryken (*Words of Delight*, Baker, Grand Rapids Michigan, 1992, p314) rightly insists that the form “not only represents insight but compels it” and that we should avoid trivialising this profound form by such condescending comments as “proverbs are catchy little couplets designed to express practical truisms” or “proverbs are worded to be memorable, not to be theoretically accurate.”

Many are surprised at the comment of Roland E. Murphy (*The Tree of life*, p15) that it is too facile though quite traditional to describe Proverbs as a compendium of ethics, of Israelite morality:

This view is strengthened by the optimistic note that sounds frequently in the work: wisdom (justice) prospers while folly (wickedness) self-destructs. As a result the book has been very popular in Western culture both for the picturesque language and for the timely truths it seems to convey. It is quoted freely and many times not exactly, and it has received greater authority than many another book of Holy Writ. But the true subtlety of the book is seldom recognised in its popular usage. A moral code undergirds it, but the real interest is to train a person, to form a character, to show what life is really like and how best to cope with it The

favoured approach is to seek out comparisons or analogies between the human situations and all else (animals and the rest of creation). It does not command so much as it seeks to persuade, to tease the reader into a way of life...p.15.

Murphy also argues (*Proverbs, Word Biblical Commentary 22*. Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1998, pXXIX):

To recover the original setting of a proverb, its point of origin, as it were, is practically impossible. There are simply too many possibilities: rural, where the oral form would presumably be the favored mode of expression; or the court, where the literary expression would more likely have been cultivated. These two "settings" are too broad to be of much help. Neither does the choice of subject help. One cannot prohibit country folk from cultivating 'king' proverbs, or upper class individuals from reflecting on rural and farming concerns

For Murphy, Proverbs 1:7; 9:10 makes an amazing claim that we easily take for granted, namely that the fear of God/Lord is indispensable as the beginning of knowledge, wisdom and understanding – reverence before the *numiorous* is basically a given in ancient belief. For Job 28 humans can discover hidden treasures in the earth but they cannot find wisdom which is inaccessible and known only to God (Job 28). In Proverbs (1:20-33) Lady Wisdom is described like an OT prophet threatening her audience but eventually she offers peace and security to the obedient. In Prov 8:3-36 Lady Wisdom she speaks to the simple in public places about truth (8:10-11,19) more precious than silver or gold; love for those who love her. Then she gives her well-known description of her relationship to God and to creation (8:22-31) and six times mentions her existence before creation. In 9:1-6 she changes her tone and offers, in contrast to Dame Folly (a trip to Sheol), the simple to partake of bread and water ('stolen', v17).

However as Richard J. Clifford S.J. points out in *The Forgotten God*, eds Das and

Matera, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2002, p61:

It requires effort for modern readers to appreciate the interactive and sophisticated world that produced the sayings. One senses in the sayings wonder at the created world, faith in its mysterious self-righting capacity, hope that the truth will win out. In Proverbs truth is reached dialectically. However the person who is isolated, or defensive, can never become wise.” Jesus, for whom the world was likewise God’s, revealed the world to others using parables and instructions. For Murphy the most perceptive study of biblical wisdom by far is *Character in Crisis* by William P. Brown, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1996. Brown examines the development of moral character within Proverbs, Job and Qoheleth, especially as each concludes with a return to family life (Proverbs) to a new family (Job) and the enjoyment of the vicissitudes of everyday existence (Qoheleth). Brown demonstrates that the aim of the Bible’s wisdom literature is the formation of moral character, not just for the individual, but also for the community. But many proverbs are mere observations with no intention of providing a moral dimension or interpretation. Further as Clifford notes “There are no allusions to historical events in the chapters and linguistic and thematic arguments are not conclusive. The argument that the long poems are later than the brief sayings has no validity in view of the coexistence of instructions and sayings in early literatures (*Proverbs*, Old Testament Library, Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1999, p6)

For Diane Bergant in *The Catholic Study Bible*, OUP 2006, p254, Proverbs is the book which best characterises the wisdom tradition. A ‘Guide for Successful Living’, its key purpose is “to teach wisdom; it teaches children to listen to their parents’ (1:8) citizens, respect towards the king (16:10-15); young men to be

aware of the dangers of undisciplined living (5:1-14; 23:29-35); young women to emulate a model wife (31:10-31).

In Kim Paffenroth's *In Praise of Wisdom* (Continuum, New York, 2004, p3), Paffenroth describes Proverbs as one of the more popular biblical books, often invoked for "the simple but timely truths it contains". They are conveyed in pithier form than Aesop's fables and have more direct, everyday applications than Confucius' sayings ... it is most often synonymous with what we would term common sense. It is enlightened self-interest, or self-interested enlightenment in its clearest, oldest form: "To get wisdom is to love oneself; to keep understanding is to prosper" (Prov. 19:8).

I must admit that I like the approach of Stuart Weeks (*Instruction and Imagery in Proverbs 1-9*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007). He notes that Proverbs 1-9 is frequently described as an anthology, loosely connected to the 'instructions' composed in Egypt and other places and perhaps originating in an educational society. Weeks, however, argues that it is rather a sophisticated poetic work with a basic unity of composition and message. Drawing on a traditional association of foreign women with the corruption and apostasy of Jewish youths, which was given added impetus by the post-exilic controversy over mixed marriages, Proverbs 1-9 sets a foreign seductress in opposition to a personified figure of Wisdom. The two compete for those youths who are uncommitted. Thus instruction is associated with the Torah and is the prerequisite for the wisdom by which God's will can be recognized.

It is worth noting the view of Katherine J. Dell in *The Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006). She suggested that wisdom be fully integrated into scholarly examination of OT theology and not considered as merely peripheral to the rest of the OT testimony. One of her major concerns is whether the God of Proverbs can be identified with the same Yahweh who led the people of Egypt out of slavery in Egypt. She concludes her book with the conclusion that wisdom represents a mainstream

tradition within OT life and thought (p.200). It is not a different Yahweh in Proverbs from the God who led the Israelites out of Egypt. She believes that attitudes towards the God of Proverbs are changing.

At first sight Proverbs with its model Solomon is a rather cautious, bourgeois, unexciting classroom book. Michael Fox in his Anchor Bible Commentary (2009) examines its ideas of wisdom, ethics, revelation and knowledge, using comparable material from Egypt and medieval Hebrew commentaries, does not hesitate to label some proverbs both “insipid” and “nonsensical”. It certainly lacks the excitement and drama of the great characters and events of the Law from Adam to Abraham to Moses. It lacks the political intrigue, sex scandals and historical events found in the former prophets. Proverbs has little place for the classical prophets who demanded a more just society. It lacks the urgent passionate denunciations, critique and constant condemnations or even the wonderful consoling passages of the later prophets. In fact some used to describe it as “essentially foreign, of prudent calculation, designed to lead to prosperity” (quoted in John J. Collins *Proverbial Wisdom and the Yahwist Vision* in J.D. Crossan, ed. *Gnomic Wisdom*, Semeia 17, Chico, Scholar’s Press, 1980, p1. Further, a professional educator, Mark Hinds, *Teaching for Responsibility, Religious Education*, Spring 1998, (pp217-218) sees Proverbs as having many of the features which try to encourage the development in the young of the qualities of analysis and critical reflection which are involved in “teaching for responsibility”;

Through contradictions, irony and riddles in, among and between proverbial sayings, these texts indirectly direct the reader’s attention to the ambiguities in life.

Do not answer fools according to their folly,

Or you will be a fool yourself.

Answer fools according to their folly,

Or they will be wise in their own eyes. (26:4-5)

Which is true? It depends on the reader, on the reader's context and experiences, on the community's beliefs and mores, on the particular situation and so on. Those who seek moral or ethical absolutes in Proverbs are not given an easy road; discernment, reading of circumstances from different vantage points, and dialogue among a community of readers – much is required of those who would be responsible.

Further, it seems clear to a careful reader that wisdom writers were fully aware that a proverb is not a full statement of reality but a rather limited one which often was not applicable to particular situations. R. Murphy in the 1996 edition of his wisdom study (*The Tree of life*) Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan notes that, in bibliography, Proverbs has fared best (p191). To judge by the recent flood of books and articles, proverbs is an important biblical book, not least because it provides the background for such antiwisdom books as Job and Ecclesiastes and such N.T. teaching as the Sermon on the Mount. It seems to reflect on the ordinary, fairly comfortable lives of many people to whom their God is rather remote.

It is worth mentioning at this point the recent study of Proverbs by Peter T.H. Hutton (*Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs: The Deep Waters of Counsel*, Ashgate/Society for O.T. study series, Aldershot, 2008) which rejects the tendency to dismiss Proverbs as articulating “a platitudinous and banal wisdom, consisting chiefly of the counterfactual doctrine that both the good and the bad would always be appropriately requited for their deeds.” (p3). Further, the temptation is to move directly to the more glamorous sceptical approach of Job and Ecclesiastes which cleverly subvert the mainstream, even clerical establishment ideologies of Proverbs. Thus the wave of re-reading the O.T. books will have finally arrived at one of the most neglected books in the Bible. For Hutton, Proverbs is “far from the settled, self-satisfied text that many scholars have taken it to be. In its own way, it is as challenging and provocative as

Qoheleth". Hutton finds that the book has a didactic strategy in which certain texts seem to be deliberately subverting the apparent platitudes of Proverbs, This contrasts with the approach of William Mc Kane's influential commentary (1970) where he argued that "each sentence is an entity in itself" (p413) and that older secular sayings were found together with others motivated by Yahwistic piety. For McKane there are three classes of sayings in Proverbs : A type which reflect the empirical approach to life of old wisdom: B type which describes the social effects of good and bad behaviour; C type which includes Yahwistic reinterpretations of old wisdom. He concludes with a progression from secular, pragmatic wisdom to a pious reappropriation of wisdom. The aim of this somewhat enigmatic process is to get people to reflect and to move people to a new level of consciousness. Childs (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 1979, pp549-50) firmly rejects this approach as does Von Rad and Eissfeldt who see Proverbs as composed from many collections, different periods and peoples. The content of Proverbs (thought, vocabulary, style and even metric form) however is more typical of pre- exilic than of post- exilic Judaism. Certainly it is time that the so-called assured results of the historical-critical examination of Proverbs are seriously reconsidered. Studies like that of Brueggemann (1990) and Philip Davies (2002) have concluded that Proverbs mirrored the views of establishment scribes who supported an unjust religious and economic situation, as Freidrich Wolf insisted in 1963 (p86). Even Proverbs unmasks the ideology of the class ruling at the time (Hutton, *Contradictions*, p3). To this day the normal approach of scholars towards Proverbs remains somewhat dismissive, as if Proverbs were a randomly constructed collection. In fact the purpose of the use of such devices as parallelism, repetition and hyperbole is, in the phrase of the Russian formalist Shklovsky, "to lengthen the perception", to compel us to pay attention (see "goads" Qoheleth 12:11)

In its final version Proverbs sees itself as an educational programme aimed at teaching young men how to live wisely and the mature how to become wiser (1:2-

7). It gives three different types of material

- a) long discourses in which a 'father' (teacher) gives instructions to his 'son' (pupil) (chs 1-9;22:117-24:22)
- b) speeches by personified wisdom (1:20-33; 8:1-9:6);
- c) brief proverbial sayings, mainly in chs 10-31.

The motto "The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom" provides a motto/inclusion for the whole book (1:7;9-10; 31:30). The opening part (1:2-6) emphasises the verbs "hear" which means to know wisdom (V2a), to understand it (V2b), to commit oneself to moral insight (V3) and to move towards maturity (V4). The aim is to turn immature people into wise people.

Proverbs is more precisely an anthology of anthologies and contains seven collections together with superscriptions. Three are attributed to Solomon

- (1) 1:1 "The Proverbs of Solomon (misle selomoh), Son of David, king of Israel". This title covers not only the first collection (chs 1-9) but also the whole book
- (2) 10:1 "The Proverbs of Solomon" (misle selomoh)
- (3) 22:17 "The Words of the Wise" (dibre hakamim)
- (4) 24:23 "These also are (the Words) of the Wise" (gam-elleh(dibre hakamim).
- (5) 25:1 "These also are the Proverbs of Solomon, which the Men of Hezekiah, King of Judah, edited" (gam-ellah misle...)
- (6) 30:1 "The Words of Agur" (diber agur).
- (7) 31:1 "The Words of Lemuel, King of Massa, Which His Mother Taught Him (dibre limu'el massa....)

Finally, though without any superscription, there is a poem on the "Women of Virtue" (*esat hayil* 31:10-31).

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

Before we come to a modern interpretation of Proverbs it is very useful to describe, albeit briefly, how previous generations have interpreted this book – even though an adequate history of interpretation remains to be written.

In the Talmud (Sabb.30b) and Abot R. Nat, (ch1) some issues were raised



concerning 7:7-20. However, after the first century A.D. the canonical status of Proverbs among The Kethubim was not raised. Many translations were made, such as the Greek Septuagint. In the latter a number of additions to the Hebrew seemed to be moralistic and pietistic modifications as well as efforts to tone down the sensuality of the text. The LXX version of Proverbs 22:20-21 provided authorisation for Origen to read multiple interpretations into biblical texts. Theodore of Mopsuestia, however, attributed a lower level of inspiration to Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (*sapientiae gratia* not *prophetiae gratiae*), a view rejected at the Second Council of Constantinople 553. But in general Proverbs was seen as a source for simple religious and moral truths and practical advice while not many commentaries were produced for the whole book. Solomon's reputation for wisdom was so great (1K 4:9-34) that he was considered to be the author of Proverbs, Song of Songs, Qoheleth and also of The Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach 47;18. There is a delightful legend in the Talmud which claims that Solomon wrote the Song of Songs in his lusty youth, Proverbs in his mature age and the sceptical Qoheleth in his old age. Proverbs is mentioned by Flavius Josephus in Contra Apion 1.8

J. Robert Wright in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (vol.9) on Proverbs (pXIX) concludes that in the New Testament there are 58 direct quotations from or allusions to Proverbs which include five direct quotations and 53 indirect allusions. The most important is perhaps Proverbs 8:22. "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work". This finds its completion in Apoc. 3:14 "The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation". Proverbs is also quoted in Rom 3:15 and Jas 4:6, and in Luke and 1 Peter. Further, Jesus' remark that he is "the way" can only be understood against the background of Proverbs. Jesus is portrayed in the N.T. as an astonishing wisdom teacher (Mk 6:2) yet he can condemn the scribes and law doctors. Paul can insist that the foolishness of God is "wiser than men" (1 Cor 1:25) – it is a real fool who abandons the gospel (Gal 3:1). The eventual cult of wisdom is seen

in the naming of the great church of Constantinople “Hagia Sophia”, Holy Wisdom, who was frequently depicted as a crowned woman with her three daughters, Faith Hope and Charity.

Proverbs, because of its moral emphasis, was a popular source for quotations among the Fathers. The earliest quotations are given in the Epistle of Barnabas, Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp. Not many commentaries were dedicated to the full volume or to individual parts of it. The outstanding example in patristic literature on Proverbs is Basil the Great of Caesarea (c.330-379), one of the Cappadocian Fathers. His first publicly preached sermon was the Homily on the Beginning of Proverbs (Prov 1:1-5 and other passages). On Proverbs 8:22 Basil ignores the Trinitarian application and describes the text as referring to the wisdom of God which can be seen by contemplating the visible world. The quotation from ch 8 where wisdom is hypostasised was an important text during the Arian controversy. In the controversy both parties interpreted Wisdom as Christ. The orthodox and Vulgate interpreted the Hebrew word “qanah” as “possessed” whereas the Arians interpreted it as “created”, as also the Septuagint. The premodern Jewish tradition interpreted Wisdom in Prov 8 as Torah. The Greek fathers’ exegesis of Proverbs is mainly found in the (unedited) catenae of Procopius. The text attributed to Procopius in PG. 87 (1221-1544) does not appear authentic while the partial Latin translation in PG. 87 (17791-1800) appears trustworthy. There are also verse-by-verse commentaries by John Chrysostom and Didymus the Blind and Evagrius of Pontus and fragments of Hippolytus (c.200). Hippolytus begins his commentary by examining the name Solomon to whom Proverbs is attributed. Solomon means peacemaker. However the true peacemaker for all Christians is Jesus our redeemer, ‘go’el’ (Proverbs 23:11). Jesus is the true Saviour of the poor and the peacemaker for all. J. Robert Wright in his *Ancient Commentary on Scripture* (XXII) includes some 671 selections from 64 ancient authors on Proverbs: Augustine contributes 74 items, John Chrysostom 66; Origen 55; Ambrose 45; 33 each from Bede, Clement of

Alexandria, Gregory the Great and Caesar of Arles; then Jerome 29, Basil the Great 28, John Cassian 23; Hippolytus 18, Cyril of Alexandria 16; Evagrius Ponticus 13; Apostolic Constitutions 13; Gregory of Nyssa 11; followed by 47 other writers with under ten reflections each.

Writers from Augustine to Chaucer to Erasmus and Shakespeare (Henry IV, 2.98-100) frequently exploited the pithy wisdom of Proverbs. Chaucer's favourite book for quotation was Proverbs but he also used Sirach and James. He also drew Lady Wisdom from Prov. 8 in his classic *Consolatio* and quoted Boethius extensively on wisdom.

Augustine and the Western tradition after him, saw the whole Bible as a wisdom book for humanity. Augustine commented on passages of Proverbs in his *Sermones* (CPL 284): Prov 9:12 (LXX) in Sermon 35 (PL 38.213-214); Prov 13:7-8 in Sermon 36 (PL 38:215-221); Prov 31:10-31 in Sermon 37 (PL 38:221-235). Salonius, born about 400, became bishop of Geneva (440) and wrote mystical and allegorical dialogues on Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Gregory the Great's (c.540-604) exegesis of Proverbs is preserved by Paterius in his *Liber testimoniorum....ex opusculis S. Gregorii* (CPL 1718 PL 683ff). There is an extensive sequential commentary by the Venerable Bede (672-735), an *allegorica expositio super Parabolis Salomonis* (PL 91:937-1040) wrongly placed among the work of Rabanus Maurus, a *Libellus de muliere forti* (Prov 31; PL 1039-1052) and remains of his *Allegorica Interpretatio* (PL 91, 1051-1066). One should not forget Albert the Great who, according to medieval sources, wrote commentaries on every book of the Bible. He wrote *Liber de Muliere forti* (*Mulieris Fortis Encomium* cf. *Opera Omnia*, vol. 18) and aroused interest in the teaching of proverbs.

Chaucer, I was surprised to read in David Lyle Jeffrey (ed.) *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1992, p832), quotes from Proverbs more than any other biblical book, but also uses Sirach and James. He made his own translation of Boethius who provided a

lively extension of the wisdom figure from Prov 8 especially in his classic *Consolatio*, where she appears as Lady Philosophy, a powerful Dame Wisdom to the Christian West (p.832). Augustine used the term 'philosophy' ("the love of wisdom") and insisted that for a Christian wisdom was of much greater importance than eloquence. The great Thomas Aquinas took from Augustine his key thoughts on Wisdom. His favourite pre-Christian text was Ben Sira. For Aquinas the wisdom of the imitation of Christ was the only way to confront the folly and evil of the world.

Gilbert Dohan, a director of research at the *Centre National de Recherche Scientifique* in Paris, writes in *the Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages* that among the main medieval commentators from the twelfth century were: William of Flay who commented on Proverbs and also Andrew of Saint-Victor whose commentary was popular in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Peter the Chanter of Paris, writing in the late twelfth century, pointed out that Jews and Christians struggled with one another concerning Prov 30:4 a text that a Christian would naturally interpret in a Trinitarian fashion. *The Glossa Ordinaria* with its collection of interpretations going back to the Fathers, served as a commentary on Proverbs well into Reformation times. It solved the problem of the contradictory pieces of advice, whether to speak to a fool or be silent (Prov 26:4-5), by explaining that the verses deal with different affairs.

In the 13th century William of Auvergne wrote a commentary, based on that of St. Bonaventure which included a division of the text, a cursive reading with *quaestiones* which was quite influential with later authors. In the fourteenth century the postillae of Nicholas of Lyra (1326) remained influential for a long time. He interpreted 25:1 as saying that the men of Hezekiah made a second collection of Solomon's unpublished proverbs and added to the collection made in Solomon's time.

During the Reformation period commentaries were produced by Melancton (1524) and Cardinal Cajetan in 1542. Melancton stressed the proverb as a

teaching device and compared Proverbs with the Greek authors Theognis and Phocylides.

Cornelius a Lapide (1567-1637) was a Flemish Catholic biblical exegete who taught at Rome and completed there his well-known commentaries which covered all the biblical books except Job and the Psalms. The most popular Catholic biblical exegete of his time, he composed rules of interpretation which lasted for over two centuries. He tried to include as many interpretations of individual passages as possible. His works, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, owed their enduring popularity, especially among preachers, “to their clarity, deep spirituality and allegorical and mystical exegesis, buttressed by a wide erudition which enables the author to draw extensively on the Fathers and on medieval theologians”. In 1651 the philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) sketched the history of the development of Proverbs in a number of stages, the last of which he dated in the post-exilic period or the rule of Josiah at the earliest. J.B. Bossuet (1627-1704), the famous Catholic French preacher, also produced a commentary in 1693.

In the nineteenth century when Job and Ecclesiastes were influential among intellectuals, “Wisdom Literature” came to designate Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes in addition to Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon from the Septuagint. In reality of course, Wisdom is a modern scholarly title and is not drawn from a division in the Jewish canon – no canonical collection of books had such a title in the Hebrew Bible. Until the first decades of the nineteenth century Proverbs was held to be genuinely old. Eichorn in his influential introduction (1803) insisted that all the proverbs were old. According to R.N. Whybray, writing on *Proverbs in The Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* ed. John H. Hayes, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1999, p321, the real beginning of the modern critical interpretation of Proverbs took place with J.G. Eichorn’s *German Introduction to the O.T.* in 1783 and 1824 (fourth edition). In his influential introduction to his 1803 edition Eichorn insisted that all the proverbs were old with no convincing trace of a later

date or vocabulary. He also claimed that the antiquity and Solomonic authorship were no longer as firmly grounded as they used to be. During the nineteenth century scholars were divided as to whether Proverbs was basically pre- or post-exilic.

According to R.N. Whybray (in Hayes' *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, p231) Anton Theodor Hartmann, a professor of theology at Rostock in 1828, rejected W.C. Umbreit's view that Solomon was the collector of proverbs at least up to ch XXV. He claimed that in fact the evidence revealed the contrary. Not a single one of the collections in Proverbs should be dated earlier than the time of the last Hebrew Kings – he examined the Aramaizing dimension of proverbs. The theme of religious piety is found in each of the collections of Proverbs.

In the early nineteenth century Proverbs was read as a rather pious philosophical book which applied the ethics of the Jewish religion to ordinary practical life. Scholars such as J. Wellhausen proposed a synthesis of the development of the Bible, in which scheme the prophets developed first, to be followed by the Law. Later some interpreted Proverbs as applications of the basic morality of the prophets. Wellhausen's original interpretation is worth quoting:

The Proverbs of Solomon would not be worth considering if they had grown on Greek or Arabic soil; in the dim generality they are noteworthy only because they are of Jewish origin." (*Commentar uber die Spruche Salomos*, Heidelberg, 1826, pp.iii ff). However, careful study of the literary forms in Proverbs and in particular the discovery and interpretation of the Egyptian "instruction of Ptahhotep ("the oldest book in the world" as it is described), first published in 1847 and the argument of A. Erman and H. Grossman, 1924 who claimed that the recently discovered "Instruction of Amenemope" published in 1923, showed that the Egyptian text had in fact been used as a model for a large section of Proverbs (22:17-24:22). Thus it was not the pure product of the

Israelite genius alone, as many scholars believed. Rather, as P. Humbert (1929) and other scholars made clear, it was a continuation of an older literary tradition common to many people in the ancient Near East.

Whybray, in his survey, notes five topics which have been prominent in discussions on the provenance of Proverbs in the last half of the twentieth century:

No agreement has been recorded as to the provenance of Proverbs. There are at least three proposals: tribal-life in pre-monarchical life (Genstenberger, who rejected the view that the source was the Royal Court with its wisdom school); the fact that the highly artistic character of the proverbs is unlike that of the proverbs found in the historical and prophetic books; the fact that they are aimed at a class of educated farmers.

A gradual realisation that the proverb is a natural and universal form of speech and is not to be confined to any special class or situation. Scott (*Interp.*, 1970, p28) suggests some six sources for the wisdom tradition, while he does not consider anyone as dominant.

The commentary of William McKane (1970) who insisted that Proverbs revealed a tradition in transition was quite influential. In agreement with Zimmerli, he characterised Israel's mundane wisdom as utilitarian and man-centred. There secular sayings from an older international wisdom were given beside others which were revised in the light of Yahwistic piety, a development which would continue until Ben Sira and after.

On the theology of Proverbs it is widely accepted that the motto of the book and the theme are to be found in the topic given in 1:7 and 9:10 ("the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom"). This truth, found in all wisdom books, as Derek Kidner notes, (*The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes*, IVP Academic, Downer's Grove, Illinois, 1985, p17) prevents "the shrewdness of Proverbs from

slipping into mere self-interest, the perplexity of Job from mutiny and the disillusion of Ecclesiastes from final despair". The optimistic belief that just conduct reaps its own reward while the unjust and foolish perish miserably is also found elsewhere in the O.T.

The distinctive character of chs 1-9, composed of longer poems, is widely accepted. Four are unique in that they personify wisdom as a woman who was associated with Yahweh from before creation, who builds a house and offers life and happiness. Note that folly is also personified as a woman, who is the 'strange woman', the adulteress, fertility goddess and folly personified. A number of suggestions especially concerning the Near East female deities have been made as to the source for the identity of Wisdom – for example W.F. Albright suggested a Canaanite goddess. The range of topics in chs 10-30 suggest that wisdom and folly deal with the whole of life. In later Judaism, Wisdom was identified with the Law of Moses (Sirach 24) or with the Spirit of God (Wisdom 7).

The exciting studies of G. von Rad (*Wisdom in Israel*, 1970), in particular, represent a high point in the effort to understand Biblical Wisdom as scholars moved to and fro between a commitment to the actual history behind and beneath the text and a view of the text as history-like reality. One of the first attempts to find wisdom in the O.T. was von Rad's examination of the Joseph story (Gen 37-50) – Joseph is wiser than the Egyptian sage (Gen 41:8), gives sound advice and is described by Pharaoh as "intelligent and wise" (41:33;39). As early as 1936 von Rad recognized a different theological stress in wisdom literature:

A quite different strand of religious influence entered the Yahwistic faith in the form of wisdom-lore, a highly rationalised mode of speculation concerning the divine economy in this world which we may regard as being of Egyptian origin. At this time we were faced with unequivocal, self-justified statements of belief concerning creation (The *Theological Problem of the Old Testament*, The Problem of the Hexateuch, Edinburgh, Oliver and



Boyd, 1966, pp142-143)

For von Rad the aim of wisdom was to discover Yahweh's laws for the world order and apply them to living in harmony with Yahweh. This order was established by Yahweh at creation for our blessing. The positive contribution in von Rad's approach was to focus on the canonical text of Proverbs. The aim of Proverbs was to make explicit what had traditionally been implicit. Von Rad highlighted six proverbs which go beyond a simple deeds/consequences agenda to express the mysterious freedom of Yahweh which completely escapes all calculation. (von Rad, 1962, p439):

"A man's heart thinks out a way for itself/but Yahweh guides its step" (16:9)

"Many are the plans in the heart of a man/but it is the purpose of Yahweh that is established" (19:21)

Every way of a man is right in his own eyes/but the one who tests the heart is Yahweh" (21:2;16:2)

"A man's steps come from Yahweh/but man – how could he understand his way?" (20:24)

"There is no wisdom, no understanding, no counsel over against Yahweh"

The horse is harnessed for the day of battle/ but the victory comes from Yahweh" (21:30-31)

For Zimmerli, with whom McKane agreed, the central question was: what is good for people? For Von Rad, knowledge of the world and human affairs is inextricably intertwined with God:

Humans are always entirely in the world, yet are always entirely involved with Yahweh. (pp62, 85)

The twentieth century saw a widespread attack on the traditional approaches to the Bible in such areas as neo-liberalism, feminism, womanism, post- colonialism and post- modernism, to name some of the newer approaches. Works like Bertil

Albrektson's *History of the Gods* (Lund, Gleerap, 1967) showed, for example, that the main culture of the ancient Near East interpreted history as directed by their gods.

Recent writers have shown a welcome interest in the final shape of this book of seven collections of sayings, instructions and poems which begins with a general introduction and ends with the well-known "mulier fortis" poem as it has been described since Augustine. The book has "the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom" as a theme in Wisdom (Pr 9-10; 15:33; Job 28:28) and provides the closing for the introduction and the whole book of Proverbs (Pr 1:7; 31:30). As Leo G. Perdue comments in his excellent study *The Sword and the Stylus* (2008) p89:

Its redaction reveals the artistry of skilled sages and teachers who likely compiled the book as a developing manual for instruction in rhetoric and moral virtue for youth studying in the schools. By means of this manual, they learned to compose literary forms, use elegant language, engage in proper speech and incorporate principles of behaviour to guide them in life in general and in performance of their professional roles at the conclusion of their education. It is unlikely that the book was composed originally for the general population. The suitability of Proverbs for general reading was later debated (cf tractate Abot) (pp89-90).

Clearly these collections seem to have developed after the time of Solomon. This is evident from the different titles to each section, the different arrangement found in the Septuagint where 24:23 follows 30:14 and 25-29 follows 31:9, the inclusion of non-Israelite collections at 30:1 Further, each collection has its own typical vocabulary with a notable variation between the first and fifth collection. Thus the style can vary from "not good sayings" (19:2) to abomination sayings (11:1) to better sayings (22:1), to numerical sayings (30:18-19) to impossible questions (Job 8:11). Negative warnings are frequent in Proverbs 1-9 and 22-24 and also

throughout Sirach. Paradoxical sayings are found in 18:15 and 20:17. D.C. Snell (*Twice-Told Proverbs and the Composition of the Book of Proverbs*, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, IN.1993) has listed the following examples of repeated proverbs:

“Whole verses related with spelling variations (14:12; 16:25; 18;8; 26:22)”

“Whole verses with one dissimilar word (6:10-11/ 24:33-34)”

“Whole verses repeated with two dissimilar words (10:1/15:20; 11:1/20:23)”

“Whole verses repeated with three dissimilar words (10:2/11:4).”

Further, the absence of the theme of war is surely indicative of the period when the final collection was made. Scholars such as B. Waltke (*Proverbs*, Erdmans, 2004 pp6-9) interpret the Greek text of Proverbs as a rather free translation from the Hebrew, strongly influenced by stoic philosophy and Jewish midrash. Since Proverbs emphasises attitudes and conduct which lead to successful living and warns against those which lead to trouble and disaster, there is little about death. Wisdom delivers her disciples from involvement with the strange woman whose “house sinks down to death” and “is the way to Sheol” (2:18—19; 5:5; 7:26-7). To hate wisdom is to be “in love with death” (8:36). “He who pursues evil will die” (11:4,7,19)

Some scholars would describe Proverbs as having little or no place for radicals like the classical prophets, who demanded a more just society. For Michael Fox (*Anchor Bible*, New York, 2000, pp3,75) Proverbs sets out “guidelines for securing a life of well-being, decency and dignity....To be sure they will also bring exterior rewards – life, health, wealth, favour and well- being”. Surprisingly, its preferred way of speaking is not to use destructive words like sin. Rather it uses words like “fools” and “foolishness” or “stupid people” who go against the grain in a world organized by our Creator. According to Whybray (*Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, Sheffield, JSOT, 1990) there is

quite a variety of attitudes to wealth and poverty. In Proverbs what is common is an apparent resignation to the inevitability of poverty. There is no call to reform the structures or the system – there is an invitation to defend the poor from exploitation and to help them by acts of charity. The voices of the poor are absent from the whole text – apart from 30:7-9, wealth is considered a blessing although God may intervene to help the poor. The king and the rich do have an obligation to help the poor (31:1-31). We read in 22:2:

“The rich and the poor meet together;  
Yahweh is the maker of them all”.

In 8:19 wisdom is preferred to wealth and in 10:4-5 diligence and hard work lead to riches. There is a simple juxtaposition in 10:15: “a gatherer in summer, a wise son; a sleeper during harvest, a disgraceful son”. While charity to the poor is encouraged, there are many hints that poverty derives from laziness (19:15; 20:4; 21:25). Although the wealthy are not approved of in Proverbs because of their treatment of the poor and their misuse of power, Proverbs does not disapprove of or despise wealth in itself. Rather those who become rich through hard work and honest means are praised and encouraged. Ch 1-9, 22:17-24:22 seem to come from the well-to-do acquisitive society where people are often more concerned with getting to the top and have little concern for the poor. The sentences in 10:1-22:16; 25-29 seem to come from people of moderate means, mainly self-employed farmers, for whom life was precarious and prosperity desirable. The queen mother’s advice (31:1-9) to care for the dumb, the desolate, the poor, the needy, is similar to court advice elsewhere. The concluding poem about the ideal wife suggests wealth earned by hard work, combined with good sense and generosity to the poor taken for granted. Joseph Blenkinsopp’s comment (p36) is worth repeating:

The writers and teachers who compiled the collections of aphorisms for the benefit of the young, upper-class hardly merit the title of intellectual. Their teaching is at best sclerotic and

pedestrian, and, at worst, complaisant and ethically insensitive on a whole range of issues. Their vision is limited and their language constrained by the social class to which they belong, the ethos of which they are committed to uphold and perpetuate. The *Weltanschauung* (view of life) has much in common both with positive and negative respects, with that of the nineteenth century English upper class described in the novels of Anthony Trollope, Henry James and Ford Madox Ford. In one respect, however, their teaching transcends these limitations. We note at several points significant overlap with the evolving legal tradition in Israel, namely where they urge the observance of important items of customary law (e.g. concerning murder, theft, false witnessing, dishonest trading, removing landmarks) and the maintenance of fair and impartial procedures (e.g. 18:5, 17-18; 21:18). The overlap may be exemplified by a saying about judicial bribery: "The wicked accept a concealed bribe to pervert the ways of justice Prov 17:23).

Other scholars such as W. Sibley Turner (in *Old Testament Interpretation* Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1995, p157) begin with a selection from the rich and diverse and lively, even infuriating, obnoxious and chauvinistic collection to provoke the readers into searching for themselves e.g.:

"Do not withhold discipline from your children;

If you beat them with a rod, they will not die.

If you beat them with the rod,

You will save their lives from Sheol (23:13-14; 13:24).

A gift opens doors; it gives access to the great (18:16)

"It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a contentious wife (19:13; 21:9; 25:24; 27:15-16).

"The poor are disliked even by their neighbours,

But the rich have many friends (14:20)  
 To get wisdom is to love oneself;  
 To keep understanding is to prosper (19:8)  
 Who has awe? Who has sorrow?  
 Who has strife? Who has complaining?  
 Who has wounds, without cause?  
 Who has redness of eyes?  
 Those who linger late over wine,  
 Those who keep trying mixed wines (23:29-30; 20:1; 23:190-21;  
 31:4-7).  
 For lack of wood the fire goes out,  
 And where there is no whisperer, quarrelling ceases (26:20)"

#### MODERN REFLECTIONS ON PROVERBS

It is customary in modern biblical criticism to approach a text like Proverbs by reconstructing its historical background. Unfortunately as David A. Clines pointed out in *Creating the Old Testament*, (ed Stephen Bigger, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989, p227), "in the last twenty years we have lost confidence in our ability to date the literature of the O.T.", particularly books such as Proverbs which supply no reference to historical events. This has led, however, to a more determined concentration on the book itself. There are two main types of proverbs, those which tell in memorable words some insights concerning human experience (like *Poor Richard's Almanac*) and those which have a religious dimension. A similar book is the *Analects of Confucius* which combines proverbs on a successful life with others on a pious life. Many reflect the lives of the rich in the city and in the royal court.

It is, however, wrong to see the sages who composed the wisdom books as a group of aristocratic intelligentsia who discussed moral and theological issues at leisure. They were scribes and sages in the administrations, advisors to rulers, teachers in wisdom schools who "primarily prepared young men for scribal and

official positions in the government and temple”. Proverbs, as even a brief perusal shows, is an anthology of father-son instructions (chs 1-9; 22:17-24:34); some 31 chapters composed of short two-part sentences and various poems which explain the basic principles of living in our world. Two of the collections are attributed to non-Israelite sources, Agur (30:1-2) and Remuel (31:1-2), while the third (partic. 22:17-23:10) has drawn on The Instruction and Amenemope, which dates from the end of the Late Bronze Age and is divided into some thirty numbered stanzas. The opening collection of nine chapters, which seems to be the latest of the collections is the prologue for the remainder of the book. It appears to be a call to Torah-based piety note the terms for the father’s teaching include *Torah*. In Prov 9:1-6 there is a festival to celebrate the completion of Woman Wisdom’s building of her house (temple or school) with seven pillars, which contrasts with the silly impulsive woman’s house in Sheol (9:13-18). It provides the basic approach and attitude and atmosphere in which the rest is to be read. These audiences (Prov 1:2-7) are aimed at people in general, the “simple” or unlearned and the wise person who wishes to deepen their understanding of the wisdom virtues and of course of God. Raymond C. Van Leuwen, however comments (*The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol V, p26): “Some scholars believe that the God of Proverbs was a mere variant of the deities in other ancient Near Eastern wisdom writings. An extreme form of this view argues that the God of the Proverbs is not the God of the rest of the O.T This position, however, presupposes the widespread (and mistaken) belief that the uniqueness of Israel’s God had to do with Yahweh’s involvement in history; it also entailed a corresponding marginalisation of creation”. Albright once proposed that Wisdom was recognized as a goddess in Iron Age Palestine but this is difficult to sustain and as Weeks points out (Introduction, p40) there is no evidence of a goddess ‘Wisdom’ in any other source. Egyptian representations of the divine were extremely fluid and sophisticated.

Van Leuwen in his *Excursus: “The Heart” In the Old Testament* notes that “Israel shared the general structure of its anthropology concerning heart and other

bodily members with its neighbours". The famous "Memphis Theology" from Egypt illustrates the biblical conception well:

The sight of the eyes, the hearing of the ears, and the smelling the air by the nose, they report to the heart. It is this which causes every completed (concept) to come forth, and it is the tongue which announces what the heart thinks" (ANET 5, f. Prov 6:12-19) – see *Old Testament Survey*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2005, p245.

This general introduction, which concludes with a poem, shows the artistry of the teachers who compiled the book to provide "instruction in rhetoric and moral virtue for youth studying in the schools". By means of this manual, they learned to compose literary forms, use elegant language, engage in proper speech and incorporate principles of behaviour to guide them in life in general and in the performance of their professional roles at the conclusion of their education." (Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2008, pp89-90).

This introduction consists in a series of brief wisdom poems with a strong moral and religious emphasis. The aim was to teach wisdom and discipline (1:2). Some are longer, such as the poem ch 2 which is in fact one single long sentence. Ch.4 concentrates on ways and paths (cf. N. Habel, *Interpretations* 26, 1972, pp131-56). They deal with the origin, purpose, benefits and lady rival of the true Lady Wisdom who invites "my son" to her banquet. Like a guide for successful living they exhort children to listen to their parents and citizens to respect the king. It warns young men and provides a model wife for women to imitate (31:10-31) – note that adultery is mentioned explicitly only in ch.6. Wisdom is learned from father and mother, but ultimately is a relationship based on a reverential fear of Yahweh (1:7;9:10; 15:35; Ps 111:10; Job 28:28). – which has connotations both of respect and of fear. It is the opposite of "being wise in one's own eyes" (3:7). It is the "beginning" of wisdom, a word which can be interpreted as source or even foundation. Richard J. Clifford in the *Access Bible* (Oxford University Press,



1999, p209) comments that the phrase means “giving to God what is due, knowing and accepting one’s place in the universe. It primarily designates neither an emotion (fear) nor general reverence, but rather a conviction that one should honour and serve a particular god”.

Von Rad *in Wisdom in Israel*, (London SCM Press, 1972, p67) comments succinctly:

There is no knowledge which does not, before long, throw the one who seeks the knowledge back upon the question of his self-knowledge and his self-understanding....The thesis that all human knowledge comes back to the question about commitment to God is a statement of penetrating perspicacity. This, of course, has been so worn by centuries of Christian teaching that it has to be seen anew in all its provocative pungency....It contains in a nutshell the whole Israelite theory of knowledge.

For John Hayes (*An Introduction to O.T. Study*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1979, pp349-356) the theological perspective on wisdom can be seen in four ways:

The limits to the human mastery of life: “A man’s mind plans his way but Yahweh directs his steps” Prov 16:21; 21:30-31)

Fear of Yahweh as the first principle of knowledge and wisdom is an effort to think systematically about the relationship between wisdom and Yahwism.

A further development was the personification of Wisdom in ch 8 where a female figure beckons him to turn and love her; she promises blessings; was created before the world was established; is a “darling child” (some translate a ‘master workman’) Hayes finds the closest parallel in the Egyptian goddess Maat.

A further stage (Wisdom of Solomon 7:17-82 and Sirach 24:3-23) sees wisdom as a gift from God and as associated with the Torah given through Moses.

In ch 3:13-20 the first creation theology in Proverbs, some three verses emphasise the joy which comes to the one who discovers wisdom. Wisdom is painted in the image of an ancient near-eastern goddess of life. The text also describes the role

of creation for wisdom. Wisdom is “the tree of life to those who lay hold of her” and “he who finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord; but he who misses me injures himself; all who hate me love death” (3:18; 8:35-36).

In a statement of self-praise (panegyric), which provides the key passages 8:1-36, Woman Wisdom is introduced as a peripatetic teacher searching the world (i.e. the city) for students – the city was dedicated to a particular God. She was with the Lord in the act of creation as the firstborn of God. Her clear goal is one of joy, an intimate joy with God and people (cf Sirach 1:9-10). She claims all that a leader and ruler require: knowledge, counsel, advice and insight and is born of God and claims to give life, happiness, wealth, and honor. She stands in a public place and invites all who want to learn from her to receive her teaching, thus choosing between the two banquets (9:1-18). Jean-Noel Aletti (*Seduction en parole en Proverbs I-IX*, V.T., pp129-44), noted in 1977 that Wisdom’s speeches always include another character e.g. especially ch.9 where Wisdom and Folly are parallel. Again and again the young man is warned about sexual relations with a “foreign” or “strange” woman (7:16-20; 9:13; 14:1).

The portrayal of Wisdom as God’s mysterious female assistant at creation before an implied male audience (8:30) shows the value of the everyday search described in the first Solomonic collection in 10:1ff. Here the second major collection of 375 sayings is expounded – they are in different forms and deal with many topics. The sayings in ch 10-31 engage, involve and provoke the audience through irony, humour, satire and even ellipsis. Wisdom’s house is located on the highest point of the city. Clearly God’s wisdom is inextricably bound with creation and can and must be learned (1:5ff; 2:1ff). At first sight it is surprising to see divine wisdom portrayed by such ordinary wisdom as recommending hard work, prudent speech, good manners, the avoidance of harlots – note the antithesis as 26:4 and 5. Religious and “secular” proverbs are intermingled in no evident order. However the opening Proverbs 10:1-5 point to the home and family as the orientation of the collection.

The ideal person seems to be the “cool” person (17:27) who is slow to anger, with a tranquil mind (14:29f; 281ff). In Egyptian wisdom the wise person is “cool”. The cool man, according to Joseph Blenkinsopp (*Sage, Priest, Prophet, Library of Ancient Israel*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1995, p34):

will not give way to fits of temper and will ignore insults (12:16). He will confine himself to saying what he knows (20:15), will avoid slander, gossip and quarrelling (10:18; 11:12-13; 26:21); and will be a good listener (12:15; 18:13; 25:12). The fool, the “hot” man, is by definition the one who does not know when to keep quiet, who has no control over his tongue (10:8,14; 12:23,etc.) Just knowing when to stay silent can work wonders, even for one of limited talent (17:28)

In its stress on fools and their folly some ten examples in ch 17 are held up for examination and condemnation (vv2,7,10, 12,16,21,24, 25 and 28). In Prov 17:27-28 the wise know when to speak and when to keep silence. Ch 18 has a strong emphasis on speech and ch 19 on wealth, poverty and quality of life. Truth, fidelity, kindness and honesty with control of the appetites are the basic emphases in Proverbs and Sirach. Laurence Boadt in *The Catholic Study Bible* (RG 73) comments that Joseph fits the ideal of both Egyptian wisdom and of proverbs:

He speaks only what is appropriate, keeps his own counsel, accepts misunderstanding, shows great skills as an administrator of public affairs, is adept at translating dreams, is skilful in political intrigue games, and avoids entanglement with foreign women. Above all, Joseph is attentive to God’s plan, which works differently from the course of human planners

Much is made, as in the wider Near East, of the father’s role as a firm but compassionate disciplinarian and of the mother’s wise teaching and example. But on closer examination, all of the tenets of the ten Commandments are there, apart

from the laws of the Sabbath and the prohibition of idols (perhaps taken for granted!) . Many deal with service to Yahweh and one's fellow human beings. There is a regular emphasis on the prominent concerns of the prophets. Yahweh hates the mistreatment of the poor, corruption in business (11:1; 20:10, 23), unjust actions (15:27; 17:15,23). Clearly both poor and rich are created by the same God (22:1ff; 24:22; 3:15). Justice is better than sacrifice (21:3). Kindness and compassion are the characteristic of the good person (11:17; 14:22; 16:6; 24:10ff.) The just person does not return evil for evil (20:22; 24:29) or rejoice in another's misfortune (17:5) Right action leads to rewards (10:3; 25:21f.) and vice versa. To mock the poor is to mock Yahweh (14:31): "The one who mocks the poor insults the creator; He who is glad at his calamity will not be held innocent." (17:5)

Chapter 16:1-22:16 is sometimes called the "royal collection" because it stresses the roles of people within structures of society and the divine providence over human affairs. Here the presentation is mainly synthetic in form while the previous ones were largely antithetic in form. Here the attention is rather given to social concerns such as politics and social justice, e.g. "honest balances and scales are the Lord's" (16:11).

Scholars such as Roland E. Murphy insist that texts such as Prov. 21:30 show that the wise were well aware of their own limitations in understanding the mysterious ways of God. Thus Prov. 21:30 insists that there was no control over the activity of God: "there is no wisdom, no understanding, no counsel, against the Lord". The sages recognized the need for careful advice and planning particularly for war. Whatever the numbers and equipment, they clearly accepted that "victory belongs to the Lord". (21:21; 16:1-9; 3:5; Jer 9:23-24; Job 11:7-8; 36:22-26).

In contrast to the brief sayings of ch 10-21, the form in 22:17 ff changes to longer second-person addresses like the Egyptians "Instruction"; likewise a priority is given to concern for the poor. However nowhere do we feel the agonising of Job, or the wrestling with the tragedies and deeper issues of life and death. The educational approach of "spare the rod and spoil the child" promoted here would

not find wide acceptance today (10:13; 13:24; 19:18; 22:15; 29:15).

Scholars such as Leo G. Perdue (*The Sword and the Stylus*, p93) agrees that *The Words of the Sages* (22:17-24:22) depend on the twelfth-century Egyptian text, *The Instruction of Amenemope*, a twelfth century text with a similar content and structure and, it is calculated, some eleven sayings overlap. It was popular at a time when Egyptian power had declined – the latest surviving copies date from the sixth century B.C. (The Twenty-sixth Dynasty). Adolf Erman drew attention to the correspondence with Prov. 22:17-23:10 in 1924.

A further anonymous fourth collection (“**These Also are (the Words) of the**”, 24:23-34) begins bluntly: “Partiality in judging is not good. Whoever says to the wicked, you are innocent, will be cursed by peoples....Do not rejoice when your enemies fall...” It contains warnings and prohibitions leading to a first person narrative (“I passed by the field of one who was lazy”...) with a description of its destructive consequences.

The fifth collection (25:1-29:27) identified “The Men of Hezekiah”- a famous reforming king of Judah in the late eighth and early seventh centuries, (2 Chr 29:25-30) – as the redacting scribes involved were described. It contains six references to Yahweh or Elohim (25:22; 28:5; 29:13,25,26). Frequently the themes have already been covered but images given are followed by a description of the phenomenon. In ch 26 three enemies of the good life (folly, laziness and evil speaking) are discussed. The nagging wife comes high in the hate list in both Proverbs (27:15) and Sirach (25:20).

Each of the last two chapters begins with a subtitle attributing the advice which is given, by Agur whose questions resemble those of God to Job (e.g. Job 38:5) and King Lemuel who gives the only formal parent to child advice in Proverbs. There Lemuel’s mother teaches the importance for rulers to avoid dedication to women and wine instead of good government.

“The Words of Agur “which possibly include the whole of chapter 30 is a notoriously difficult part to translate. They are well-known for their scepticism

which anticipate the words found only in Qoheleth in the Bible (3:16-22). It provides the strongest criticism of wisdom's claims in the whole Bible. He asks: "Who has ascended to heaven and come down?" (30:4). He thus parodies wisdom's claims to revelation about God, creation and prophetic speech. Agur admits that he does not know wisdom or God and is worn out (2 K 9:25; Is 14:28). Agur seems to be an Arabic mantic or wise man from the tribe of Massa who is familiar with some traditions in Mesopotamia. The basic theme of the whole chapter 30 is the arrogance which leads one to reject God's sovereignty and overturn the whole social order. Agur insists that he himself has no formal education in wisdom but echoes such texts as Is 14:12-21; Ez 28 and the legendary *Dialogue of Pessimism* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In V7-9 he has a much quoted devout prayer:

Two things I ask of you;  
 Do not deny them to me before I die;  
 Remove far from me falsehood and lying;  
 Give me neither poverty nor riches;  
 Feed me with the food that I need,  
 Or I shall be full and deny you,  
 And say, "Who is the Lord?"  
 Or I shall be poor, and steal,  
 And profane the name of my God.

Surprisingly the LXX places Ch 30:1- 31:9 at the end of ch 24.

The words of King Lemuel (31:1-9), the seventh and last collection in Proverbs (Prov 31:1), contains a superscription and a following instruction on the requirements of leadership. This comes from Massa, the same Arabian tribe from which Agur came. First there is the problem of maintaining authority over the women in the court (v2-3). In v3-5 the queen mother warns her king-son that abuse of sex and alcohol can lead him to forget the poor. In v6-9 the advice is that alcohol can help the poor to forget their poverty. Lemuel is responsible for just

judgement, especially for the poor.

The flow of the Book of Proverbs proceeds from the general principles of the opening collection, to particular examples in the main sections, to a surprising conclusion. It covers in all some eight different types of fools, as Crenshaw points out in *Old Testament, Story and Faith*, Hendrickson, Peabody, Mass, 1992, p317; from W.O.E. Oesterley, *The Book of Proverbs*, London, Methuen, 1929, pp lxxxiv – lxxxvii:

- pethi – a naive, untutored individual
- kesil – a person who is innately stupid
- ewil – who is persistently obstinate
- sakal – one who persists in folly
- ba'ar – a crude individual
- nabal – a brutal, depraved person
- holel – an irrational madman
- lets – an inveterate talker who values his opinions excessively

For the first type what was needed was exposure to learning. For the other seven the wise had nothing but contempt. Much attention in Proverbs was focussed on the way to destruction. This agreed with the frequent prophetic denunciations and the negative Deuteronomic interpretation of Israelite history. Threats came from sexual temptation (adultery), laziness (e.g. the lesson of the ant in 6:6-9), gossip and slander which led to pride.

#### The Ideal Wife

Somewhat surprisingly, given the tendency of Proverbs towards male chauvinism and the many negative references already made to the character of women, especially loose and unattached ones, an acrostic poem (each of the 22 verses begins with one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet) concludes that book as it praises the worth of the ideal woman in an unrestrained fashion, a deliberate echo of the women with whom Proverbs began. She is “far more than jewels” although her personal and companion qualities are unmentioned, as she is responsible for a

large estate and teaches wisdom. She open her mouth with wisdom “and her tongue is the ‘torah of kindness’” (v26). It is noteworthy that four such acrostics occur in the first book of Psalms and another four in the fifth book, with four in Lamentations. The best known example is the Babylonian Theodicy (ANET, 601-4). On the one hand the picture of a wife with considerable creativity and responsibility, is in sharp contrast to the stereotyped view of ancient Israelite women so common today. On the other hand the perspective is typically masculine with the husband as the patriarchal master in a rather feudal society and the “rather bourgeois portrait of the ‘woman of substance’ with its catalogue of managerial skills.” Hitherto the image of a woman has been so prominent a symbol for wisdom/folly throughout the book 1:20-33). According to John J Collins (**Introduction to the Hebrew Bible**, Minnesota, Fortress Press, 2004, p495):

This poem is a valuable counterbalance to the picture of the “strange woman” in Proverbs 1-9. It shows that the sages were not misogynistic; they were critical of some female behaviour, not of women as such. But for all its professed praise of women, 31:10-31, it is unabashedly patriarchal in its perspective. It reflects the crucial contributions of women to agricultural society in antiquity, and shows high respect for their competence. In the end, however, much of the glory redounds to the husband, who is a gentleman of leisure because of her labours, and can take his place among the elders at the city gates. The role of women in a traditional society was light years away from modern feminism, but it was not entirely negative either. Even if the husband in Proverbs 31 does not rise early to help her, he at least joins in the praise of his wife and appreciates what an asset she is.

Thus Proverbs concludes with Woman Wisdom in a similar way to the Song of Songs which presents the Shulammitte (Song 6:9; Prov 31:28). Compare also Wis.



8:2 and Sir. 15:2. The key word in v 10 (*'eshet havil*) has been translated in turn by such words as good, perfect, virtuous, noble, worthy, valiant, strong. In Proverbs the Woman Wisdom fulfils the great themes of the book: she is a fountain and sustainer of life, she is a person of strength and dignity (v 25). She buys fields and plants vineyards, makes and sells clothes. Universally admired, she speaks with wisdom and teaches the Torah of love and *hesed* (v 26) she opens her arms to the poor and the needy. As v 29 points out: "many women have done excellently, but she surpasses them all". Because the image of women has been so prominent a symbol for wisdom and folly throughout the book (1:20-33; 8:1ff; 9:13; 19:13f; 31:3) it is not surprising that scholars like McCreesh and Clines interpret the capable housewife not so much as the ideal model for a woman but as the model practitioner of wisdom, a pendant to the description of Lady Wisdom in 9:4-6. The ideal wife's activity is mainly secular until the conclusion, when the religious dimension is emphasised: "Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised" (31:30). Wisdom, in Proverbs, gives life, happiness, wealth and honour.

#### THE USE OF PROVERBS IN THE LITURGY:

Proverbs is used once a year in each of the three liturgical cycles:

**Year A** Thirty Third Sunday: Prov 31:10-13; 19-20, 30:31) together with Mt 25:14-30

The servants are entrusted with responsibility for the property of the householder

**Year B** Twentieth Sunday: Prov 9:1-6 together with Jn 6:51-58. Jesus, like Wisdom, prepares a meal for the hungry people

**Year C:** Trinity Sunday: Prov 8:22-31 together with Jn 16:12-15. Personified wisdom was often used by Christians to understand the Word of God

**Year II** Daily cycle during the 25<sup>th</sup> week:

**On Monday** Prov 3:27-34, on how to treat our neighbour, is read with Lk 8:11-18 (light of witness not to be hidden under a bed).

**On Tuesday** Prov 21:1-6, 10-13 and Lk 19:21: it is the Lord who proves hearts

and sees what is right.

*On Wednesday* Prov 30:5-9 with Lk 9:1-6 – preach the word of God without material comforts. The text in Proverbs asks to be neither rich nor poor – the rich doubt God’s existence while the poor are tempted to steal and profane God’s name.

#### THE RELEVANCE OF PROVERBS

*Richard J. Clifford (Proverbs in The Access Bible*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p808) admits that Proverbs is difficult for modern readers to enjoy. Yet chs 1-9 aim at forming character and chapters 10-22 and 25-29 do not so much provide information as help to make decisions and see dimensions of our world not immediately evident. They aim at developing an open-hearted person who rejects easy compromises especially in basic relationships with God, spouse, household and neighbours:

The universal truths of Proverbs remain relevant today. Proverbs proclaims that God’s world is good, yielding its full blessing only to those who seek wisdom, do justice and revere God. To those, however, who do not listen to wisdom, which God has placed in the world and who are hostile to their neighbour, the world will prove a dangerous place. Evil comes back upon the wicked. The virtues of wisdom, justice and piety are acquired through discipline, a process requiring sincerity, persistence and openness to those more experienced. The book declares that right, wise and reverent conduct is the only way to happiness, which God is invited to grant as a gift.” Prov 3:17 rightly remarks “all the paths of Torah lead to shalom”.

Clifford sees a threefold dimension in wisdom in *Proverbs*: a sapiential dimension or way of knowing reality; an ethical way of conducting oneself, and a religious way of relating to the divinely designed order or to God. Folly, the corollary, is not merely ignorance or impiety. It condemns God’s world and takes action

against God and God's creatures. It is a serious activity with serious results (*Old Testament* Library, 1999, pp19-20). Wisdom should end in wonder (Prov 30:18-20).

#### GOD IN PROVERBS

According to J. Clifford's essay on *Proverbs* in *The Forgotten God* eds. Das and Matera, Westminster, John Knox Press, Louisville, 2002, p4, wisdom literature does not describe God using the covenant relationship with Israel but rather working in the entire world. What is unique among O.T. volumes is that not one but two people are completely responsible for the attainment of the good life. (R. Norman Whybray, *The God Life in the O.T.*, T&T Clark, London, 2002, p182). Proverbs includes more references to wisdom than to God. In some texts where there are passages which see wisdom as the key to success and happiness, no reference to Yahweh is made. Yet elsewhere even secret thoughts are known to Yahweh: his eyes are everywhere (15:3). Wisdom is subordinate to God the creator of everything including the world and human beings, who maintains goodness and justice and is the source of the good life. God's eyes are in every place (15:3) as he sees into human hearts (5:21;15:11) and weighs/tests the human spirit (16:2; 21:12), controls destinies, actions and events (16:33; 20:24) and frustrates plans which he rejects (16:3,9; 19:21; 21:31). The book of Proverbs does not so much dictate moral rules and behaviour. Rather it invites the reader to a lifelong journey of intellectual thinking and moral discernment. While the large majority of sayings comes from the setting which is more rural than courtly, more farming than state administration, the book sees the king as enthroned at the top of the pyramid which was human society at the time (25: 2-7).

Proverbs reveals God's character by indicating what he delights in and by what he hates:

- 1) "To the Lord the perverse person is an abomination,  
But with the upright is his friendship  
The curse of the Lord is on the house of the wicked  
But the dwelling of the just he blesses..." (4:32-33)

- b) "The good person wins favour from the Lord, but the schemer is condemned by him" (12:2)
- c) "False scales are an abomination to the Lord, but a full weight is his delight" (11:1)
- d) "the depraved in heart are an abomination to the Lord, but those who walk blameless are his delight" (11:20)
- e) "lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who are truthful are his delight" (12:22)
- f) the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord but the prayer of the upright is his delight" (15:8)

Agreed and Disputed Areas in the Theology of Proverbs Today, according to R.N. Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs: A Survey of Modern Study* (HBI I; Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1995):

#### Ten Areas of Consensus

- 1) The Theology of Proverbs does not focus on Israel.
- 2) It has some historical connections with Ancient Near Eastern Wisdom Literature.
- 3) It focuses on practical ethics for the individual.
- 4) It is generally optimistic in outlook in contrast to Ecclesiastes.
- 5) It does not lay out a complete systematic theology.
- 6) It teaches that one's behaviour determines whether one prospers or suffers.
- 7) At least some of its teachings are religiously motivated.
- 8) It is thoroughly monotheistic.
- 9) Gaining "wisdom" is the key to a good life.
- 10) Wisdom is the gift of God.

#### b) Ten disputed questions:

- 1) Does proverbs have a unified message?
- 2) Is Proverbs an alien corpus within the O.T., having more in common with the international wisdom than with the covenant theology?
- 3) Is proverbs essentially practical or does it have a theology? Is it a religious work parallel to the O.T. concept of the Spirit?
- 4) Is Proverbs more anthropocentric than theocentric? Does it base its legitimacy on an appeal to divine worship?

- 5) For Proverbs, is suffering imposed by God on evildoers or is it the natural outcome of evil behavior?
- 6) In contrast to Torah is Proverbs sage advice or authoritative doctrine?
- 7) Is proverbs rooted in a theology of creation or has Proverbs no theology of creation?
- 8) Does proverbs teach on Egyptian Maat, like ordering of the world?  
Although there are impressive parallels between Maat and Woman Wisdom, one must not transpose Egyptian ideals into Proverbs.
- 9) Has Yahwistic theology been imposed later on proverbs which were originally either secular or more generically religious?
- 10) How should we interpret Woman Wisdom: as a personal attribute of God or an attribute of creation (von Rad)?

**Themes in Proverbs:** Daniel J. Estes in his excellent *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2007, pp224-261) has provided a fascinating overview of the following themes in Proverbs:

Cheerfulness  
Contentment  
Decisions  
Diligence  
Friendship  
Generosity  
Humility  
Kindness  
Parenting  
Purity  
Righteousness  
Truthfulness

Trevor Longman III has a very thoughtful conclusion to his study *How to Read Proverbs*, IVP Academic, Downer's Grove, Illinois, 2002, p158. He remarks that Proverbs could be described as a self-improvement book:

But that would be a mistake. Proverbs is so much more than a collection of well-crafted insights into living. It is a thoroughly

theological book, confronting us from the very beginning with the most fundamental of choices: what is or should be the driving force of my life? Will I enter a relationship with Wisdom or Folly? With God or idols? A particular choice faces the Christian reader: in light of the New Testament's teaching on the nature of wisdom, is Jesus Christ, the epitome of God's wisdom, at the center of my life's decisions and actions? (p158).



## CHAPTER TWO: JOB

The Book of Job suits our description of our topic as “God-talk” better than any other Old Testament book. The five speakers and finally God himself discuss God and his acts and nothing else throughout the book. No one disputes that Job is the supreme product of the Israelite literary genius; it matches profundity of thought with richness of language dedicated to a topic of perennial importance and perennial difficulty. The date...cannot be determined exactly John L. McKenzie, **A Theology of the Old Testament**, New York, Doubleday, 1974, pp218-9.

How the book of Job got into the Holy Scripture I don't really know. That's the greatest mystery of all....Job's tragedy was that of the happy ending....Scholars try to rationalise Job by rearranging the verses....but it doesn't make it become clear. The Book of Job will never come clear. It doesn't matter; it's a poem.

Such remarks from Muriel Spark's **The Only Problem**, Putnam, New York, 1984, typify the perennial fascination with the patient/impatient Job, festering on his dung heap yet boldly challenging his creator to a face- to- face encounter.

God comes out of the story as most morally tarnished. The comforted may emerge looking stupid (which they are) but God



does so looking like an unpleasantly sarcastic megalomaniac... Job is still insidiously subversive...God has still failed to appear in court and we construe his absence as non existence, hubris, apathy or an admission of guilt. We miss him and would dearly like to see him going to and fro on the earth and walking up and down in it, but we admit tyranny no longer, and we demand justice more than we are awed by vainglorious assertions of magnificence

According to Louis de Bernières, Preface, *The Book of Job*, London, Canongate, 1998, a story is often told of a teacher who as a lad of fifteen was taken to Auschwitz in Poland. There his entire family died in the gas chambers, part of the Nazis' "final solution of the Jewish problem". He alone survived. After class one day someone asked him how he could retain his faith in God after what he had witnessed at Auschwitz. His response was simply: "Have you read the Book of Job?"

Ulrich Simon begins his overview of studies on Job with the significant words: "No book in the Bible has been used and abused more freely than Job. Throughout the centuries of the past, but even more since 1959, eisegesis, as opposed to exegesis, has celebrated a feast". (*A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, eds R.J. Coggins and J.N. Houlden, London, S.C.M. 1990). According to Simon the reason is that we do not know, who, where, when or why it was written. James L. Crenshaw in his excellent summary of the history of the interpretation of Job (*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol 3, p866f) lists many of the opinions about Job, which did not always agree with James 5:11, whose Greek word indicates endurance, not patience. These interpretations include a rebel, a dualist, a pious man searching for truth, one who lacked the love of God, an Aristotelian denier of providence, one who confused the work of God with that of Satan. I admire the honesty of Marvin Pope in his Anchor Bible commentary on Job (p.xxxix): "In fairness to the reader, it should be explained that the translation offered in this volume, as with every attempt to translate an ancient text, glosses

over a multitude of difficulties and uncertainties.”

On the position of Job following Psalms in the canonical order of the Bible, Walter Brueggemann finds it appropriate (*An Introduction to the Old Testament*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2003, p293) “that the book of Job should follow the book of Psalms in the canonical order, for the Book of Job takes up the primary genres of the book of Psalms, especially lament and hymn, weaves them into a new coherent dialogued and pushes both lament and hymn to an emotional, artistic and theological extremity”. Concerning the genre of the book of Job, Westermann has suggested: that the basic material is that of *lament* that characteristically engages three parties, the speaker, YHWH, and the adversary; that the lament has been arranged in the book of Job as a dialogic *disputation*, a disputation that stands “within the lament”; and that the dialogic dispute (expressed in forensic language) amounts to a drama wherein we are offered “a dramatizing of the lament”. (Westermann, 1981, p11).

Leo G. Perdue, in his much admired introduction to wisdom in the Age of Empires (*The Sword and the Stylus*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2008), places Job in the wisdom of the Neo-Babylonian Empire:

The book of Job consists of a growing tradition that began, most likely, with the narrative in chs 1-2 and 42; 77-17. The Joban poet then composed the dialogues in ch 3-31 and 38:1-42:6 as a response to the earlier story. The “speeches of Elihu” (ch. 32-37) and the poem on Woman Wisdom (ch 28) were then offered as challenges to the dialogues. The book addresses not simply the problem of evil, but more importantly the issue of the justice of God. This searing theological issue became acute during the years following the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, the collapse of Judah and its major social and religious institutions, the ensuing devastation and impoverishment of the land and its inhabitants, and the loss of freedom and homeland by the exiles. The extreme,

negative consequences of the Babylonian conquest and exile led many in Judah and in captivity to question the related affirmations of divine justice and the theology of retribution taught in the earlier sapiential tradition as well as in Deuteronomy. Some of the destitute in Judah engaged in lamentation over the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple (see the book of Lamentations), while others wondered how the wicked Babylonians could serve as Yahweh's instrument to punish his people (Habakkuk). Some of the exiles sought solace in the preservation of the traditions of the past (especially the Priestly texts), while still others looked to the future in hope for a coming restoration of the nation in the liberation of the captives and the rebuilding of the nation (Second Isaiah and the eventual emergence of proto-apocalyptic). However, looming ever large was the critical question of divine justice. It is likely that the dialogues were written during this period of intense questioning and theological reflection (pp117-8).

For Perdue, the purpose of the book of Job was not to answer the abstract question of how bad things happen to good people, although it can be read in that way. Rather he aims to address the experience of "innocent" rural landowners (like the fictional Job) who were exiled along with the Jerusalem elite – in a similar way Qoheleth is a skeptical voice of protest against the accommodations of Ptolemaic (Greek) rule over Judah.

The book of Job is a kind of dramatic fiction which does not clearly enunciate its purpose yet challenges us to question the moralistic clichés which dominate our thinking and decision making. The author is anonymous even though later rabbinic tradition attributed it to Moses. There are no references to particular historical people or events which could help to supply a date – views range from the tenth to the third centuries BC. Many conclude that the issues raised (Was Job patient or not? Was God just or not?) are better focused on the event of the

destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC – there are verbal connections between Job and such sixth century literature as Jeremiah, Lamentations and Isaiah 40-55. Recent interpreters have reservations about including Job among wisdom books since it does not claim to be the work of a wise person! It is a poetic drama (3:1-42:6) framed by a prose folk story about Job (1:1-2:13 and 42:7-17). Scholars, not surprisingly, spend considerable time examining the many clues which are embedded throughout the text.

David J.H. Clines has emphasised at least four interpretative approaches by scholars to Job; painting Job as the ideal patient sufferer or as the champion of reason against dogma, or as the victim of a cruel and absurd world or in the context of Israelite wisdom (in *The Book of Job*, ed W.A.M. Beuken, BETL 114, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 1994, pp14-17). For Clines none of these agree with the others as to the essence of Job's message. Scholars list at least eight different understandings of the divine speeches. One should note above all, perhaps, that Job "is an astonishing mixture of almost every kind of literature to be found in the Old Testament, combining proverbs, hymns, laments, nature poems, legal rhetoric and other literary forms into a unified composition that is without equal" (cf Francis Anderson, *Job*, 1976, Inter-Varsity Press, London). William Sanford Lasor, *Old Testament Survey*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1996, p487, concludes: "So important, in fact, is this book's genre that it must not be fit into any preconceived mould. It does weep with complaint, argue with desperation, teach with didactic authority, excite with comedy, sting with irony, and relate human experience with epic majesty. But above all, Job is unique – the literary gift of an inspired genius". Norman Habel (*The Book of Job*, Old Testament Library, Philadelphia, 1985, p60) stresses its conscious crafting as its speakers draw widely on nature imagery, ancient mythology, verbal irony and a brilliant array of literary techniques. He notes (p61) how Job and his friends "explore numerous realities of their world, including the ground of knowledge, the nature of the wicked, the human condition, the role of friends, the analogy of

nature, the rule of God, and the moral order.” Scholars also insist that to gain a wider view of the full biblical position, books such as the practical Proverbs and the speculative Job must be read together because each contributes valid and essential insights into Yahweh’s rule over the universe.

It is interesting to note that the Septuagint (Greek) text of Job is approximately one sixth shorter than the Hebrew version – the missing parts are more common in the later parts of Job. There are also minor differences which reduce the responsibilities of God for Job’s misfortunes and make Job less angry and more pious. Surprisingly, the only speech of Job’s wife is expanded in 2:9:

How long will you endure, saying, “Behold, I will wait a little while, expecting the hope of my salvation?” For behold, your memorial has been abolished from the earth – sons and daughters, the labor pains of my uterus, for which I toiled in distress for nothing. You yourself sit, spending the night outside in the corruption of worms, and I am a wanderer and a servant from place to place and from house to house, waiting until the sun sets, in order that I may rest from the distress and pain that have taken hold of me. Best say some word against the Lord, and die.

In the post-biblical book *The Testament of Job* the wife is a major character. In an Aramaic version of Job found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, the text ends at 42:11 six verses before the Hebrew text.

## **A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE INTERPRETATION OF JOB**

### **Job in Scripture**

There are citations of (or allusions to) Job in Mt 19:26; Mk 10:27; Lk 1:52; 1 Cor 3:19; Phil 1:19; 1 Th 5:22; 2 Th 2:8; Jas 5:11; Apoc 9:6. However, two biblical passages in particular have frequently been highlighted: Ez 14:12-14 and Jas 5:7-11. In Ezechiel, Job is described as a just person like Noah and Daniel who were capable of saving others: For Ezechiel, Jerusalem is so evil that in contrast to

Sodom the presence of good people could not save the city: "even if Noah, Daniel and Job were in it, as I live, says the Lord God, I swear that they could save neither son nor daughter, they would save only themselves by their virtue" (Ezek 14:14). Job saved his three friends who spoke wrongly about God (Job 42:7-9), but his offering for his own children did not save them (Ez 18:20).

In James 5:7-11 ("you have heard of the endurance of Job") the context is different. James, in contrast, expects that the poor will receive little justice in this world at the hands of the rich, before the coming of the compassionate Lord.

In general one can describe Job as a question mark to the view of Proverbs that because there is wisdom at the creation of the world, therefore, it is ordered and regular. But Job's deep theology resonates with the widespread O.T. theology that Yahweh has created the whole world and not just Israel – Job is placed outside Israel and before the gift of the law. Job fits in well with the crisis time after Jerusalem's fall when even the divine promises seemed bankrupt. As James Crenshaw put it:

In the story about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham asks whether the Judge of all the earth will act justly. In another text, Gideon complains to an angel that the Lord has ceased to deal favourably with Israel. The prophet Habakkuk wonders just how long God will sit idly by while wickedness thrives, and Jeremiah accuses his trusted friend of betraying him by taking advantage of his weakness and innocence. In perhaps the most ironic touch of all, Jonah becomes angry at the Lord because Nineveh was spared as a result of repentant action – Justice, in Jonah's mind, required punishment for the evil city.... Josiah's death, must have dealt the final blow to the dogma of reward and punishment. These isolated voices seemed to have achieved unison in the circle of tradition from which the Book of Job sprang. *Old Testament Story and Faith*, Hendrickson, Peabody, Mass., 1986,

p305)

Roland Murphy (*The Tree of Life*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1996, p33-34) who warns that any dating of Job is based on tentative evidence, still finds several wisdom themes in Job which are also found in the other wisdom books:

- A preoccupation with creation
- The importance of name or memory
- Life as onerous
- The traditions of the fathers
- Personification of Wisdom
- The problem of retribution

For Murphy, Job is not about patience nor is his suffering a vicarious healing of others as in the suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. It is a test like the testing of Abraham in Gen 22:1-12. He finds that Job comes through with all the strength and weakness of human beings, with a mixture of faith and despair as he struggles with the hidden God. He also finds that the Bible provides us with a theological basis for the right to quarrel with God; the psalms of lament, the confessions of Jeremiah and Job are eminent examples.

Surprisingly Job is found in different places in different canons:

In the Talmud the order is Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes.

In the LXX it is Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Job.

In the Peshitta it is Deuteronomy, Job, Joshua.

From the Council of Trent in most English Bibles it is Job, Psalms, Proverbs.

In most Hebrew Bibles it is Psalms, Proverbs, Job.

In Kittel's *Biblia Hebraica* it is Psalms, Job, Proverbs.

#### JOB IN THE PRE-RABBINIC INTERPRETATION

The Septuagint version tends to change the rather bombastic doubting Job into a rather pious persevering sufferer by toning down the angry questions and violent

outbursts about God as a demonic enemy. It gives a longer speech to Job's wife. The result was that, because the LXX was the Bible of the early Christian Church, the exegetes were not exposed to the impieties of Job's agnosticism. It is significant to note that the earliest textual evidence based on the Septuagint and the Targum of Job validates the present sequence of chapters and verses.

Nevertheless it seems correct to say that from the unknown Targum commentator among the Dead Sea Scrolls (where four fragments of Mss were found - showing that the Elihu speeches were included at the turn of the era) until recent times, commentators have tended to construct a Job in their own image and likeness, a projection of their own problems and desired solutions. Many writers, from Luther to Kant, William Blake and D.H. Lawrence, not to omit such poets and dramatic writers as Frost, MacLeish and Wiesel, have been inspired by this symbol for the human condition festering on his dunghill, a symbol which provides, nevertheless, no easy answers to the bottomless problem of human suffering. Similar Wisdom-style narratives include the Joseph story (Gen 37-50), the Aramaic *Tale of Ahigar*, the Egyptian *Protests of the Eloquent Peasant*, the Akkadian *Poor Man of Nippur* and the Hittite *Tale of Appu*.

The oldest surviving interpretation of Job, *The Testament of Job* (53 chapters) (in James H. Charlesworth ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, New York, Doubleday, 1983, I.850ff) which probably comes from first century B.C. Alexandria, is an occasionally humorous embellishment of the story which praises the virtue of patience as "better than anything" (22:7). Significantly Job in 28:7 is described as "the king of all Egypt". The text is noted for its dualism and zeal against idols, its speculation about Satan and his many disguises, its interest in women (Job's impoverished wife is called more favourably Sitis - Dinah the daughter of Jacob, in the Targum on 2:9), burial proprieties, magic, merkabah mysticism, angelic glossolalia, care of the poor and female prophecy. The first half (ch 1-27) reviews the first two chapters of canonical Job to include a Satan of many disguises and a revealing angel. Here Job knows from the beginning what



will take place and why, but is assured of ultimate victory and that his torments will end and he will be restored to wealth and power. In the second part (ch 28-53), Job offends his four visitors with his talk of a kingdom in heaven.

Crenshaw notes 9 differences from the biblical story:

- 1) Job destroys Satan's idol and incurs his anger. But when Satan disguises himself to fool Job an angel reveals his identity.
- 2) Job's possessions and virtuous deeds are magnified.
- 3) Sitis, Job's wife, shows her loyalty by begging for bread and selling her hair for food.
- 4) Satan concedes victory to Job.
- 5) Bildad poses difficult questions and Zophar offers royal physicians to Job who relies on the one who made physicians.
- 6) Sitis is concerned that her children have not received proper burial and Job tells her that God took them.
- 7) God condemns the friends for not speaking the truth "about Job".
- 8) Job's daughters inherit magical items and a gift of glossolalia.
- 9) Job is transported into heaven by means of chariots.

J. Allen writes a very careful history of interpretation in *Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Intervarsity Press, Downer's Grove, Illinois, 2008). Initially Job in Rabbinic Literature was a positive figure, "a quintessential example of a righteous gentile who acknowledged and was accepted by God". However, in the face of Christian usurpation of Job as a precursor to Christ and model of pre-Christian piety, the darker sides of Job were examined, especially his defiant self-defense and his scepticism concerning divine beneficence. This led later to a view of Job as not a Gentile at all but a righteous Israelite. Rabbi Nathan accused Job of sinning in his heart and Rashi accused him of excessive talking. N.N. Glatzer in *The Dimensions of Job*, New York, Schocken, 1969, describes how later Jewish interpreters called Job a rebel (Ibn Ezra, Nachmanides), a dualist (Sforno), a pious man searching for the truth (Saadia Gaon), one who lacked love (Maimonides), an Aristotelian denier of providence (Gersonides), one who confused God's work with Satan's (Simeon ben Semah Duran), a determinist (Joseph Albo), one who failed to pacify Satan, a scapegoat, an isolationist (The Zohar), one who suffered

as a sign of divine love (the Zohar, Moses ben Hayyim). A Jewish legend indicates that God turned Joseph over to Satan, called Samael, to keep him occupied while the Jews escaped from Egypt; then God rescued Job from the enemy at the last moment. The Aboth, Rabbi-Nathan accused Job of sinning with his heart and thus defended divine justice. Some twenty medieval commentaries have survived, many of which expound on theories of providence.

#### JOB IN PATRISTIC LITERATURE

There are few citations or allusions to Job in the Christian literature of the first and second centuries with the exceptions of Clement of Rome, writing to the Christians of Corinth (1Clem 17:3-4; 26:3) and Justin (Dial.46, 32; 79:4; 103:5. According to *The Encyclopedia of the Early Church* (p878) the first writer to make much use of Job is Clement of Alexandria (15 explicit citations in the Stromata) who draws arguments from it for his well-known teaching on the authentic Christian “gnosis”. Soon after Job makes his first appearance in Latin Christian literature in Cyprian’s *Testimonia De Opere et Eleemosynis* 18 which quotes Job 14:4-5 – Job is seen as a model for rich Christians, and is aware that it is impossible not to sin daily before God.

The first systematic commentator on Job was Origen whose 22 homilies were translated into Latin by Hilary of Poitiers – little of either version has survived. However a small part of Origen’s work survives in the catenae from Ch 1, ch 19-222; ch 27, etc. Origen saw Job as the prototype of all Christian martyrs, not as a type of Christ. He explained the mystery of evil in Job by referring to the well-known doctrine of the pre-existence of souls and their initial fall. Job was a person who feared God before the law was given to Moses and a symbol of the just person who accepted tribulations.

After Origen one can mention Evagrius’ commentary of which many fragments are found in the Catenae also that of Athanasius and that of Hilary of Poitiers. Didymus of Alexandria’s Commentary up to Job 16:2 has more recently been discovered among the Jura papyri (1968-73). Like Origen, Didymus presents Job

as a symbol of the just person undergoing trials. Job is a model of courage, persistence and submission to the divine will. Didymus was active in the time when the Antiochian reaction against the Alexandrian allegorical method was at its height. The Job-Christ typology which Gregory the Great later adopted, appears for the first time in a Commentary on Job attributed to the fourth century Julian the Arian.

St. Zeno, of African birth, became Bishop of Verona from c. 362 – his sermons only came into circulation in the early Middle Ages. He composed a long list of the parallels between the sufferings of Job and those of Jesus in his incarnation and passion (Tract 11:15)

Towards the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth centuries, there seems to have arisen a profound interest in Job and a flourishing study of his work. It was a critical time when the Roman Empire faced many difficulties. Many, like Job, could not find good reasons for their destiny and unremitting misfortune. In their difficult situation Job as a model of firmness and resignation was clearly a suitable model for those suffering harsh legal measures.

From John Chrysostom (c.347-407) we have a sermon on Job (PG. 63, 477-486), a commentary only partly published (PG. 64, 503-506). Here we have one of the peaks of early excellence which combines biblical spirituality and late imperial Graeco-Roman moral philosophy, with Job as the model and sum of both. He was a man who feared God before the law was given to Moses. This demonstrates that for the just man there is no law (1 Tim 1:9; 6:7) and that Christ did not come to teach anything new or unprecedented. Chrysostom also argued for Job's freedom as opposed to any fatalistic solution to the problem of evil. However, the model for Chrysostom is not the protesting Job of the dialogue or the transformed Job of the Yahweh speeches, but the Job of ch 1-2. One should consult E. Dhorme (*A Commentary on the Book of Job*, Paris 1926, London, Nelson E.T. 1967) who provides a veritable treasure of Christian scholarly comment. A contemporary of Chrysostom was Polycronius, bishop of Apamea and a brother of Theodore of

Mopsuestia who also left behind a few brief texts on Job.

Two complete Syriac commentaries have survived in eastern Patrology. Ephrem the Syrian, author of many works, lived between 306-373. However the Syriac commentary on Job appears later than Ephrem's genuine writings. The second complete Syriac commentary is by the Nestorian Isho'dad of Merv who became bishop of Hedatta in Mesopotamia about 850. He generally provides a literal interpretation and quotes many passages from Theodore of Mopsuestia.

Theodore of Mopsuestia's (c. 350-428) lost commentary on Job seems to have rejected the book's canonicity and considered it to be the work of a pagan writer. Olympiodorus (early sixth century, deacon and exegete at Alexandria) was known for his commentaries which have partly survived in catenae and are often attributed to Julian (CPG3.7453ff). He divides his mainly literal commentary into 33 chapters, not the traditional 42. It is based on the text of the Septuagint. His Job is a model of a wise and just person.

In the Latin West, after Hilary of Poitiers (c.315-367) the defender against the Arians, the first commentator is Ambrose of Milan (c.333-397), the teacher of Augustine. He preached sermons on Job which later became part of his *De Interpellatione Job et David* (PL. 14, 793-850; CSEL, 32, 211-296). Ambrose had little interest in Job as a just gentile or a prophet to the nations. He even bluntly denied that Job was a type of Christ. Job's message for Ambrose, who was a student of the Greek fathers and of Philo, was that of the "unsurmountable impediment of wealth to salvation and the glorious spiritual treasure awaiting the steadfast sufferer". (cf J.R. Baskin, *Job as Moral Exemplar in Ambrose*, VC 353, p223). Thus for Ambrose the virtues of Pyrrhus and Socrates assumed a fresh Christian dimension as a key to a Christian interpretation and message. In his homilies Ambrose presented the two famous characters, Job and David, demonstrating that humanity can resist adversity only through the protection of divine grace, quoting Jam. 5:10-11:

Think again, I ask you, upon the holy Job. He was covered all over

with sores, afflicted in all his limbs and filled with pain over his entire body. Yet he was not swayed in his affliction, nor did he falter even in the mass of his own words, But ‘in all those things he did not sin with his lips (Job 2:10-), as Scripture testified. Rather, he found strength in his affliction, through which he was strengthened in Christ’ (Ambrose of Milan, *The Prayer of Job*).

By the mid fifteenth century, Job was a focal point for the theologians to debate sin, justice and human freedom. According to J. Allen in the *Dictionary of the Old Testament, Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, (Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 2008, p366). Jerome is unique among the church fathers in that “he was fully aware of the difficulties posed by the book of Job in Hebrew and of the difficulties between the narrative and poetic sections. Because many of these difficulties had been covered up by the LXX (and the Old Latin, which followed it) very few Christians understood the interpretive challenges that the Hebrew text presented. Jerome compares the Hebrew meaning of the biblical poetry to an eel: the more you squeeze it, the more it escapes (preface to Job). Although Jerome does challenge many putative Christian beliefs about Job (His equivalence to Jobab, (Gen. 36:33) for instance), he admires Job’s steadfastness in trial. He recognises Job as not only a model of patience and hope in adversity (Comm.Eph.3.5) but also as a prophet who foresaw the coming Christ and who comforted himself in his miseries with the hope of resurrection: “The Lord had not yet died and the athlete of the Church saw his redeemer rising from the grave” (Jo. Hier.30) Thus Jerome uses texts such as 19:23-27 to find a message for the church, to establish the hope and reality of bodily resurrection, a text so affirmed with music and melody in Handel’s Messiah.

Augustine dictated his *Adnotationes In Job* around 400 (PL34, 825-886; CSEL 28/2,509-628) He read Job as an example of grace. His literal interpretation concludes at 40:5 where Job humbly submits to the judgement of God. Augustine’s exegesis is marked by his widely-known teaching on the universality

of sin and limited salvation based on the free choice of good. Job is a just person but conceived and born in sin. He knows that he deserves no reward for his just behaviour in life. However a completely opposite view is found by Julian of Eclanum who used the new translation by St. Jerome. A follower of Pelagius and also of Antiochian literalism, and a close relative of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Julian was often condemned as a heretic. Julian did not consider the letter to the Romans to be as good a starting point for theology as Job so he wrote a full commentary on Job.

Other commentaries include that of Ps – Pelagius or Jerome (PL 26, 619-802).

Among the Greek fathers we have an analysis of the first twenty chapters of Job in 24 homilies by Hesychius of Jerusalem (fourth-fifth century) which survives in an Armenian translation. It takes its beginning from the moral and literal commentary of Chrysostom, adding some typological allegory.

However the most influential and thorough commentary from the patristic age is found in the 35 books of Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Job* which in turn was heavily indebted to Jerome's *Commentarii in librum Job* (PW 26: 655-850), St. Ambrose (*De interpellatione Job et David*), (PW 14: 797-850) and St. Augustine (*De patientia*, PW. 40: 615-16). This is more a manual of moral and ascetic theology than a work of exegesis. It was begun in the East in the form of homilies given in Constantinople (c. 579) where Gregory represented the Pope. They were carefully completed in Rome after Gregory became Pope. For Gregory, the author of Job is the Holy Spirit. Reading Job is a weapon against the evils of the time and a help to suffering towards perfection. Ever since Gregory, Job has been interpreted as a fundamental source for moral truths and wise sayings concerning some of the most difficult questions about the meaning of life, the question of suffering and the moral order of the universe. Gregory's *Moralia* dominated all subsequent medieval treatments of the book of Job including those of Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Lyra. Gregory (c. 540 – 604) follows the three different levels of interpretation which Origen popularised and which Ambrose and

Rufinus spread in the West, as he explains to his friend Leander:

First we lay the foundations of the historia (literal sense); then through the Typica (the typological interpretation) to build our mind so that it becomes a fortress of faith; and thirdly moralitas through the moral sense to cover the building with a layer of colour. Gregory interprets God's word 'like a river which is both deep and shallow, in which a lamb can walk and an elephant must swim'.

Thus, according to the literal sense, Job is a type of the suffering Redeemer and the church in its earthly sufferings. In his preferred allegorical reading, the ostrich (39:13-14) is the synagogue and her eggs are the apostles "born of the flesh of the synagogue". Thirdly, in a moral sense Job transcends the temporal realm and ascends to the eternal. On the moral level he tries to explain away Job's bold words to God and describes him as the patient saint of the prologue. Surprisingly, he comments that if an exegete finds a good occasion to edify his audience he should not avoid it and can return later to his accurate comments, like a river which expands to fill a low valley and later returns to its natural course.

The basic allegory according to Gregory sees Job as a figure of Christ and also of the church which is the body of Christ. Job, like any saint, who bears Christ's image in himself, is also a type of the church. On the other hand the three friends signify heretics. The seven sons and three daughters are respectively figures of the apostles and the faithful (1:19-20). They also signify the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit and the three virtues of faith, hope and love (1:38).

Two verses in particular guided Gregory's interpretation of Job's laments: the challenge of Satan (2:5) and the divine approval (42:7). They demonstrate that Job did not curse God and give the victory to Satan. Thus Job is a model of virtuous suffering and interior assent to worshipping God. In Gregory's reading of the whirlwind speech, God in his address foretells Christ's victory over Satan (Behemoth and Leviathan) and promises the final defeat of the antichrist.

Gregory, in fact, compared his own physical sufferings (frequent pains in the bowels, fevers, difficulties in drawing his breath) with those of Job. He saw them as character forming and driving himself towards the divine and to public attention. He insisted that, since Paul quotes Eliphaz (Job 5:13; 1 Cor 3:19), some things in these sayings were right.

Between the allegorical interpretation of Gregory and the literal interpretation of Thomas Aquinas stands Moses Maimonides, another great medieval Aristotelian. For Maimonides (1135-11204) the story of Job is not historically true but is a parable about the meaning of providence. Job was righteous yet he lacked some wisdom. According to Maimonides, Satan had led Job to some wrong beliefs.

However Elihu introduced the angel of correction and intercession in contrast to Satan. This enabled the “knowledgeless” Job to listen to the prophetic revelation of the Yahweh speeches. Even though Job is hailed as a righteous person in the opening chapters, he is, in fact, deeply flawed and lacks the higher virtues of intellectual perception. Job’s angry outbursts at God demonstrate that he does not fully appreciate God’s approach. His mourning at his losses suggests that to some extent he sees earthly benefits as the result of divine providence, a view that Maimonides and Aristotle reject. Job needs to refine his thinking through suffering – Maimonides criticises his fellow Jews in this aspect also, even using Aristotle. Not surprisingly to medieval readers, Job is portrayed not only in biblical studies but also in poetry, mystery plays and liturgy, and various reworkings of the Joban legend – e.g. as a wise- man, a prophet and a philosopher and a patron saint of people suffering from worms, skin diseases and melancholy. Saint Gregory is the inspiration for the *glossa ordinaria* on Job, often attributed to Walafrid Strabo, but most likely the work of Rabanus Maurus. A summary was produced by St. Odo, Abbot of Cluny (PL CXXXI11, cols 105ff). Studies such as those of St. Bruno (Expositio in Job PL. CLXIV, cols, 551 ff), Rupert of Deutz (Super Job Commentarius. PL. CLXV111, cols. 963 ff), Pierre de Blois (*Compendium in Job*, pL. CCV 11, cols.795 ff) are influenced by Gregory. Other



commentators include Albert the Great (*Commentaries in Job*, edited by Malchior Weiss, Fribourg, 1904), and Thomas Aquinas (*Expositio in librum Sancti Job*, cf Angelicum 2,2 (1925) p170) - cf Knafen Bauer, commentaries in Librum Job, pp22ff – Jewish commentaries included Rashi (ninth century) who faulted Job for talking too much. Ibn -Ezra (eleventh century), Levi Ben-Gershom (fourteenth century), Samuel Bed Nissim (fourteenth century).

The most recent English translation of Aquinas' *Job* is by Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1989. Aquinas' literal commentary on Job takes a different path from that of Gregory, as he comments in his prologue:

Blessed Pope Gregory has already disclosed to us its mysteries (mystical senses!) so subtly and clearly that there seems no need to add anything further to them” For Thomas, Job is the ideal student/professor, perfectly wise though somewhat naive in practical matters and imprudent in his manner of communicating his limited wisdom. He even gives his friends the impression that he is blaspheming. Speaking so strongly of his own innocence he gives the impression of pride and even of doubting the divine judgement as an inequitable judgement although deep down he is convinced that God is by no means unjust. A. Damico and M.D. Yaffe (eds) in *Thomas Aquinas, The Literal Exposition in Job*, Atlanta, Scholars press, 1989, interpreted Thomas on Job as a beginning point for examining the problem of divine providence. Thomas offers a line by line commentary using cross references to other parts of scripture, Aristotle, the Fathers and other Christian Aristotelians. He comments in his prologue:

‘Good things do not always happen to good men or bad things to bad men. On the other hand, neither do bad things happen to good men or good things to bad men. Rather both good and bad things always happen to good people and bad men indifferently. The fact,

then, is what has especially moved the hearts of men to the opinion  
‘that human affairs are not ruled by divine providence’

Thomas remarks that if adversities only come in return for sins then God’s judgment is inequitable. But in truth this is not so, therefore God is by no means unjust.

Aquinas draws from Augustine the key aspects of his thinking on wisdom, apart from his own tendency to change the reasoning from Platonic to Aristotelian logic when dealing with the First Cause. His preferred pre-Christian text seems to have been Ben-Sira. For Aquinas Wisdom proceeds from God as a gift of the Holy Spirit in Christ. For Aquinas it is only this wisdom (=imitation of Christ) which helps us to face the evil and folly of our world.

D.J.A. Clines in *Interested Parties* (Sheffield, 1995, p153) notes that among the leading themes of the pre-Reformation period, Vandenbroucke has identified a far-reaching pessimism about the state of the church, the morals of the clergy, the capacity to meet the needs of the new nationalisms, the powerful fascination with the devil which gripped the popular imagination from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries.

In the High Middle Ages the *Office of the Dead* included nine lessons from the book of Job which alternated with Psalm readings. Job himself had a special role in the medieval liturgy as patron saint of those suffering from worms, leprosy, different skin diseases, venereal disease and melancholy. Lawrence Besserman in David Lyle Jeffrey’s *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1992, has an extensive list of literary representations from Job on p403. He notes that Tennyson called it “the greatest poem of ancient and modern times”.

The late Middle Ages continued both the Gregorian and Thomistic interpretations of Job as is evident from the works of Nicholas of Lyra and Denis the Carthusian (1402 -71). Nicholas of Lyra’s (c.1270 – 1340) *Postilla Super Totam Bibliam*, (1322-31) was, after the twelfth century *Glossa ordinaria*, the most widely

disseminated of all medieval bible commentaries, well-known for its focus on the literal sense and its use of Jewish sources, especially Rashi's commentary. Both T. Cajetan (*In Librum Job commentaries*, Rome, 1535) and Oecolampadius (*In librum Job exegeime*) gave literal interpretations drawing on Maimonides and Thomas, and interpreted Job as a debate on divine providence.

The reformers emphasised the literal rather than the allegorical interpretation. Luther (1483-1546) and Calvin (1509-1564) who published *Sermons on the Book of Job* (1563) and Beza (*Jobus Illustratus*, 1589) saw in Job a model of "the psychologically oriented, individualistic, pietistic tendencies in their contemporary spirituality....a lone hero of faith, valiantly wrestling with doubt, the devil and uncertainty" (Clines, *Interested Parties*, p155). Influenced by Gregory's *Moralia* the standard medieval views of the comforters were well intended but open to the reproach: "Cursed be he that does the work of the Lord negligently" (Jer. 48:10). For Calvin the comforters are like devils torturing Job "worse than he has been tortured before". Luther, however, never wrote or lectured systematically on Job. In fact his Job is the site of inner conflict between a Job who is a saint and a Job who is also a sinner. This Job is a Luther clone, a model of the Reformer's own self-image, where his saintliness consists to some degree in recognising his own sinfulness and lack of self-worth. The text Job 9:29 was important for Luther. Whereas the Hebrew had "I fear all my pains" the Vulgate had "I feared all my works" which Luther delighted to repeat as showing the dangers of works-righteousness. For Luther, Job is not someone who is nearly perfect but a saint who is also a sinner. Job, for Luther, is an unparalleled source for language about the devil who is described as Behemoth in ch 40 and Leviathan in ch 41 – Aquinas had "identified them with the elephant and the whale, quoting Aristotle, Albert the great, Pliny and Isidore. For Luther, "My soul chooses hanging" (7:15) is a cry for evangelical teaching, or for not resting on earthly things.

Luther in the preface to the German translation of Job does not explore Job

christologically but argues that the theme is whether a just person can suffer misfortune. He accepts that Job spoke wrongly about God yet is still more just than the friends.

John Calvin, especially in his 159 sermons, preached on Job in Geneva (1554-1555) He has left a much bigger legacy on Job than Luther but likewise has no commentary. For Calvin, Job is essentially in the right because he does not deserve what is happening to him. The friends are wrong in their reasons for Job's sufferings but their cause is wrong: "there is nothing in their speeches that we may not receive as if the Holy Spirit had spoken it". The virtue in Job that Calvin emphasises is his obedience and acceptance of the divine will. Praying for one's enemies is good but anger at sufferings is bad as it shows lack of gratitude for God's mercies. However, Job's riches have not blinded him with pride or led him to abandon service of God. However, Job for Calvin leads ultimately to a "recommendation to a quietism that does not doubt or struggle" (Clines, *Interested Parties*, p167). Job in the end finds grounds to trust in divine providence and to trust that despite the disorderliness of appearances, God is in control ordering human events with justice and wisdom.

Calvin sees Job as the lone defender of immortality against Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophor. Job vindicated God's providence by expanding God's justice to the after life.

In his 1584 commentary the Spanish theologian D de Zuniga (1536-98) interpreted Job 9:6 as grounds for the views of Copernicus – a view condemned in 1616 until the objectionable passage was removed. In 1651 T. Hobbes found the image of Leviathan as a symbol of the state and the political power which does not justify itself by reference to Law or reason. In 1651-66 Joseph Caryl (1602-1673), a graduate of Exeter College, Oxford and a preacher at Lincoln's Inn, published a 12 volume commentary on Job marked by piety and learning. In 1710 Leibnitz described Job as one who fails to see the divine purposes and therefore improperly complains that the evil is unjustified. In 1764 Voltaire, writing in the

*Dictionnaire Philosophique*, satirizes the inanities of Job's comforters and their philosophical defenders. Voltaire, who saw Job as one of the most valuable books of the ancient world, thought he was an Arab and made some anti-Jewish comments. Voltaire however saw Job as a representative of the human condition. Kant criticised Leibnitz in 1791. For Kant, Job was an example of authentic theodicy. Job's integrity leads to the divine revelation from the whirlwind which shows God's resistance to the operations of the speculative reason. However, Job's faith based on moral conduct, while recognising the limits of reason, provides the basis of an authentic theodicy.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the interpretation of Job emphasised the rebel dimension. In 1731, J. Le Clerc, (1657-1736), a French Protestant in Dutch exile, argued for the fictive character of Job, while A. Schultens (1737) defended its historicity. Later in England the eccentric W. Warburton in two widely circulated volumes (1737-41) insisted that Job was an allegory of the political situation of the Jews after the Babylonian captivity. The well-known Hebrew scholar R. Lowth defended the historicity, antiquity and non-allegorical nature of Job in 1765. Lowth's lectures in Hebrew poetry were influential in the literary analysis of Job. Lowth argued against the view held also by Theodore of Mopsuestia in the fourth century and by Theodore of Berza in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that Job was analogous to a Greek Tragedy. For Lowth, Job did not suit the formal criteria of Greek tragedies. He judged Job's artistic qualities in the light of Hebrew poetry. He praised Job's capacity to express character and manners and his capacity to describe natural phenomena. The Romantic poet J.G. Herder (1782-83) was strongly influenced by Lowth and praised Job's nature poetry as an example of the sublime.

A fascinating many-sided study, *The Rhetoric of Suffering: reading the Book of Job in the Eighteenth Century*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995) was written by Jonathan Lamb, professor of English literature at Princeton. He examined a wide range of eighteenth century works which struggle with the contradiction between

human suffering and the scholarly impersonal systems of secular and divine justice. He highlights the fascination of Job for a variety of eighteenth-century intellectuals from artists to writers, philosophers and theologians, even statesmen. Job is the archetype of the individual who refuses “to sacrifice the particularities of his woes to the symmetry his friends claim to see in them.” He thus provides a devastating critique of the theodicy of Job’s comforters and their counterparts in the eighteenth century and in fact in every age. They refuse to listen to what Kierkegaard called Job’s “prodigious insurrection of the wild and bellicose powers of passion”. On the contrary they try to silence him in the presence of an inscrutable god and insist that everything he suffers falls within a divine plan. Thus Bishop Warburton saw the appalling earthquake at Lisbon in 1755 as ordained by the author of all to serve as the scourge of moral disorders. On the contrary Voltaire personified the ruined city as Job. It was not only Voltaire, Hume and Kant who rejected the thinking of their contemporary Job’s comforters. I was very surprised to read in Lamb (p274) that nowhere is Job more frequently reproduced in the eighteenth century than on tombs, vaults and mausoleums. Lamb quotes James Hervey’s *Meditations among the Tombs* (London, J. Rivington, 1746, pp vi, 17, 49). Hervey marks almost every pause before the dead with a quotation from Job ranging from the common choice for graveyard inscriptions (“Here even the wicked cease from troubling” and ““This is the House appointed for all Living”) to more vociferous passages such as “I shall never more see Good in the land of the Living”. Similar collections are found in Robert Blair’s *The Grave*, London, Cooper, 1743 and George Wright’s *Pleasing Melancholy on a walk among the Tombs* (London, Chapman 1793). The association between graves and the Book of Job is due to the verses of Job 19:23 beginning “O that my words were written”. There Job imagines his words carved on a rock between the observer and his dead body.

In the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries well known scholars such as Richard Simon (1685) and A. Schultens proposed that the old tale (written or oral)

was developed by the author of the dialogue. This approach was given classic shape by Wellhausen (1870), Cheyne, Budde, Duhm and Volz. Others, Mersc (1871), Sellin, Gordis, Eichorn, de Wette, Driver, Dhorme proposed that the Elihu speeches were an addition by the same (or another) writer. Still others considered the wisdom poem (ch 28) and even one or both divine speeches as later additions. In the nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries the historical critical approach has, not surprisingly, dominated scholarly studies of Job. Given the vast amount of critical studies and the variety of interpretations it is almost impossible to summarise this period adequately. Two particular emphases should be mentioned. Carol A. Newson, an O.T. professor at Emory University, finds that the most important trend in reading Job is the change from a historical-critical approach to a literary paradigm. This of course does not suggest that literary approaches have completely dominated historical critical approaches or that literary scholars do not use the insights of historical critics. For Newson the traditional critical questions up to this point included the ancient background of Job; the history and redaction of Job, the difficult issues of date and authorship, the problem of genre. She finds it quite surprising that in Norman Habel's 1985 commentary the traditional questions are all but ignored and replaced by a detailed description of the plot. Newson in her fine commentary on Job in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (vol 4, p319) sees Job as offering

a challenging exploration of religious issues of fundamental importance: the motivation for piety, the meaning of suffering, the nature of God, the place of justice in the world and the relationship of order and chaos in God's design of creation.

Further, the historical events of the world wars have provoked a deeper appraisal of biblical theology. Scholars such as Levenson note how the Book of Job has become a model because in no other volume have such characteristic themes of the twentieth century been so central – “disaster”, “unimaginable evil”, “frustration”, “bewilderment”, “a sense of despair”, of Well's *The Undying Fire*,

Mac Leish's *J.B.* and Frost's *The Masque of Reason*.

Samuel E. Balentine, writing on Job in the *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (p375), notes how the different portrayals of God in Job pose a serious and key interpretive challenge but no clear authoritative voice.

In the Prologue, the Satan incites a presumably sovereign God to afflict Job with undeserved suffering, leaving us to wonder if God can be coerced, manipulated, perhaps even tricked? In the dialogues between Job and his friends, a presumably compassionate God remains distant and silent, leaving us to wonder if God genuinely cares for those who suffer. In the whirlwind speeches God speaks at such monopolising length about so many things that seem disconnected from Job's plight, we are left to wonder if mere creatures like Job matter at all to the Creator. In the Epilogue, the God who indicts the friends and rewards Job seems more fickle than just. If, after all that has transpired, Job is in fact a faithful "servant" (1:8;2:3) who has "spoken what is right" (42:7-8), then why must he suffer so much before God confirms what God already knows? Even if Job has passed God's test for fidelity, we may wonder if God has not failed Job's test, for what is required for God to be God.

One could easily get the impression that every possible approach to Job has been tried. Many such as W. Vischer see the basic issue as posed by the Accuser in the prologue after God says to Satan: "Have you considered my servant Job...? and he answers "Is it for nothing that Job is God-fearing? Have you not surrounded him and his family and all that he has with your protection?" (1;9-10). More often, as Childs pointed out (*Introduction to the O.T. as Scripture*, p532), there is the tendency to emphasise completely the theme of human suffering, or theodicy. For Childs, rarely have modern scholars placed the emphasis on immortality which was popular in earlier exegesis. In the more critical approach there was a tendency



to eliminate secondary developments such as Elihu speeches, the prologue or the figure of Satan. Childs proposed a fresh study from a canonical or literary whole perspective, e.g. Andersen, Habel, Hartley, Jansen, Newson. Other interpretations include the liberationist approach of Gutierrez, the deconstructionist approach of Clines, a historicized approach of Wolfers in which Job is the nation of Israel, and a number of feminist, psychoanalytical and philosophical perspectives, e.g. how does the book point to Christ or how is Job to be read as part of the canon? Katherine J. Dell entitles her study of Job as *The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature* (BZAW 197, Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1991). She concludes that to search for a central unifying message in Job has proved largely fruitless (p55) She discovers a new overall genre for Job, the parody (p147) which has more resemblances to the Greek sceptics than to traditional wisdom circles. Job limits the power of God and comes close to denying the possibility of any type of belief. In *Job the Silent* (New York/Oxford, 1991), B. Zuckermann discusses the development of the Book of Job with the poetry sections earlier than the prose. For him Job was a satirist and the false hope of resurrection runs throughout the poem. Job's Redeemer (19-25) is the sharpest parodistic thrust where a counter-deity is "invoked out of thin air by Job to oppose the real deity". Thus, for Dell, the new overall genre for Job is the parody (p147). For Zuckermann the whole book is a parody especially in the relationship of Job the silent (in the prologue) to Job the verbose (in the dialogue) and the death-wish which runs through the whole book.

Hegel (1770-1831), even though it is said that he had a lifelong attraction to the book of Job, refers to Job only briefly in his writings. Job for him is an example of one who recognises the contradiction between his righteousness and his situation of suffering. Yet Job brings his situation "under the control of pure and absolute confidence" in the harmony of God's power; Job's happiness follows on his submission, but cannot be demanded as a right. (This section is based on the article on Job in Hayes (ed) *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* p593)

In 1825 the English William Blake published his great work *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1825) from the Romantic period. For Blake, Job's failure to understand is based on a lack of vision, of transcendent imagination which can only be healed by suffering. The well-known illustrations are often found as title pages in commentaries. They describe an interior pilgrimage from prosperity through the ordeal to reconciliation. There Job and God are almost identical and the dramatic battle is both human and divine. For Blake the vision is mystical and in a way everything is, because without seeing, a person is dead. The vision answers the unanswerable. Blake describes Job's God in the light of Greek mythology as he journeys towards the ascendancy of imagination and art. He is often accused of being opposed to the traditional ideas of religion, especially, the idea of atonement.

The existentialist Kierkegaard (1813-55) published his two writings on Job in 1843. In *Edifying Discourses* he focussed on the prose tale and particularly on 1:21 "...The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." In *Repetition* Job is the example of a person undergoing an ordeal, a transcendent experience which puts a person in a "purely personal relationship of opposition to God" (p210) – but Job gets, unexpectedly, the possibility of repetition, i.e. taking up his life again. Many well-known 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars and artists examined Job including Melville, Dostoyevsky, Froude, Royce, Wellhausen, Bickell, Delitzsch (one of the first to date Job), Levavasseur, Renan, Geiger, Cassel and Dhorme, whose commentary and historical overview make it one of the essential books for a study of Job.

In the theological crisis which marked the beginning of the twentieth century, Rudolph Otto (*The Idea of the Holy*, 1917) saw Job as a powerful witness to the numinous presence of God which inspires a corresponding awe and transcending peace. His notion of *tremendum* reflected Immanuel Kant's sublime, transposing it into the holy. It is "the sheer absolute wondrousness that transcends thought....the *mysterium* presented in its pure non-rational form" which Job finds

in his encounter with God." M. Tsevat (*The Meaning of the Book of Job*, HVCA XXXV11, 1966, pp73-106) rejected a non-rational resolution to Job. He concluded that the world is an amoral environment in which we cannot impose our standards of right and wrong on God. Job loses his belief in justice but finds a closer appreciation of God and God's accessibility to people. Like Otto, P. Berger (1967) has a Job who is overwhelmed by his masochistic encounter with God.

One of the most stark versions of the story is F. Kafka's (1883-1924) *The Trial* (1925). There, the Joban character Joseph K. is arrested one morning for an unspecified crime and goes through an endless bureaucratic hierarchy blind and unable to penetrate the transcendent. He is executed without ever confessing guilt or knowing the reasons for his arrest. M. Buber (1878 – 1965) noted the connections between *The Trial* and the Book of Job which are not explicitly linked by references. Buber himself suggested that Job has four views of God, in the prose narrative, the friend's speeches, Job's speeches, the divine theophany, each of which improves upon and replaces its predecessors. Buber, however, asks: "But how about Job himself? He not only laments but he charges that the 'cruel' God had 'removed his right' from him and thus that the judge of all the earth acts against justice and he receives an answer from God. But what God says to him does not answer the charge: it does not even touch upon it. The true answer that Job receives is God's appearance alone. In this, distance turns into nearness, 'his eye sees him', and he knows Him again. Nothing is explained, nothing adjusted, wrong has not become right, nor cruelty kindness. Nothing has happened but that man again hears God's address".

The American poet Robert Frost (1874-1963) wrote one of the most unexpected and successful interpretations of Job in *A Masque of Reason* (New York, Henry Holt, 1949, pp587-606). Note also the novel by G.K. Chesterton *The Man Who Was Thursday* first published in 1908, (and later in New York, Sheed & Ward, 1975) with the incisive comments by Garry Wills on the relationship to Job.

In Frost's play God returns after a thousand years to thank Job for his

contribution:

the way you helped me/ Establish once for all the principle/There's  
no connection

man can reason out/between his just deserts and what he gets:

Frost saw that Job was a contrast to much of the Bible:

“You realize by now the part you played  
To stultify the Deuteronomist,  
And change the tenor of religious thought.  
My thanks are to you for releasing me  
From moral bondage to the human race.

Roland Murphy's comment (*The Tree of Life*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1996, p45) is worth repeating:

This short poem is practically a dialogue between Job and his wife, God and Satan. At the outset Job and his wife are speaking when God makes his appearance – the wife claims to know who the stranger is, because she recognizes him from Blake's pictures. When Job inquires about the heavenly bliss, the Lord begins in an apologetic vein, to the effect that it has long been on the divine mind (a thousand years) to thank Job for the way in which he helped God make his point that the old reward-punishment principle of retribution simply does not hold. There is no reasoned connection between virtue and reward, wickedness and punishment. The trial was admittedly bad for Job, who could not possibly understand what God was up to, but by now Job should know the significant role he played in showing up the folly of Deuteronomist theology (that the good are rewarded and evil punished). Job set God free to be God by slipping him out of the bind that the three friends of Job clearly placed God in. At the end, Job's wife takes a photograph of Job, God and Satan with her

Kodak!

For Frost, Yahweh does not respond to Job's question but was "just showing off to the Devil as is set forth in chapters one and two".

Jung, who does not interpret the text as such, published his examination of Job in 1952 whereas Barth published his in 1959 – both in fact were children of pastors in the Swiss Reformed Church. Jung wrote his *Answer to Job* while he was suffering from a fever and in a matter of days in order, as he tells us, to examine "the way in which a modern man with a Christian education and background comes to terms with the divine darkness which is unveiled in the Book of Job, and what effect it has on him." His fresh, personal approach involved the development of a psychoanalytical approach to scripture. Thus he read it as an expression of the human unconscious as it struggled with the phenomenon of good and evil and their relationship. In the true spirit of Liberal Protestantism Jung concludes his *Answer to Job*: "In order to fulfil its task, the Protestant spirit must be full of unrest and occasionally troublesome; it must even be revolutionary so as to make sure that tradition has an influence on the change of contemporary values". The reaction to Jung was, not surprisingly, negative, heated and strong. Barth dismissed Jung's work as irrelevant to his methodology. Jung could not possibly read Job objectively and examine what is there. For Jung, Job is essentially about the nature of God, as symbolic being. Jung sees the God of Job as behaving intolerably – the behaviour of an unconscious Being who cannot be judged morally, in fact, a creature without insight. Jung treats the text as any literary critic approaches a drama with God as merely one of the several characters. God, who has a dark side, can be criticised for his insensitivity and accused of having a deeper motive, of being preoccupied with himself and using Job to deal with his own inner conflicts and doubts. God is not the caring Exodus Yahweh but a human construction who can be examined in the psychiatrist's chair. God, who can praise Behemoth in extravagant words, says nothing about man, his greatest creation. But the unreflecting God suffers a moral defeat at Job's hands as

wisdom suggests that the Cross, not abusive force, is the answer to Job. Wisdom (Job 29) leads God to decide to become a man. In the abandonment of the Cross God experiences what he has made his faithful servant Job suffer.

For Karl Barth (1959) Job begins with a God or Elohim, the god of experience and tradition. Job's sufferings confound his understanding as his angry protests indicate. In the theophany, however, Job encounters Yahweh, a god who cannot be grasped in the terms which Job and his friends proposed. In his revelatory moment Job has two gods as one (Elohim and Yahweh). For Barth, in the whole central section of Job including the speeches of his friends and Elihu and also the complaints of Job himself, Yahweh is replaced by the generic names of Elohim and Shaddai. Thus the crux for Job is the unknownness of God as Elohim and Shaddai. Job's submission to the divine leads him to find reconciliation and freedom. For Barth Job is an example of the "falsehood of man". His friends moralise in an all too human manner, in the most stupid fashion imaginable. They deny him even the last comfort of sympathetic participation. The stance of Job and the reappearance of Wisdom (ch 28) compel Yahweh to begin the process of self-examination. Thus for both Jung and Barth, Job is not about the problem of theodicy or why bad things happen to good people. It is an exploration of a meta-story, of the incomprehensible story of the messy relationship between God and humanity.

MacLeish (1892-1982), a staunch humanist, produced a widely popular play *J.B.* in 1956. Other modern writers include Joseph Roth (*Job*, a novel), the Yiddish author I.L. Perets (*Bontsye Schwaig*) and Robert Heinlein (*Job, A Comedy of Justice*). The modern Italian composer Luigi Dallapiccola set parts of Job to music and the English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams produced *Job, a Mask for Dancing*.

MacLeish's *J.B.* was published in 1958 and gained the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1959 and the Tony Award for best play. It led to a national debate about the nature of God and the nature of hope and the role of the artist in society. It is the

story of a twentieth-century American millionaire banker celebrating Thanksgiving. God commands that he be stripped of his family and wealth, yet he refused to turn his back on God. MacLeish wrote as he wondered how modern people could keep hope alive and keep on living in a world so full of suffering. J.B. concluded that there is no justice in the world yet people can still choose to love one another and live. In a review in the *The Christian Century* its drama critic insisted that MacLeish produced a non sequitur by jumping down from the theological discussion between God and Satan to emphasise J.B.'s purely human sufferings. Thus he produces a completely different character from the Bible's Job. The latter "shouts his pride, shrieks his blasphemy and fights with a God who eludes his attacks."

In sharp contrast is the post-Holocaust reading of Job in Elie Wiesel's play *The Trial of God* (1979). Wiesel, an orthodox Jew from Romania is a journalist, novelist and Nobel Prize winner. Job's suffering is like the Jewish fate under the Nazis. The figure of Job is an innkeeper named Barish. He and his daughter Hannah, have survived the Cossack raids. Set in a medieval European village, three itinerant Jewish actors are on trial to answer God's silence during a pogrom. This powerful play examines post-Holocaust historical issues concerning Jewish faith. It is said to have been based on Wiesel's real-life Auschwitz experience where he witnessed three Jews near death conducting a trial against God who has oppressed his Jewish people. But to stage the play a defender of God must be found. Sam, the character who defends God, eventually turns out to be Satan.

Ernst Bloch in *Atheism in Christianity* (1968 ET 1972) explores God's failure to provide a direct answer to Job's cry for justice and rejects the conclusion of Job. For him it is a cover for the heresy which Job wanted to fearlessly proclaim, i.e. the flight of man from Yahweh. For the Marxist Bloch, Job is the exemplary rebel against theism and the abusive power which religions foster. In 1974 R. Polzin (*The Framework of the Book of Job*, (Int.XXV111 pp182-200)) produced a structuralist approach, while he avoided the historical questions and presupposed

the unity of the book which he described as a “confrontation of inconsistencies” – a succession of conflicts upsetting the text until the original equilibrium is re-established when Job receives double his wealth.

Harvey Gotham, who has retired to France to write a monograph on Job, is the stricken hero of Muriel Spark’s *The Daily Problem* (1984). He considers the comforters as “very patient and considerate” in trying to relieve Job’s suffering as they keep on talking like an analyst to a patient on a couch. For him Job’s narrative teaches “the futility of friendship in times of trouble. That is perhaps not a reflection on friends but on friendship. Friends mean well, or make as if they do. But friendship itself is made for happiness not trouble” (ch.9).

Rene Girard (b.1923) reads *Job* (Stanford University Press, 1987) in the light of his own analysis of sacred violence and the phenomenon of the scapegoat. Girard applies to Job his well-known thesis that society requires an innocent scapegoat who must be sacrificed in order to restore order. He quotes the show-trials in Stalin’s Russia as contemporary examples. But the hero Job resists the accepted ritual and regains his freedom. Job is the story of a small community where he has been the dictator for years. “Everybody loves him, he does no one any harm”. One fine morning he wakes up and everybody is against him. His three “friends” are ready to show how bad he is at the same time. He has turned from the absolute hero to the scapegoat of the community. Job is thus like a long psalm that shows you what happens to communities. No myth will ever show you that. Job the hero resists the accepted ritual, protests his innocence and in a complicated manner regains his freedom. Girard argues that the divine speeches are not original but in fact a later attempt to neutralize Job’s subversive words.

J. Williams (*The Bible, Violence and the Sacred*, Harper, San Francisco 1992) accepts the unity of Job but sees the divine speeches as poor theology.

David Wolfers (*Deep Things out of Darkness, The Book of Job*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1995) proposes that Job is an eighth century allegory written as a result of the Assyrian invasion, showing that the Mosaic covenant was no longer valid



for Israel.

Other contemporary interpretations according to Lindsay Wilson (in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005p385) include “the liberationist approach of Gutierrez, deconstructionist readings by Clines, a historical reading by Wolfers (Job in the nation of Israel) and a variety of feminist, psychoanalytical and philosophical perspectives.”

Gustavo Gutierrez works with the perspective of Latin American liberation theology (*on Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* Maryknoll, N.Y. Orbis, 1987). For Gutierrez, Job the rich owner of property is nothing. But once an outcast and identified with the poor, he is restored to true solidarity with the people. Gutierrez proposes (pp88-89) an interpretation of Job beyond every scheme of retribution:

Inspired by the experience of his own innocence, Job bitterly criticized the theology of temporal retribution, as maintained in his day and expounded by his friends. And he was right to do so. But his challenge stopped halfway and, as a result, except in moments when his deep faith and trust in God broke through, he could not escape the dilemma so cogently presented by his friends: if he was innocent, then God was guilty. God subsequently rebuked Job for remaining prisoner of this whether-or mentality (see 40:8). What he should have done was to leap the fence set up around him by this sclerotic theology that is so dangerously close to idolatry, run free in the fields of God's love and breathe an unrestricted air like the animals described in God's argument – animals that humans cannot domesticate. The world outside the fence is the world of gratuitousness; it is there that God dwells and there that God's friends find a joyous welcome. The world of retribution – and not of temporal retribution only - is not where God dwells; at most

God visits it. The Lord is not prisoner of the “give to me and I will give to you” mentality. Nothing, no human work however valuable, merits grace, for if it did, grace would cease to be grace.

This is the heart of the message of the book of Job.

As Ulrich Simon points out (cf Coggins and Houlden, *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, p356). “yet Job is not merely a convert to socialism, for he is also raised by God to an eternal dimensions of salvation. Indeed both Girard and Gutierrez recall Gregory’s *Moralia*, for their Job is a pointer to Jesus Christ in his humiliation.”

The current fascination with literary theory has produced different readings of Job from such perspectives as feminism, vegetarianism, materialism and N.T. ideology. Thus the international journal *Concilium* (1983/9) has an issue on the silence of god, dealing with such topics as revolt, hope in another God, the people of El Salvador, the communal sufferings of Job. In the periodical *Semeia* (1977, vol. 7) we have William Whedbee on *The Comedy of Job* and Alonso Schokel in *Towards a Dramatic Reading*. The list of famous admirers of Job in history includes such disparate figures as Martin Luther, Immanuel Kant, Paul Claudel, D.H. Lawrence. Job has haunted writers as different as Goethe (*Faust*), Mark Twain (*The Mysterious Stranger*), A. Camus (*Man in Revolt*), S Beckett (*Krapp’s last Tape*) A. Trollope (*Dr. Thorn*), Neil Simon’s play (*God’s Favourite*). One thinks of the wide popularity of Rabbi Harold Kushner’s slim book *When Bad Things happen to Good People* where he argues that in our evolutionary world many things happen by chance and even God cannot control their outcome. God can only advise people to do the correct thing. The decision for or against evil is the human person’s decision, not God’s.

No wonder St. Jerome compared Job to an elusive eel. Likewise, Ulrich Simon in his brief survey in Coggins and Houlden “*A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*” (p357) concludes that “A lifetime is not long enough to plumb the depths of Job if only because the great gamble taken up by Pascal and Goethe,

continues in the experience of human beings.”

Interestingly, David Clines in *Job* (pp181-201), in the *Books of the Bible*, ed. B.W. Andersen, New York, 1989, offers readings of Job from the perspective of feminism, vegetarianism, materialism and N.T. ideology. A fresh approach was used by Carol Newson in her book *The Book of Job : A Contest of Moral Imaginations*, Oxford University Press, 2003, as she tries to steer a clear path between historical-critical and postmodern approaches to Job. She reads Job as a literary whole but excludes the Elihu speeches, which she judges to be a later addition – in contrast to Habel who sees Job as a literary whole. She sees Job as a polyphonic text with different voices found in the text and identifiable on the basis of genre.

*The Scholars' Issues*: According to Wing-Chi (*Gift Theory and the Book of Job*, Theological Studies, 67, 2006, p723) central to the Book of Job are five burning questions:

- The justifiability of God in allowing a good person to suffer
- The controversy over retributive justice
- The value of human suffering
- The nature of the whirlwind revelations
- The significance of the restoration scene and why Elihu is not punished.

Scholars find a wider set of critical issues in the book of Job than in almost any other O.T. Volume – in fact these problems are not modern discoveries but had been examined by early Jewish and medieval Christian commentators. There is such a large number of *hapax legomena*, the basic involvement of disputation and long conflictive speeches which give rise to a higher number of sophisticated, unique words than in any other book of the Hebrew Bible. Some scholars claim that Job and Second Isaiah are the most engaging and theologically astute texts of the Hebrew Bible. Bernard S. Childs conveniently summarises the critical situation in five detailed controversial issues, in addition to the widespread disagreement concerning the overall purpose of Job (Childs p528 ff).

The five detailed controversies are as follows:

- 1) The relation between the framing prose prologue/epilogue and the poetic dialogues (3:1- 42:6)
- 2) The secondary and disruptive nature of the Elihu speeches (32:1- 37:24)
- 3) The problems of the two distinct divine speeches, which seem to bully Job into submission
- 4) The alleged dislocations, additions, and interpolations such as the problems of the third cycle where Bildad's third cycle is extremely short and Zophar does not appear at all. What follows (chs 26-27) as a reply of Job seems wholly inconsistent with Job. Further, there is almost universal agreement that ch. 28 is a secondary interpolation into the book.
- 5) The lack of agreement on the dating, form and historical background to Job.

Our comments will concentrate mainly on the first three points.

#### The Prose / Poetry Tension

Let us begin with some scholars' comments on what the Book of Job does to one who reads it. Thus D.J.A. Clines asks (in W. Beuken ed. *The Book of Job*, Leuven, University Press, 1994, pp1-20), why is there a Book of Job and what does reading Job do to one? He answers "by its charm and its force, by its rhetoric and its passion it persuades readers of ideas that cannot be defended..... (p20). Roland Murphy (*The Book of Job*, Paulist Press, New York, 1999, p130) notes that Jesus also "ran into an impenetrable wall of divine mystery: 'not my will but yours be done' (Luke 22:42): "Is my predicament all that desperate? Ultimately yes. But the Book of Job does something to me if I read it. It does give an unmistakable new orientation to my desperation. I am no longer the prisoner of my guilt nor even of my anger, my rage, my despair, the total outburst of pain. Job has shown me the way and I can never forget the words of the Lord that Job spoke rightly (42:7)"

Lelan Ryken (*Words of Delight*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1992, p342) mentions three things which make Job an enjoyable reading experience:

The argument is not intricate and detailed. We should listen for voices of people who are angry with each other, not the voices of philosophical argumentation.

We need to respect the leisurely pace of Hebrew poetry – if we look for a fast-moving plot we will be endlessly frustrated. Job is intended to be read rather than acted.

The irony of the friends is that they spout the received wisdom of O.T. religion. It consists in a few favourite sermon topics; sinners bring suffering on themselves; God will punish sinners for their wrongdoing; if Job will repent, God will restore him. This is theoretic truth but we know from the prologue that Job is not being punished for any misdeed. We also know that God is not inflicting suffering on Job in sadistic delight. Job will make such wild charges against God in his early speeches. This is why God rebukes Job at the end of the story, and why Job repents.

Clines (*Word*, 1989, pviii) accurately observes: “It is improbable that the prose narratives ever formed an independent whole; for the narrative of the arrival of the three friends in 2: 11-13 is plainly designed to preface the speeches and Yahweh’s closing address to the friends (42:7-8) makes no sense unless the friends had been speaking words for which God could reproach them.”

Like a frame enclosing a picture, the prose framework encloses the poetic centre. Thus the common wisdom is surprisingly challenged by an impatient Job as if a saint in a stained glass window suddenly burst forth in furious and angry words. The use of a story to envelop a poetic centre is not unknown in near eastern texts. In particular, prose introductions are not unusual in near east wisdom writings. A well-known popular example is the story of Ahikar. This was known throughout the Near East and was copied by the Jews of Elephantine in Egypt in the fifth century B.C. It should be remembered *that* the prose section is essential to the Book of Job. Otherwise we could not decide between Job’s protestations of innocence and his friends’ conviction of his guilt – the epilogue is a vindication of Job’s ultimate innocence despite the appalling tragedy visited upon him. Some

scholars see the early prose tale as indicating the poet's radical rejection of the justice of god. Is the poet rejecting the view that suffering was God's discipline and that the proper response in adversity is piety? Others hold that both prose and poetry were written by the same author (Perdue: *The Sword and the Stylus*, p126).

In the prologue/epilogue God is called Yahweh by the narrator while the different speakers use the general word Elohim - except in 1:21 where Job uses Yahweh three times. In the poetic centre Yahweh is found once in 12:9 and Elohim in 5:8 - elsewhere the archaic forms El, Eloah and Shadday are used. In the tale "the Satan" who is not the devil of later beliefs, has a prominent role as a member of God's entourage who takes on an adversarial role. He disappears completely in the poetry. In Num. 22:22 the Satan is, in fact, an angel of God who takes on an adversarial role against Balaam. In the tale we find a rather folksy god casually subjecting his most faithful servant to appalling suffering for the sake of a wager, a very different picture from the majestic god who speaks from the whirlwind. The older prose folktale is very positive about Job and critical of his friends, whereas the poetic centre has the friends as God's defenders, while God corrects Job for his pride. The happy ending is a surprise especially to Job's view that God does not seem to produce happy endings. Curiously, Satan and the text are not mentioned in the epilogue nor is Job informed of what has really been going on in heaven. Certainly Job is not a carefully constructed work of logic and cannot be properly interpreted from the viewpoint of western historical logic. Surprisingly, the story is one in which the characters know much less than the audience and the key action takes place off stage.

The prologue begins with six dramatic scenes (four on earth and two in heaven). They describe how a most scrupulously blameless person, who is singled out for special praise, is subjected by a rather callous God to the most appalling test. His righteousness is paradoxically the reason why Job loses everything. The household of Job is mentioned again in ch 31. He owns many herds of sheep,

camels, oxen, donkeys as well as many male and female servants. He is married with seven sons and three daughters. Four calamities (two by bandits and two by meteorological phenomena) destroy his herds and household leaving only his wife to survive. The question remains whether Job's piety will endure even when his prosperity does not! Thus the text can be divided into the following six sections:

- 1) 1:1-5 a description of the ideal man Job
- 2) 1:6-21: the decision to perform a limited test on Job
- 3) 1:13-22: Job's animals, servants and children (but not his wife), through no fault of their own, are violently killed; but he remains firm.
- 4) 2:1-6 A second test is agreed with Satan.
- 5) 2:7-10 Job is tested through sickness, an indeterminable ailment which produces boils over his entire body so that he sits, not in his comfortable home but in a garbage dump scraping his sores with a potsherd.
- 6) 2:11-13 The visit of his three friends – seven days of silence. It is almost as if he were already dead.

Words like “innocent suffering” are much too mild for the Book of Job, which deals with the dreadful three catastrophes and meteorological disturbances inflicted on an extraordinary, just and religious person. Not even when exhorted by his wife does he deny his innocence and curse God. When afflicted with running sores from head to toe he bluntly responds to his wife's invitation to curse God and die with the words:

You talk as any wicked fool of a woman might talk,  
If we accept good from God, shall we not accept evil?

Job, as Andersen puts it, (*Tyndale O.T. Commentaries*, London, Inter-Varsity Press, 1976, p100) “is no stoic, striving to be pure in mind with no feeling. The bible knows nothing of such dehumanizing philosophy: but we stand in a long tradition of a pallid piety that has confused the Christian way with the noble but heathen ethic of the stoa.”

Job is the legendary prototype of justice mentioned with Noah and Daniel in Ezechiel (14:14-20). His land of Uz is known to the ancestors and was mentioned

in Gen 22:21 and in Lam 4:21 is associated with Edom (later Idumea), Judah's southern neighbor. The Greek Septuagint, in an afterword identifies Uz with Ausitis on the border of Idumae and Arabia. The key question of the prologue is the philosophy of the cynical Satan: "Does Job fear God for nothing"? "Have you not put a fence around him and his house....But stretch out your hand now and touch all that he has and he will curse you to your face" (1:9-11). Job can indeed be seen as an answer to cynicism, not to mention to our current flood of pessimism, relativism and scepticism. In the story Job, the first recorded 'righteous sufferer' in history, is satisfied with the response of the God of the whirlwind, that God is in control of evil. But Job, an angry and eloquent sufferer, who directly confronts the God responsible for all such suffering, never attains to knowledge of the plot revealed to the reader in the prologue. He only hopes to die quickly to end his misery. Death for Job is the great social leveller which equalises all unjust earthly distinctions. Surprisingly, St. Bernard of Clairvaux took up the prologue's question of motivation in his study of the love of God. Certainly love is the only condition or atmosphere for an adequate answer.

Job begins the dialogue with an outburst against God. It is difficult to find any development in the emotional state on the arguments of either Job or his friends (4:7-9; 10:4-5). One point seems clear: "Since God always punishes the wicked" Job suffers because he also has sinned. Curiously nowhere apart from 19:25-26 does Job express a belief in a bodily, personal resurrection. God is neither absent nor silent nor does he give a direct answer to Job's inquiry (9:16-17). He speaks from the overwhelming power of the storm while Job recognizes that he is insignificant and merely "dust and ashes" (42:6; Gen 18:27). God is neither absent or silent.

In the dialogue, Job confronts divine justice by comparing the creator to a despot who attempts to destroy his own work. He begins by cursing not God but the day of his birth as he asserts his own rights. He wants the night of his birth to be cursed "loud enough to rouse Leviathan deep in the sea" – a Canaanite allusion



which foreshadows the Leviathan in ch.41. He accepts that he has committed insignificant sins but nothing which should have led to this divine attack. He even accuses God of tormenting the weak and declaring the innocent guilty (7:12ff; 9:20ff) and summons him to the court-room. Satan had spoken of God protecting Job with a hedge of thorns (1:10) and now Job sees God surrounding himself with thorns as a barrier. He begins by directing a series of challenging questions to his friends which show the sense of meaninglessness which has taken hold of Job himself:

“Why was I not still-born,  
 Why did I not die when I came out of the womb?” (3:11)  
 Why was I ever laid on my mother’s knees  
 Or put to suck at her breasts? (3:12)  
 Why should a man be born to wander blindly  
 Hedged in by God on every side? (3:23)

Job even accuses God of tormenting the weak and declaring the innocent guilty (7:12ff; 9:20ff) and summons him to the court-room (13:3ff; 23:4ff). He ends (ch 29-31) with a final curse hoping for vindication and a declaration from God of his innocence. In keeping with the common tradition, all the disputants in Job appeal to the wonder of the natural world (e.g. 5-14; 36:24-27; 24) recognize that they can learn from animals and plants (12:7-9) and show some knowledge of astronomy (9:9). The mythic monsters Yamm, Tannin, Rahab, Leviathan and Abaddon surface from time to time. The God invoked is never Yahweh as in the prologue and epilogue, but Elohim or Shaddai. In contrast to the rather single-minded and rather static accusations and positions of his friends, Job’s own mind, clearly influenced by the thoughts of Jeremiah and Second Isaiah, is confused, flexible and experimental: “In every one of his eleven speeches he adopts a different posture, psychologically and theologically. In the end he admits that he has nothing to rely upon, not even God – nothing except his conviction of his own innocence.” (David A. Clines in *Creating the O.T.*, ed Stephen Bigger, Blackwell,

Oxford, 1989, p284). The author clearly experienced Gethsemane suffering firsthand, the well-known 'dark night of the soul', in which reason searches for answers which faith and the common wisdom are not supplying. The book is a clash between faith and experience, between Job's extreme suffering and his conviction, not that he was sinless but that he had not done anything to merit such a tragedy. A key point about the book is that it offers no easy answers.

According to Perdue (*The Sword and the Stylus*, p421) Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar are traditional sages like the young Elihu. He notes that Whybray changed his earlier position on the sages as a professional class of scribes and teachers. They are not learned men belonging to a professional class but on the contrary wealthy aristocrats who owned lands and extensive property, in fact learned farmers. Likewise Von Rad (*Wisdom in Israel*, pp20-21) denied they were professional sages and agreed with the view of Whybray.

Job's counsellors have always had a bad press. They have been variously described as Pharisees and Legalists or even more unkindly as a committee (by Robert Frost). This is in sharp contrast to the hero Job, who has even been compared to Prometheus, whom Zeus punished out of envy. Job has simply been tested and finally vindicated. God admits to Satan: "You incited him against me to destroy him for no reason" (2:3). In a Chicago Studies article John Collins once called Job's friends model counsellors: they come from a distance to console and comfort Job; they do not hasten to speak but sit with him on the ground for seven days without speaking and note that his suffering was very great. They begin calmly and positively with words of encouragement and a reminder of Job's own approach to others.

Thus Eliphaz who has the most compassionate approach and who plays the lead role, begins respectfully and expounds the universal law of retribution (Ps 37) which he has learned from observation; "If someone attempts a word with you, will you mind?....you have instructed many and made firm their feeble hands....Is not your piety a source of confidence and your integrity of life, your

hope....Reflect now what innocent person perishes....Can a person be righteous against God?" (4:11ff). Eliphaz claims that a spirit at night revealed to him that no human can ever be truly righteous before God who even finds faults with his heavenly servants. But he should trust God who frustrates the clever but acts to save the needy. Eliphaz ends his first speech on a hopeful note "I would appeal to God.....happy the one whom God reproves, the Almighty's chastening do not reject" (5:17).

But the dialogue, not least of all on Job's side, quickly becomes a tirade of abuse as they talk past each other. It ends in personal accusation (16:2; 18:2; 22:4ff). For Eliphaz not even the angels are just before God (4:18). Simply, he tells Job that the traditional wisdom is correct and should be accepted without further investigation. Eliphaz thus becomes an accuser and not a comforter, a dry wadi riverbed and not a surging river (6:15-16). Job harshly accuses his friends of gambling for orphans (6:27). He even uses metaphors from Canaanite mythology in which Yam (the sea) and Tannin (the sea monster), who were suppressed by Baal, show him how he is besieged and encircled by God (7:12). He does not realize that God is watching with silent compassion and admiration until the test is over and he can state his approval in public. Bildad, in particular, seems to treat Job as if he were a particularly stupid pupil who ignores what he should have learned by experience (8: 4-19). Job even agrees with Bildad (8:3) that God does not pervert justice but sarcastically asks how could a person win a dispute with God. Such thoughts lead to a great creation song which, like the nature psalms, emphasises the incomprehensibility and control of God (9:5-10). Job juggles three possibilities for his defense: 1) to drop the complaint against God (9:27-28), 2) to purify himself (9:29-31), 3) to find an impartial mediator (9:32-35). His key issue is: why is God contending with him? God knows he is not guilty yet no one can rescue him (10:7). Only Zophar is quite clear that Job is guilty and being punished for it. Zophar's patronising speech provokes Job to sarcasm in ch.12. In ch.13 Job wishes to speak to God and plead his case. He anticipates that his friends, biased

towards God, will act as false witnesses against himself.

Secondly, the friends base their analysis on the solid source of tradition, which was well-known to Job himself. Their arguments are fully in agreement with some of the biblical traditions such as Psalm 37, a psalm which struggles to cope with a mysterious world and strongly emphasises that the success of the wicked is transitory - three times we hear the words "Do not fret" (V1,7,8). In V 25 the psalmist insists that "I have been young and am now grown old/ and never have I seen a righteous man/ or his children begging for bread."

The logic of the Deuteronomic history, with such key prophets as Jeremiah and Ezechiel, was that observance or non-observance of the covenant laws led to blessings or curses. The Babylonian captivity was an outstanding example of this view. Ezechiel could criticize the popular view that people were being punished for other people's sins. But he insisted that the wicked could reap the fruits of their own wickedness (Ez 18:1ff).

Thirdly, the friends produce quite reasonable and logically compelling arguments: "Is it because of your piety that he reproves, that he enters with you into judgement? Is not your wickedness manifold? (22:4) The friends concentrate on lecturing Job but never seem to have an intimate sense of God. They start with the conclusion and keep repeating the same basic point: "If Job is being punished, then he must have done something. Otherwise he is blaspheming, accusing God of being unjust, and denying God's wise ordering of the universe."

Daniel J. Estes in his very useful *Handbook on the Wisdom Books* (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2007, p61) quotes with approval Andersen's correct assessment of Zophar's deficiency:

Zophar's cold disapproval shows how little he has heard Job's heart. His censorious chiding shows how little he has sensed Job's hurt. Job's bewilderment and his outbursts are natural; in them we find his humanity, and our own. Zophar detaches the words from the man, and hears them only as babble and mockery. This is quite

unfair. Zophar's wisdom is a bloodless retreat into theory.

When Yahweh eventually interrogates Job, his aim is not to crush Job but to expand his horizon to show him that there is much that is mysterious in God's governance of our world. For Job the assumptions of a theology of retribution are too superficial. Firstly, he notes the presumption of his so-called friends. Then he speaks of rich oppressors who hold both God and the innocent in contempt. Thirdly, if dumb animals could speak they would confirm Job's position. Fourthly, even Job's friends have failed to provide a proper interpretation of the reliable sources of knowledge available. Fifthly, the friends bear false witness. They declare him guilty in order to protect the reputation of God. They have not spoken of God what is correct (42:7). Then Job asks God to lift from him the heavy hand of affliction.

In the second cycle of speeches as irritation grows on both sides, Job holds strongly to two basics: he is guilty of no grave fault and God is entitled to do as he pleases. In 16:1-6 Job proclaims his disgust for his friends: "I have heard many things like these; miserable comforters are you all! Will your long-winded speeches never end? What ails you that you keep on arguing?" (16:2-3). In fact God is a very hostile enemy, like a wild animal or a violent warrior (16:9). He expects an advocate from heaven to plead his innocence (16:18). Job is confident that the truth about his innocence is recorded in heaven. Yet his friends have sided with the scoffers and increased his suffering and God has even erected a wall of darkness against him (19:8). He accepts that he will die, but three times he expresses his confidence that he will see God (19:26-27). Eliphaz is now much less conciliatory but accuses Job of condemning himself. He sarcastically criticizes Job's claims to wisdom. But Zophar in his predictable speech has no compassion for Job or God of mercy to present to him. Bildad is not as harsh as Eliphaz but asks Job to stop and consider and not treat his friends as fools. In ch 21 Job is more conciliatory, yet insists on the very opposite to the arguments of his comforters and points out that far from a terrible fate, the evil in fact seem to

enjoy the happiness and prosperity which is reserved for the just. He asks how often is the lamp of the wicked snuffed out (18:5-6). He thus rejects the claim of Proverbs that things will go well for the just.

In the third cycle the speeches are much shorter with Bildad providing only five verses and Zophar not speaking at all. Some of the speeches attributed to Job seem to reflect the position of his friends rather than that of Job himself. The comforters give up their efforts to compel Job to confess and simply pronounce him guilty beyond reasonable doubt. Eliphaz condemns Job for extorting usury from his family, for not providing charity to the needy, using power for his personal gain and oppressing widows and orphans (22:6-11). Bildad, in ch.25 makes the familiar comment that people cannot be just before God. Many scholars think the book suffered some dislocation in ch.25. Some assign 26:13-25 to Zophar and think that ch.28, on the inaccessibility of wisdom, is a later addition.

The author of Job brilliantly shows how the friends become more and more dogmatic and sure of themselves. In the speeches there is a steady increase of hostility and a hardening of contrasting positions. They even produce a catalogue of crimes against Job, absurdly making him out to be a user, insensitive to the suffering of others, even an exploiter of the poor (22:5-11). Job and his friends all wanted an explicable God and an explicable universe with which they could cope. The honesty of Job is that he could not reconcile the facts of the case with their theory. "Is it for God that you speak falsehood?" is his blunt accusation (13:70). Job can well be described as the poet of theodicy because he believes that both the character and purpose of God can be subjected to human scrutiny. At least Job knows that there was a problem as he groped for an answer in a mysterious suffering world. He believed and repeated three times that some advocate will eventually achieve his vindication (9:33; 16:19) Is this "goel" (kinsman) a relative, or is it God or an angelic mediator or defending counsel?

A thought-provoking reading of Job's friends is provided by David B. Burrell, a

Catholic scholar (*Deconstructing Theodicy*, Grand Rapids, Brazos Press, 2008). For Burrell, Job rants and raves and moves from cursing lament to complaint to considering filing a lawsuit against God. He notes that while classical models of theodicy attempt to address the issue of suffering, Job himself refrains from providing a solution although he criticized the assumption of Deuteronomy that there is a close connection between behaviour and experience – faithfulness is rewarded and covenant transgression is punished. Burrell classifies Eliphaz as a dogmatist, who in particular tries to refute Job’s blamelessness, while Bildad is a jurist who defends God’s justice and Zophar is primarily a philosopher, who questions whether knowledge of God is ultimately possible. Burrell also adds a review of the few references to Job in the Qur’an, some four medieval commentators in Job and two contemporary studies of theology. He insists that we should not fixate on God as transcendent, distant and remote but rather focus on God as creator and communicator. Burrell relies for his views on the three commentaries of Gutierrez, Wilcox and Zuckermann. Elihu is an interpretation while the divine speeches vindicate Job against his friends.

Before Job’s final summary of his position (ch 29-31) the author significantly inserts a poem (Job 28) on the inaccessibility of wisdom which has not previously been an important theme. Clearly the author has little or no hope for the success of the wisdom enterprise. Qoheleth (3:11) comments that God has planted such a futile urge in the human heart. The message is a blunt one: People can discover hidden treasures on earth but they cannot find wisdom (28:12,20) which is known only to God. In Prov 8:3-36 Wisdom addresses the “simple” and insists six times that she existed before creation at the side of God, his delight. This interlude aims at refocusing the reader’s attention on the divine wisdom. According to Robert Davidson (*Wisdom & Worship*, London, SCM Press, 1990 p4) the function of ch.28 may be “to look back across the dialogue, to comment upon its adequacy or inadequacy, and perhaps at the same time to act as the prelude to the rest of the book which climaxes in the speeches on divine wisdom in chapters 38-41.” Two

questions occur twice (V12,20) almost like a refrain in this fascinating poem:

“But where can wisdom be found?  
 And where is the source of understanding?”  
 On each occasion the questions are immediately answered:  
 “No man knows the way to it;  
 It is not found in the land of living men (V.13)  
 No creation on earth can see it,  
 And it is hidden from the birds of the air (V21)”

This poem draws on Second Temple piety as it identifies wisdom with the fear of God. God found it when he made storms (28:27) and rain and thunderbolts. Then he said to people: “Behold the fear of the Lord is wisdom and avoiding evil is understanding”. (28:28). This poem is a preparation for the nature reflection at the end of Job which only God understands. Read, for example, the extraordinary picture of the ingenuity and skill of the miner who:

“sets his hand to the flinty rock  
 And lays bare the mountains at their foundations.  
 He splits channels on the rocks  
 And gems of every kind meet his eye  
 he probes the wellsprings of the streams  
 And brings hidden things to light” (28:9-11)

But it is a conclusion to Job’s search for wisdom. It is also a criticism of Job’s rather brazen attack on divine justice and a warning that it is doomed to failure. It is like the other poems on personified wisdom (Prov1:20-33; 8:1-36; 8:1-6, 13-18; Sir 24). It is based on an outlook which is different from the outlook of any speaker whom we have heard and thus challenges the assumption not only of Job himself but also of his friends. It ends with the significant words: “The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom and to depart from evil is understanding”. In Job’s last speech he looks back to his good old days when he was respected as he helped and consoled others. Now he cries to God but receives no answer and is tossed around by a storm.

Many scholars, however, try for other definitions of wisdom: Zerafa, following



Von Rad finds the basic meaning of wisdom to be “the art of success”; others say it is basically superior intelligence achieved by training and instruction. Whybray describes it as a “superior mental ability”. Crenshaw describes it as “the quest for self-understanding” including nature, wisdom, juridical and practical wisdom, theological wisdom.

Then in the full summary (ch.31) the text provides an extremely deep portrait of Job’s moral code which ‘soars to lofty heights not even surpassed in the Sermon on the Mount’. As James L. Crenshaw points out (*O.T. Wisdom*, John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1981, pp15, 106):

Job’s list of offences covers external deed and inner disposition, abuse of humans and affront to the deity, active misdeeds and passive acquiescence in wrongdoing. Outright adultery and its secret counterpart, seething lust, stand alongside one another as equally heinous conduct in Job’s eyes. Without a moment’s hesitation, he draws back the curtains to his heart and reveals uprightness with respect to avarice and deceit, as well as singleness of devotion before God. Devoid of deception, greed and idolatry, Job refused to hoard his possessions for selfish ends but distributed his goods to needy persons. He championed his servant’s cause; clothed, fed and sheltered widows, orphans and the poor; provided hospitality to strangers traveling the dusty roads. Naturally such a person acted out of his own understanding of justice rather than fear of the crowd and possessed sufficient power to correct injustice. Even the land had no complaint against Job, who understood the necessity of allowing soil to replenish its nutrients.

What is more, Job had never rejoiced over his enemy’s misfortune.

After the conclusion of the dispute with his three friends, Job proclaims an accusatory lament to God, followed by a series of oaths, which are his legal defence against his friends’ accusations of wrongdoing. His declaration of

innocence includes twelve sins/crimes. Job, in a world where slaves were considered mere property (31:13-15,) insists that he treated slaves humanely as possessing basic rights including the making of a legal complaint, because like himself they were made by God. He did not make gold into his god. He did not even rejoice when his enemies suffered (31:29-30). He even served meat to strangers and travellers in his generosity (31:31-32). Job was a model of righteousness and even believed he was "well-in" with God as well as enjoying the respect from both young and elderly. Now he is made sport of by those "whose fathers I would have disdained to set with the dogs of my flock" (30:1). This almost triumphant portrayal of Job's virtue ends with "My final plea: let the Almighty answer me!!" Job imaginatively places his mark (literally the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, tav) as he confidently anticipates approaching God as an honoured prince crowned with the divine declaration of his innocence (31:36-37). But what turns up, is ironically, the young Elihu, who seeks to make up for the lack of wisdom of his elders and to take the place of God (36:2)

An important point worth remembering with Joseph Blenkinsopp (*Sage, Priest, Prophet*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1995, p52) is that all of the disputants in Job appeal to the wonders of the natural world (e.g. 26:5-14; 36:24- 37:24), acknowledge the possibility of learning from animals and plants (12:7-9), and demonstrate at least a passing acquaintance with astronomy (e.g. 9:9). Even God intervenes in the guise of a sage inviting Job to contemplate the awesome wonders of the natural world (chapters 38-41).

The learned use of mythological figures is also in evidence throughout: the mythic monsters Yamm, Tannin, Rahab, Leviathan and Abaddon surface from time to time to remind the reader of the threatening presence of moral chaos and the disputants are familiar with such staples of ancient times as rebellion in heaven (4:18), the defeat and binding of the forces of chaos (3:8;7:12;9:13;26;12) and the first man (15:7)....The deity invoked, appealed to or called to

account is significantly, never Yahweh...but Elohim or Shaddai.

*The Four Elihu Speeches* (32:6-33; 33; 34:1-37; 35:1-16; 36:1-37:24)

Nothing has prepared the reader for the coming of Elihu and his six chapters. In fact it has often been said that if these chapters disappeared from our text, that we would never know they were missing. Elihu who has a Hebrew name, may have been included to provide a more orthodox criticism of the preceding debate. Elihu occupies a key interlude position in the present structure of Job, after Job's final plea and immediately before Yahweh himself speaks. He is a transition figure providing a bridge to the entry of Yahweh. Just as elsewhere in the Bible, young wise people like Joseph and Daniel saved the situation when the established authorities had failed. Now Elihu tries to assume such a role. He evaluates the dialogues and concludes that both Job and friends were wrong. After Elihu's long speeches the reader quite likely despairs that Yahweh will speak. In fact Yahweh's more than seventy questions have been foreshadowed by Elihu in 37:14-20.

For Crenshaw:

Elihu ploughs the same furrow that Job's three friends have opened, as youth inevitably tend to do. Like Eliphaz, he thinks God warns mortals by means of frightening dreams and visions. Elihu also questions the effect of virtue or wickedness on God, concluding that morality concerns human beings only (35:8) Like Bildad, Elihu cannot even imagine the possibility that God rules unjustly. Like Zophar, Elihu thinks favoured persons escape penalty for their sins. His arguments lay greater stress on educative discipline and the role of a mediator in moving the deity to compassion" (**The Anchor Bible Dictionary**, Vol 3, p862).

Elihu is young, as he admits, and his repetitive language betrays his brashness and his imagined intellect. He even waits until his elders have spoken before daring to open his mouth. Yet, when he gets going he is not short of words. Elihu first

addresses Job (v33), then the friends (v 34), next both together (v 35) and finally Job for the last time (v36-37). Nevertheless a provocative article by J.W. McKay (*Elihu a Proto-Charismatic?* E.T. March 1979, p169) suggests that Elihu lifts our attention from Job's complaint to focus rather on the essential goodness and healing power of the Almighty. Elihu has no radically new philosophy. In his four unanswered speeches he summarises the points made by the comforters and Job, quoting and alluding to their words. He insists that God is greater than human beings and that Job should not be looking for an answer from God who speaks to us in dreams or visions and less obviously through suffering. Job's attempts to summon God are a waste of time. He is completely wrong on one point in that God will speak to Job. His key point is that God sends suffering for discipline and correction to refine the character of people. He becomes angry (four times in 32:2-5) particularly because the comforters have abandoned their arguments. In fact it annoys him that the argument is so poor on both sides. Job in particular has made himself more just than God. His counsel is, by asserting the goodness, love and justice of God, to insist that God is in control of the situation. His description of God's majestic power is so impressive that when Elihu silently vanishes from the scene and God takes over we are scarcely aware – the arguments of God are Elihu's, the questions are similar to those of Elihu 'the forerunner'. He is confident that all wise people would agree with him in concluding that Job speaks without knowledge and wisdom. He directs his "students" to look up at the heavens and recognise the vast chasm between God and humans (35:5). It is inconceivable that God would appear at such a trial. His final fourth speech (36-37) is more compassionate in tone. Yet he considers Job's dispute with God as incompatible with genuine reverence.

For McKay the perspective of the friends is almost completely man-centred – people always get their deserved justice. Eliphaz, despite his God-talk and mystical pretensions (4:12ff), has no real vision or appreciation of the mysterious Yahweh. He relies almost completely on what the wise fathers have told him

(15:17f). His key idea is that it is prudent and even personally advantageous to make peace with God. Bildad the academic makes no mention of experience but of the wisdom of the ages (8:8-10). The final words of his one brief meditation on God significantly insist that man cannot be just in God's sight because he is 'but a maggot' and 'only a worm'. Job sees himself as 'a prince' making his final plea to God (31:37). Zophar is more full of advice from the wisdom of the ages (11:13ff) but cannot really help Job benefit from it. McKay concludes that all three make depressing speeches. They stress more the horrors awaiting the unjust than any real appreciation of the wisdom of God (chs 15, 18, 20). In the overall structure especially, ch 37 anticipates the probing nature of the rhetorical questions which dominate the divine speeches in chapters 38-41.

#### THE DIVINE SPEECHES

God appears and answers Job, not once but three times (Ch 38-39; 40:1-2; 40:6-41; 34). God has been associated with weather and storms several times in Job already. Now he comes as Job feared he would in 09:17, in a storm and offers neither an explanation nor an apology. Job perhaps expected an explanation, the friends a defense of divine justice. Elihu perhaps expected Job to be struck by lightning. But God does none of the expected. He bluntly shows that no one has the power to argue with him as Job acknowledges in his response (42:1-6). Job has become dust and ashes as Abraham argued with God over Sodom (30:19; Gen 18:27). Jack Miles, in his award-winning *God A Biography* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1995), well comments:

Few speeches in all of literature can more properly be called overpowering than the Lord's speeches from the whirlwind (Ch 38-41). Were they to be set to music nothing but Igor Stravinsky's Rite of Spring would come close to their surging, crashing power....The Lord refers to absolutely nothing about himself except his power. In fact, in one astonishing passage....he explicitly subsumes his justice to his power. Might makes right; he thunders

at Job. Only if and when the wretch scraping his sores with a potsherd can unleash a demonstration of power comparable to the Lord's own will the Lord take the wretch's objections seriously." 'Deck yourself now with grandeur and eminence; Clothe yourself in glory and majesty; Scatter wide your raging anger; See every proud man and bring him low. See every proud man and humble him. And bring them down where they stand. Bury them all in the earth; Hide their faces in obscurity. Then even I would praise you for the triumph your right hand won you.' (40:10-14). The Lord presents himself with withering sarcasm and towering bravado, as an amoral, irresistible force.

Yahweh does not directly answer Job's questions but uses his own penetrating questions to portray Job's situation within the limitless context of God's mysterious wisdom activities. For James Barr (*The Concept of Biblical Theology*, London, SCM Press, 1999, p489) the speeches of God in 38-41 do not provide a classified account of creation but rather "a set of riddles posed by the variety and remoteness of life and existence". Robert Alter in *The Book of Job* (ed. Harold Bloom, New York, Chelsea House, 1988, p65) gives a fine description of the sublime and majestic language to be found in the final speech of Job:

If the poetry of Job...looms above all other biblical poetry in virtuosity and sheer expressive power, the culminating poem that God speaks out of the storm soars beyond everything that has preceded it in the book, the poet having wrought a poetic idiom even richer and more awesome than the one he gave Job. Through the pushing of poetic expression toward its own upper limits, the concluding speech helps us see the panorama of creation, as perhaps we could do only through poetry, with the eyes of God.

Yahweh's key point in his object lesson is that the universe is essentially theocentric, and can only be understood in that context. Habel in his commentary

(*The Book of Job* O.T. Library, Westminster, Philadelphia. 1985, p535) makes an eloquent point:

In his design there is a measure of the comic with the controlled, the bizarre with the beautiful, the serendipitous with the serious. Yahweh challenges Job to show the discernment necessary to keep this paradoxical world in balance. From these parallels in the natural world Job is left to draw the necessary conclusion relevant to his personal world. Job's complaint that the innocent suffer unjustly is never refuted. It stands side by side with the answers of Yahweh as part of the paradox of that design.

From Yahweh's stance the question is "Who is God, and can he be trusted in what he is doing in his world?" God's answer aims at transforming Job's view of the world. Can Job let God be God?

Western readers, in particular, are surprised by the divine speeches, expecting at the minimum a clear-cut settling of the debate. David Clines comments that no consensus concerning the *Speeches from the Whirlwind* (38; 42:6) has emerged (*Interested Parties, The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Old Testament* Sheffield Academic Press, 1995, pp197-198). He also has a major three-volume commentary on Job in the *Word Biblical Commentary Series* (1989-2009). He lists the major interpretations as follows:

Although there is chaos in the world, God acts with freedom to sustain justice in creation and history (Michael Fox, Gordis, Athmar Keel, Veronica Kubina)

God's actions in the world are paradoxical; he nurtures but limits Yam, checks the power of death by the recurring cycle of birth, and feeds the offspring of eagles with the dead flesh of other creatures. In a world of paradoxes, Job's speeches rooted in retribution make no sense and are dismissed. Paradox is overcome by community with God (Fohrer).

Reality is amoral, while God transcends human standards of justice. Retribution as a vehicle for the operation of God and creation is rejected. Piety is either

unrewarded or does not exist (Crenshaw; Lacocque).

While God's darker side has created evil, he acts to constrain its destructive effects. However, God is limited in power and unable to eradicate evil from the earth (Athalya, Brenner)

God's wisdom and justice transcend human comprehension. Efforts to impugn divine justice are sheer folly (Dhorme, Rowley).

God's sovereignty as Creator and Lord of History is upheld, leading to the rejection of false questioning and the proper response of confession and praise (Preuss, Margaret Crook (*The Cruel God*, 1959), Terrien).

The blustering attack by God reveals that he is a capricious, chaotic and even jealous tyrant whose abuse of power leads to Job's proper renunciation (David Robertson, James Williams).

Creation is nihilistic, possessing no meaning in and of itself. Yet in coming as saviour, God offers a new creation. (Masao Sekine)

The divine speeches are certainly what Job or his readers expect. Job had looked for this encounter even though he was well aware of the awesomeness of God: "But I would speak with the Almighty; I wish to reason with God" (13;3;23:4).

Job wanted someone to hear his case and to have his indictment written out so that he could defend himself like a prince (31:35). In the rather difficult (Hebrew) text of 19:25-27, which we tend to hear with strains of Handel's Messiah in our ears, Job seems to desire not so much a vindication after his death as vindication while he is still alive from the God whom he expected to see. One does not have to go as far as Augustine who claimed that Job had some divine prescience of the mystery of the Incarnation. This 'goel' or vindicator/champion probably can refer to Job's vindication after his death but more likely refers to the period before his death. There is a Ugaritic text of the Ba'al cycle referring to Ba'al's revivification according to the Agricultural calendar: "And I know that Aliyan is alive". Marvin Pope, who wrote on Job in *The Anchor Bible* (pp134-5) compares the 'goel' or redeemer to the personal god in the Sumerian tradition who acts as defender in the



council of the gods.

Now God, who was the object of Job's accusations, appeals and fleeting hopes, is present and addresses Job. Previously Job had responded that if God were to respond to him in court he would crush him with a whirlwind (9:16-17). So here is the God of Surprises in the whirlwind and yet Job is not crushed. According to Brueggemann (*Theology of the Old Testament*, p390) God is willing to be available to Job but it is not a user-friendly answer as God concedes nothing to Job: Yahweh is lordly, haughty, condescending, dismissive, reprimanding, refusing to entertain Job's profound question, refusing to answer the probe of 21:7 and refusing to enter into any discussion about justice, sanctions, moral reliability or covenantal symmetry...it is evident the Yahweh's response is in power...to articulate the massiveness and awesomeness of this God, for whom Rudolf Otto employed the notion of 'Tremendum' – before Otto we may appeal to Immanuel Kant's notion of the "sublime"...." For Jack Miles (p11) the broad movement of the Hebrew Bible is from action to speech to silence, while God's last words in the Hebrew Bible are those to Job.

God chooses the time, place and surprising manner of appearance – the mysterious, awesome, uncontrollable, dangerous, storm which is frequently the backdrop to Yahweh's appearances (Hb 3; Na 1:3; 2K2:11; Pss 18;50). The whirlwind appearance has already been described in Is 29:6. Surprisingly, Job the questioner becomes the questioned and God the object becomes the subject who directs the conversation which consists in a series of about seventy unanswerable questions which lead Job to recognise his limitations as a human being. Clearly, the two speeches do not provide a philosophical answer to the problem of suffering: why God would initiate and allow the outrages done to the pious and faithful Job, not to mention the killing of his ten children. These answers (questions) do not speak to the intellect but rather to the imagination and spirit. They are above all a message of "faith alone" to the heart. Many scholars seem to suggest that apart from 40:7-14 the divine speeches are rather irrelevant.

However, John L. McKenzie is correct when he points out that the first speech or series of ironical questions does speak to the problem:

In response to Job's urging that God's acts in history are opaque, God answers that the world is full of things which God made which are also opaque. Job neither creates the world nor does he manage it; and he cannot understand it or explain it. This evidently does not answer Job's question but it does speak to the question.....If Job believes that God is wise, he will have to accept God's wisdom even when it goes beyond his understanding. *A Theology of the O.T.* Doubleday, New York, 1974, p223).

The first speech of Yahweh (38:1-40:2) has two main parts:

cosmology (chaos, heaven, earth, underworld, 38:1-38). It includes six verses which hurl direct questions at Job concerning the heavenly region: light and darkness, weather, precipitation, the constellations and the clouds (38:2-3) six pairs of animals which humans do not control (38:39 – 39:30) and the two chaos monsters (Behemoth and Leviathan which since ancient times have been frequently identified as the hippopotamus and the crocodile). Some scholars have seen both beasts as forms of the chaos-god destroyed by the storm-god in the battle which preceded creation – Leviathan is often portrayed as the seven-headed serpent/god/dragon which is how Tiamat the sea-goddess is portrayed in Mesopotamian art. They are domesticated in the divine speeches in Job 40:6-41:26. Job does not answer these rhetorical questions but chooses silence. His own questions have been ignored. Job recognizes that he is of little account in the amazing world and puts his hand over his mouth (40:4). Then surprisingly God speaks again (40:6-41:26) and challenges Job to remove the proud and evil ones, especially the dreaded monsters of the deep: Behemoth the mighty creature, the hippopotamus, and Leviathan, the monster of the seas (the crocodile cf 3:8).

Job's second response (42:1-6) recognises God's power and wisdom to create and sustain the world and the fact that he himself could not replace Yahweh. He

quotes the story of Babel (Gen 11:6) which shows the stupidity of human arrogance and admits that his knowledge is inadequate. He has been questioned (“Gird up your loins now, like a man; I will questions you...” 38:2). Job is ironically questioned on his own non-participation in creation with the unspoken question, If you were not involved, how can you understand it? Secondly, he is questioned on the management of the universe – if you are not involved how can you understand it? This marvellous poem paints a series of brilliant, unforgettable descriptions of the wonders and wisdom of God’s creation. It begins with the inanimate world of sea, darkness, hail, rain and snow followed by the animal kingdom, its beauty, grass, swiftness, strangeness, power, terror, the lioness, cock, goat, wild ass, ox, cruel ostrich, war horse, the hawk and eagle watching for prey yet concerned for their young.. Some see this as signifying that Job is overwhelmed and crushed by the power of God who cannot be gainsaid. Or does this picture significantly leave out the wonder of men and women in God’s image? The picture of creation is one of joy: “While the morning stars in chorus/and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” 38:7

Is it not a portrait of God delighting in creation and caring and watching over his creatures? Shrewdly, the answer is not direct: “if the eagle cares for its young...!” The unspoken message is like that of the NT: “if God cares for sparrows how much more does he care for people”.

Surprisingly, there is a second speech: God again challenges Job as an equal in dialogue. His questions quickly narrow in scope from the universe to two mythical creatures, Behemoth and Leviathan, which are symbols of the absurd and disturbing to our completely different world view. These two symbols of chaos can only be controlled by God but not by Job. David J.A. Clines (p288 in Stephen Bigger, “*Creating the OT*”, Blackwell, 1989) makes the persuasive suggestion that it is the theology of wild animals which ultimately convinces Job – not unlike the Peter and Cornelius scenes in Acts 10. The questions turn Job’s attention to the mysterious animals which are of no practical use to the human

economy. There is no mention of the familiar domestic animals such as the sheep, asses and camels which Job possesses in abundance. The climax is the portrayal of the wild and dangerous – hippopotamus and crocodile - which are clearly part of God's creation and overall purpose but threatening to human existence- perhaps they were symbols of hostile empires! Job no more understands them than he does his own suffering – he only perceives “the outlines of God's ways and how faint is the word we hear” (26:14)

Yahweh questions Job about his knowledge of this world (38:4-38) and then the animal world (38:39- 39:30). Clearly there are so many aspects beyond human knowledge and control. Job can, for example, neither satisfy the appetite of the fierce lions or explain how raven chicks get their food or explain how the elusive ibex (goat) gives birth. Neither can Job control the flight of the hawk and eagle (39:20-30). The burden of proof is on Job if he wants to reproach God.

The reply of Job to the second speech is quite different from his reply to the first speech. Now he accepts God's judgement (42:2) that he has spoken without knowledge and understanding. The Hebrew word “I despise myself” can be translated “I recant” (or relent, or regret). However the verb translated “recant” more often means “despise”. What does Job recant/despise/relent? At any rate God and Job seem satisfied. Hitherto he had heard of God by hearsay but now he genuinely sees God face to face (42:5) even though God has not mentioned the main subject of the drama, the suffering of Job – he did, however, expound on his closeness to his creatures. Satan is not even mentioned by God. In fact God seems to have cared more for Job's growth in spirituality than for his comfort. Job knew (ch9) that he could not answer God even if he were innocent. But God does not thank the friends for their efforts on his behalf. Amazingly, God commends the rebellious Job for speaking correctly about him.

In his reply Job quotes the divine speech (38:2 in 42:2; 38:3 and 40:7 in 42:4). He acknowledges the divine purpose and the wonders of creation which, he says, “I cannot know”. He realises that without knowing why he was suffering, he could

face anything as long as he was assured that God was his friend. He concludes his speech: "I have heard of you by word of mouth but now my eyes have seen you, therefore...." (42:5ff).

Thus in fact Job is a subversive book in relation to the common received wisdom. It is an invitation to a confession of ignorance, yet conveys a sense of wonder through an encounter with God in creation. It fits in well with the post-exilic period when Second Isaiah insisted that the Jewish suffering was disproportionate to the sins which they committed (Is 40:2) and Zechariah accused the nations of over-punishing Israel for God's anger (Zech 1:15). Significantly, God comes to the suffering Job yet speaks bluntly to him. Most scholars accept that Job repents. Others see him repenting mainly because he met God, or repenting of his arrogance (hubris). Still others deny that Job really repents because his dissembling repentance is a mere tongue-in-cheek exercise. Job is freed from his obsession with his own suffering and concern for justice. He ends up with a deeper vision of both God and the world and his own faith-role in it, and becomes a much deeper Job than in the Prologue. Two quotations (pp86-87) from the liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez (*On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, Orbis Press, Maryknoll, New York 1987) are helpful in reflecting on Job 42:1-6:

According to the majority of commentators, the general meaning of the Passage seems clear: Job stands now as a creature before his God, as a child before his Father. His complaints and protests had in fact never outweighed his hope and trust. He does not now withdraw his claim of innocence, for his conviction on this count is as great as his faith in God. Nor does he have to withdraw it, for Yahweh has not repeated the accusations of the three friends. Neither does Job accept with resignation something he regards as unjust. God, however, has now made known to Job a plan and the meaning of a justice that cannot be contained in the straitjacket of

the doctrine of retribution. Job, for his part, has come to see that his language had perhaps been disrespectful. He therefore repents and humbly proposes to do penance in dust and ashes.....

According to Murphy (*The Book of Job*, Paulist Press, New York, 1999, pp99-100):

Job has been changed by a more intimate experience of God which the theophany conveyed. His previous contact with God was all hearsay. He has experienced a profound transformation in light of which issues of guilt, justice and injustice, charges and countercharges, have vanished.

The phrase 'dust and ashes' is an image for groaning and lamentation; in other words, it is an image befitting the situation of Job as described before the dialogues began (2:1-12). This then is the object of the retraction and change of mind of which this key verse speaks. Job is rejecting the attitude of lamentation that has been his until now. The speeches of God have shown him that this attitude is not justified. He does not retract or repent of what he has hitherto said, but he now sees clearly that he cannot go on complaining. This means that in his final reply what Job is expressing is not contrition but a renunciation of his lamentation and dejected outlook. Certain emphases in his protest had been due to the doctrine of retribution, which despite everything had continued to be his point of reference. Now that the Lord has overthrown that doctrine by revealing the key to the divine plan, Job realises that he has been speaking of God in a way that implied that God was a prisoner of a particular way of understanding justice. It is this whole outlook that Job says he is now abandoning. Job's answer (of which the new translation just expounded gives a better understanding), represents a high point in contemplative speech about God. Job has arrived only gradually at this way of talking about God. At one point he had even felt God to be distant and unconnected with his life; he had then confronted this God in a bitter lawsuit. Now, however, he surrenders to Yahweh with renewed trust.

In the final judgement in the Epilogue, Yahweh tells Eliphaz that he is angry with the three friends because they have not spoken rightly concerning God as has Job, who now must intercede for them to save them from their punishment. Then Job is restored and regains twice what he lost together with ten new children. But no question is asked about the murder of Job's children or the undeserved suffering which has been inflicted. This patriarchal story has touches of a fairy-tale. No questions are raised about one person having enormous wealth and owning many slaves and servants. While Job undermines the wisdom tradition that God will ensure that the just prosper and the wicked suffer, Job quite eloquently, in the wisdom poem in ch 28, insists that true wisdom is not fully available to human beings but belongs fully to God alone.

Job's virtue is rewarded when his fortunes are restored and his brethren and sisters as well as former acquaintances "dined with him in his house" (42:11) and each gave him a piece of money and a gold ring. His daughters are given special attention while the sons are anonymous. The names of the daughters are Jemimah ("dove"), Keziah ("cinnamon") and Keren-happuch ("horn of eye-makeup"). They are the most beautiful ladies in the land (42:14-15) The final words of the Book of Job are a masterly understatement: "Then Job died, old and full of years" (42:17). Job lived to see four generations of descendants, and in the modern phrase, lived happily ever after in the tradition of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Some years ago I came across a very apt statement by Martin Dalby of B.B.C. Scotland: "Bad religion answers the unanswerable; great religion cherishes the mystery". A book like Job with its bewildering alternation of genres, styles and perspectives, in sharp contrast to our preference for monologic truth, brings the dedicated student to the edge of the unknowable. In 42: 1-6 Job five times speaks of enlarged understanding using the words knowledge, counsel and understanding. He concedes that he spoke out of ignorance but does not admit that he has sinned. He accepts that he must live with mystery and the silence of a God who is in control, all powerful and awesome. Yet God favours the rebellious Job

over the three friends and their answers. God suddenly appears as Job requested but vindicates Job and condemns the friends without any explanation why these things happen or why God, in fact, inflicted such terrible suffering on Job without cause. The reader has the benefit of the prologue and the audience is sent away to reflect on their limited knowledge.

I like the comment in *A Theological Introduction to the OT* by B.C. Birch etc., Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1999, p404:

The most remarkable factor in the drama of Job is the *complete mismatch* between Job's demand and Yahwah's response (41:1-6). It is as though God has had no interest in Job – no interest in justice, no interest in the orthodoxy of Proverbs, no interest in theodicy. Astonishing: God is not interested in the primal question that drives the wisdom tradition, that haunts the human heart, and that has preoccupied Job. All such moral calculations are here treated as irrelevant and uninteresting. Attention is given only to God's sovereign power, before which Job is reduced to silence. The question that so engaged Job and his friends has evaporated.

#### AFTERTHOUGHT

The literature about Job is simply enormous and it is rare that one scholar will have mastered it all. I like David R. Jackson's article (WTJ 72 (2010), pp153-67, entitled "*Who is This Who Darken's Counsel?*") He describes how the reader of Job has been drawn into the story by the different speakers, beginning with sympathy for Job then horror at his suffering and outrage at the cruelty of his friends who fade away, exhausted. Job's defense heightens the discomfort as he speaks to and about God. Elihu intensifies the assault followed by God who fearfully and aggressively questions Job in seeming contradiction to the prologue. Then suddenly God vindicates Job and condemns the friends. The conclusion of the book and its long debate, without God actually explaining why any of this



happened, sends the audience away to reflect on matters. Jackson's clue to the book's meaning is found in Job's observation that he has become a *mashal* (a riddle, parable or proverb) to his friends. Job cannot find a wise person among his friends (17:10). At the heart of the debates is the shocking fact that God did in fact inflict harm on Job without cause! Let me select some provocative readings of Job which are worth studying.

David Clines in Bernard Andersen (*The Book of the Bible*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989, pp181-201) has a typically provocative and highly original article on Job. He finds that instead of the text setting the agenda we can bring our own questions to the text and find the text illuminated in unpredictable ways. It is fascinating to see the results when he approaches the text from feminist, vegetarian, Christian and materialist perspectives.

In *Interested Parties* (p144) Clines concludes that Job is a "great and powerful work of literature because it inveigles you into a willing or unconscious suspension of disbelief:

- 1) It "persuades its readers that there is a causal relation between piety and prosperity and that the relation is unproblematic"
- 2) It indicates "that wealth is unproblematic, ethically speaking"
- 3) "that explanations of reality and especially genetic and causal explanations, are worth having"
- 4) "that it somehow answers the problem of suffering.

Another fascinating approach is Samuel Terrien's *The Iconography of Job Through the Centuries. Artists as Biblical Interpreters*, University Press, Penn State, 1997. The iconography includes frescoes, manuscripts and mosaics from the third century to modern times, showing Job to be truly a man for all seasons. He moves easily from Blake's famous engravings to the works of Bellini and Chagall to representations from Patmos, Chartres and Pamplona.

For Terrien, Job has been read alternatively as an expression of piety or of religious revolt. Even today the comforters are "physicians of nought" or "plasterers of lies and healers of no value" (13:14) while the sick person attacks

the Deity with sarcasm. Traditionalists among Jews and Christians have seen the hero as teaching submission to the will of God in times of misfortune. Humanists, both religious and secular, have seen a Hebrew Prometheus persecuted by a cruel God or an impersonal fate. Against the mercantile cults of the ancient times, some have seen a model of selflessness. Job is unique in the Bible in that a foreigner is praised as a model of faith – yet, surprisingly, there is no mention of the distinctive aspects of Judaism such as the Patriarchs, the Exodus, the Chosen People, the Covenant, the Promised land, Zion, The Last Judgement, The Messiah. Instead, a member of a hated nation, Edom, holds up the ideals of a humane and disinterested religion. The popular Testament of Job and Gregory's *Moralia* inspired painters and sculptors up to the Renaissance and sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. Terrien carefully traces the subtle changes that have arisen in the interpretation of Job down through the centuries. He wonders whether scholars pay sufficient attention to artists as biblical interpreters! While the message of Job is a powerful one for those suffering adversity, it is surprising how minor and even misleading the use of Job in the liturgy has been – for centuries texts like 19:25-27 have been used in the Office for the Dead as a conquest of death.

Let me briefly quote a reflection which was making the rounds of Joban scholars recently, and which ran something like this: "To write on Job one needs to be an expert in Hebrew, and an Old Testament theologian in addition to being a philosopher with a loving sensitivity for poetry, also to have struggled personally with many of the issues involved and to have above all a sense of humour" – I am not sure that I am qualified even in the last. Perhaps it is better if I conclude with *The Prayer of Job* attributed to St. Ambrose of Milan:

Think again, I ask you, upon the holy Job. He was covered all over with sores, afflicted in all his limbs, and filled with pain over his entire body. Yet he was not swayed in his affliction, nor did he falter even in the mass of his own words, but "in all things he did

not sin with his lips (Job 2:10) as scripture testifies. Rather he found strength in his affliction through which he was strengthened in Christ”

### CHAPTER THREE: ECCLESIASTES (QOHELETH)

The Book of Ecclesiastes might be described as a lover's quarrel with orthodox wisdom. The author wishes things were indeed the way traditional sages claimed – he is truly a student of (and a lover of) ancient proverbs and their ideology. But somehow, he says, reality rarely seems to match wisdom's claims.

James L Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, p.512.

The presence of the book in the canon validates in every age the same kind of critical assessment of theology, conventional wisdom and piety as Qoheleth practiced and validates it not as an optional activity but as one constantly necessary to keep religion honest and in touch with reality. The book's insistence on enjoyment is an important voice to be heard by anyone who locates the message of biblical religion more in asceticism than in love and social concern, and who feels that biblical religion in some way militates against enjoyment. Qoheleth's negative assessment of the workaholic should be constructively provocative for those who believe that posture to have value or to be synonymous with religious dedication. Finally, in no way can Qoheleth be said to have had a close personal relationship with God ...”

Addison G. Wright, S.S., *Ecclesiastes, The New Jerome Biblical*

*Commentary*, p490.

Many who struggle with the emptiness of their lives are pleasantly surprised to discover a radical yet joyful fellow-traveller in the Bible, who has no talk of mysticism or even of after-life. One can place Qoheleth, who includes only twelve chapters, in a reflective sequence beginning with the modest reflections on the wisdom of life found in the prudent Proverbs – those admittedly include a brief dialogue with one skeptical of the entire wisdom enterprise in 30:1-9. Then we have the much deeper Job wrestling with the agony of the human condition, followed by the radical Qoheleth who insists that all is vanity because of the inevitability of death which conceals everything. It is worthwhile at the beginning to quote the summary of the modern confusion on Ecclesiastes by R.N. Whybray, *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, eds R.J. Coggins and J.L. Houlden, London, SCM Press, 1990, p184:

Various attempts have been made to discover in the book a coherent philosophy or system of thought; but these have been frustrated by its literary disjointedness, which makes it difficult to discover where the main emphases lie. Is Qoheleth best described as a pessimist, a realist, or even in spite of appearances, an optimist? Did he totally reject the conventional belief that righteousness leads to happiness and wickedness to disaster or did he merely wish to point out that there are exceptions to the rule? Did he regard God as a remote deity unconcerned with human affairs or as the beneficent giver of all good gifts? On these and other fundamental questions the book is susceptible of quite different interpretations, and there is at the present time no consensus of opinion about its basic message. It remains, as it has always been, an enigma, which continues to fascinate its would-be interpreters.

Qoheleth is closest to Job in the bible as it also criticises the approach of wisdom

and the law of retribution which is basic to the view of Proverbs e.g. 22:23. Yet it sticks closer than Job to the content and forms of wisdom. It has attracted an amazing variety of commentaries. To mention just a few: Bunyan, Voltaire, Thackeray, Orwell, T.S. Eliot, Salvador Dali. It is, however, important to keep in mind the widespread view that Qoheleth is an attack on the optimistic interpretation of books like Proverbs where justice is rewarded and wrongdoing is punished as in the opinion of Job's friends. Thus Qoheleth tears apart a veil of illusion which supports a false enhancement of a certain interpretation of reality. Other scholars interpret the claim of the author of Qoheleth to have been a king, enjoying wealth and pleasure, as setting himself upon an impregnable position and viewpoint from which to attack much of conventional wisdom teaching and to enable people to see through many distorting, current illusions and therefore set them free. Some of the best known sections are the famous sequence of pairs in ch.3, the two long series of sayings in ch.7 and ch.10-11 and the monologue in ch.12 which is often taken as an allegory of old age. In ch.2:3-11 Qoheleth describes his extensive business empire which included agriculture, forestry and livestock not to forget his correspondingly luxurious lifestyle. But there is no lasting gain as the wise person and the fool meet the same end and will be forgotten while all that he has built up will be given to someone else. The daily rising sun, and the blowing wind and flowing rivers, all may do their jobs without any culmination. Qoheleth may be at the margin of the OT but it is a stern reminder that everything must be rethought anew and the difficult questions faced. God can be known yet God remains hidden and elusive.

#### HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION:

The title Ecclesiastes comes from Jerome's translation of the Septuagint Greek for "Qoheleth", a Hebrew term in the form of a feminine participle, meaning "one who speaks in the assembly" often translated in English as "The Preacher". – note that Graham S. Ogden (*Qoheleth*, Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007, p31) seems to prefer the translation "the arguer". Others prefer "the assembler". The speaker in

most of the book appears as a teacher who seems quite aware of the injustice of high officials yet has no power or interest to do something about it. The title is not found outside the book, nor is it explained in Ecclesiastes. It seems to be a character created by the writer to further his agenda. Ch. 1:16 seems surprisingly to exclude Solomon: “wisdom more than anyone who ruled in Jerusalem before me”. The deeply enigmatic book of Ecclesiastes is of special importance in the development of theological interpretation. According to the Mishnah some early Jewish leaders including Rabbi Agiba highly regarded Ecclesiastes while others viewed it with suspicion. According to tradition it was eventually included in the Canon at the Council of Jamnia c.90. The Jewish rabbis debated vigorously in the first century whether Ecclesiastes “defiled the hands” i.e. belongs to the sacred books (Yadayim iii,5), a debate which continues to our times. The reason is that the book is sometimes considered as not always a unified whole. For example the two great schools, those of Shammai and Hillel, were divided on the issue. They found contradictions not only with the words of David but also internally (e.g. Eccl 4:2 and 9:4). Today the discussion concerns the extent to which Ecclesiastes is good news. A minority insists that Ecclesiastes emphasises joy while the majority seem to find it pessimistic, and perhaps even hopeless. On many occasions Qoheleth seems to suggest that life is meaningless while at key points he proposes a lifestyle of joy (2:24-26; 3:12-14,22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10) and laughter (negative in 2:2; 7:3 but positive in 8:15). The rabbis saw tension between “be happy” (11:9) and the advice in Num 15:39 “keep all the commandments of the Lord without going wantonly astray after the desires of your hearts and eyes”.

The earliest manuscript is 4 QQoh(a) from Qumran, published by J. Muilenburg in 1954 and dated approx. 175-150 BC also 4 QQoh (b). Paul gives the earliest hints to Qoheleth 7:20 in Rom 3:10 (“There is no one just, not one”) and also the reference to *hebel* (Greek *mataiotes*) in Rom 8:18-25. After Qumran the earliest interpretations are those in the Mishnah, midrashim and perhaps talmudim. Eric

Christiansen (*Ecclesiastes Throughout the Ages*, p24) remarks that Marc Hirshman (1958) in a fine study compared four early Christian commentaries to Midrash Qoheleth (itself a compilation of earlier sources c.600). He identifies five aspects of aggadic exegesis:

Solomonic exegesis which (creatively) relates verses to the biographical accounts of Solomon in Kings and Chronicles.

Identification by which verses from the Bible are related to an event or object in the Bible or in the Midrash's contemporary surroundings.

Anecdotes from Rabbinic sages illustrate moral and theological points

Mashal (parable) where an allusive narrative is told for an ulterior purpose (p161).

Cataloguing in the form of lists and catalogues.

*Ecclesiastes* was only studied gradually in early Christian literature. There is little or no trace of such studies in Ignatius, Polycarp and others. J. Robert Wright, it is worth noting, in his *Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture for Ecclesiastes* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 2005) selects some 346 selections of *Ecclesiastes* (pXXIV). His most frequent choices are Didymus the Blind (69 sections), Gregory of Nyssa (35), Ambrose (26), Gregory the Great (20), Origen (18), Evagrius of Pontus (15), John Cassian (13), Chrysostom (12), Athanasius (11), Bede (11) and Jerome (11). Two commentaries which have not survived but which were used by Jerome were the first Latin commentary by Victorinus of Pettau (who died in 304) and that by Apollinarius of Laodicea (+390). One of the earliest examples is from the *Commentary on the Beginning of Ecclesiastes* by Dionysius of Alexandria (c.200-c.265), a pupil of Origen. Thus in remarks on Qoheleth's endorsement of eating and drinking in 2:24-25, Dionysius comments:

Surely mere material meats and drinks are not the soul's good. For the flesh, when luxuriously nurtured, wars against the soul, and rises in revolt against the spirit. And how should not intemperate eatings and drinkings also be contrary to God? He speaks,



therefore, of things mystical. For no one shall partake of the spiritual table, but one who is called by Him, and has listened to the wisdom which says, 'Take and eat'.

In Augustine's *City of God* (17.20) the Rabbi did not like the sentiment either and suggested that all references to eating and drinking signify Torah and good deeds. In the third and fourth centuries we have more insightful and lengthy commentaries by Origen, Didymus the Blind, Gregory Thaumaturgos, Gregory of Nyssa, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Jerome.

Origen's commentary is unfortunately no longer extant as is the case for Hippolytus of Rome. For these only a few fragments survive (cf S. Leanza, *L'esegesi di Origene al libro dell' Ecclesiaste* (Reggio Calabria, Edizioni Parallelo, 38, 1975). We see Origen's influence in his student Gregory Thaumaturgos (c.213-270) who wrote an early interpretive paraphrase of the book *Metaphrasis in Ecclesiasten Solomonis* (cf. J. Jarick, *Gregory Thaumaturgos' Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes*, SBLSCS 29, Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1990). Like the Targum, Gregory clearly identifies Qohelet as King Solomon whose purpose was to show that all the affairs and pursuits of man which are undertaken on human things are vain and useless. His aim is to lead us to the contemplation of heavenly things. He turns Qoheleth into a spokesperson for Christian orthodoxy and the general Christian tradition – he does not always adopt Origen's allegorical approach. Gregory, who developed an influential way of reading Ecclesiastes, distinguishes between the thought of Qoheleth and the views of others whom he is refuting, e.g. the thoughts, deceits and pretenses of fools (Eccl (:1-3) and was developed in the dialogues of Gregory the Great (New York, 1959, pp193-4) – Pope Gregory the Great likewise works similar magic with difficult passages such as 3:18-20; 5:18; 12:13. Pope Gregory in his *Dialogues* book 4 (c.593) describes what is really behind the seeming contradictions of the book as follows:

When there are many people holding opinions of various kinds,  
they are brought into harmony by the reasoning of the speaker.

This book, then, is called "the preacher" because in it Solomon makes the feelings of the disorganised people his own in order to search into and give expression to the thoughts that come to their untutored minds...For the sentiments he expresses in his search are as varied as the individuals he impersonates...Therefore we find that some statements of this book are introduced as inquiries, while others are meant to give satisfaction by their logic...It is clear...that one statement is introduced through his impersonation of the weak, while the other is added from the dictates of reason.

The lasting influence of Gregory's approach can be seen in such recent studies as Anthony Perry (*Dialogues with Kohelet: The Book of Ecclesiastes*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993). Here Gregory used the same dialogue approach in which others represent "the minds of the infirm" while Gregory is the truly wise. Thus, throughout the Middle Ages readers of Ecclesiastes label some opinions in the book as deliberate falsehoods while endorsing the more orthodox opinions which follow such passages.

Didymus the Blind (c. 313-98) also carries the influence of Origen. Like Gregory's his commentary is (apart from the last verses of ch 12) complete and systematic.

Two other perceptive patristic commentaries are those of Gregory of Nyssa and Theodore of Mopsuestia. Gregory of Nyssa's eight homilies on Eccl. 1-3:13 (c. 380) are most profound. Nyssa, like Jerome, portrays a rather reserved Solomon looking 'exclusively to the conduct of the church', giving instruction in those things by which one would achieve the well-ordered life of virtue (Hom. 1). Gregory even uses the text as a springboard for other topics as in his unusual attack on slavery (beginning of hom. 4). He is well aware of the stamina required to wrestle with Qoheleth. About the same time we find the literal approach of Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350-428) who is clearly opposed to the dominant allegorists. Theodore was condemned at the Second Council of Constantinople

partly for denying the canonical status of some books including, it seems, Ecclesiastes. This is doubtful. In his commentary Theodore omits no part of the book, avoids allegorism and concentrates on the literal meaning. He is reputed to have claimed that Solomon had not received the grace of prophecy but only the grace of prudence.

Evagrius Ponticus (346-99), a native of Pontus, was ordained deacon by St. Gregory Nazianzus and became a well-known preacher at Constantinople. In 382 he departed for the Nitrian desert where he became a friend and disciple of St. Macarius of Egypt and where he spent the rest of his life. He occupies a key place in the history of Christian spirituality. He was the first monk to write extensively and had a strong influence on Palladius, Cassian, Diadochus and Maximus the Confessor. He was condemned a number of times for Origenistic views especially at the Council of Constantinople II, A.D. 553. He produced a number of spiritual books and also scholia on Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and other biblical books which have only been discovered in modern times. His notes on Ecclesiastes are published by A.M. Casiday in the series *The Early Church Fathers, Evagrius Pontus*, pp130-149, Vol I, Part 2, April 2006.

On Qoh. 4:6 he writes: The “chasing after wind”, I believe, refers to the will of the soul caught up with passions. That is why a handful of virtue is better than two handfuls of wickedness, ignorance and “chasing after wind”...It is as if someone said it is better to learn contemplation of one spiritual thing than to have numerous visions of foolish wisdom.”

On 5:2 “let your words be few” he comments: “We do not know how to pray as we ought.” He is not so much talking (about prayers) at this point as issuing a command not to theologize thoughtlessly. Indeed, anyone who belongs to this material world and whose thoughts have their origin in this world cannot speak about God without error – or on other matters that elude the senses. That is why he says, “And let your words be few”, that is, they should be true and well chosen. I think also that “few” means the same as in the following texts:e.g. “Better a little

with righteousness than an abundance of riches with sinners.”

But there is no doubting the importance and influence of Jerome’s allegorical commentary which as Murphy (*Word Commentary*, p61) quotes from S. Leanza “correctly insists upon the fairly liberal interpretation found in Jerome’s commentary: erudite philology, command of the efficient Greek versions, lessons from his Jewish tutor, Bar- Ageba, etc.” Jerome in his preface tells his purpose:

I remember just five years ago, when I was still at Rome and studying Blesilla’s book of Ecclesiastes that I taught her to think lightly of her generation and to esteem futile everything that she saw in the world. I remember too being asked by her to examine individually all the difficult passages in a short treatise so that she might be able to understand what she was reading without me always being present. Accordingly, since she was taken from us by her sudden death while I was still doing the preparation for my work...I then ceased from my work, silenced by the terrible grief of such a misfortune. Now though, situated in Bethlehem, clearly a more holy city, I can fulfil that promise to the memory of Blesilla and to you (i.e. his Roman disciples, a widow named Paula and her daughter Eustochium), and remind you briefly that I have used no authority in this work, but have rather translated directly from the Hebrew itself and have adapted it to the traditional language of the Septuagint in those passages which do not differ greatly from the Hebrew. Occasionally I have taken account of the Greek versions, those of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion so that I do not deter the reader’s enthusiasm with too much novelty. I have also not pursued those streams of conjecture, which lack a factual basis, for I do not believe this to be sensible.

Eric Christiansen, who quotes the above translation of Jerome from Robin MacGregor Lane’s unpublished version, notes also that the biographer of Jerome,

J.N.D. Kelly (*Jerome, His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, London, Duckworth 1975), admires Jerome's "skill in edification and the brilliance of his style":

On every page we come across...breathtaking transformations of the plain meaning of the Preacher's musings, all set out in colourful and rhythmic prose...For the modern student, intent on discovering what Ecclesiastes is really about, Jerome's brilliant essay is worse than useless. But judged by the standards of his age, when Christian men took it for granted that the true sense of the Old Testament was the spiritual one lurking beneath the surface which pointed forward to Christ and his Church, it was a *tour de force* of edification and illumination

Jerome accurately noted that the majority of Jewish scholars accepted Ecclesiastes even though it was in conflict with other parts of the Bible. Others emphasised that it should be included because it begins with words of the Law and ends with words of the Law.

Jerome produced two Latin translations. The first for Blesilla was somewhat eclectic as it was adapted to the Septuagint and other Greek translations. His Vulgate translation (c.398) was, together with Proverbs and Canticle ("The books of Solomon"), completed in three days. According to Christiansen (p27) Angelo Penna (1950) called Jerome's text a milestone because of its use of Hebrew and Rabbinic tradition, literal exegesis and sympathetic quotation of classical authors, including Cicero, Horace and Virgil as he first treats the literal interpretation and then moves to the spiritual. He is unusually respectful of the reader as he in ch. 3 leaves a detailed study to the reader's discretion.

The enduring influence of Jerome's interpretation of Ecclesiastes is seen in Thomas a Kempis' classic *The Imitation of Christ* (completed about 1427 and widely read to this day – it was found, for example, in Dag Hammarskjöld's briefcase when his plane crashed in Africa.

Jerome's monastic interpretation was widely influential, particularly when he interpreted it as a refutation of the unity of worldly things. Jerome's view of the book, as a dialogue between Qoheleth and pupils or fools, was followed by scholars such as J.G. Herder, J.G. Eichorn and J.K. Nachtigal (1753-1819). Jerome aimed at getting his readers to reject worldly vanities (pleasure, work, wealth, relationships, wisdom and folly) and embrace the monastic life. He tells Paula the mother of Blesilla about the course of biblical study which he had recommended for her other daughter Paula – to begin with Psalms and Proverbs (from which she can gather rules of life) and then to proceed to Ecclesiastes from whom “let her gain the habit of despising the world and its vanities.” Jerome's translation of *hebel* as *vanitas* led to the popular English rendering “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity.” Jerome's fifth century establishment of “the Neoplatonic, allegorical and Christological reading of Ecclesiastes” dominated interpretation for a thousand years according to Craig G. Bartholomew (*Ecclesiastes*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2009 p21). According to Murphy and others, pre-modern exegesis of Ecclesiastes was united in three common assumptions (*Qohelet Interpreted: The Bearing of the Past on the Present, Vetus Testamentum*, 3203 (1982, pp331-37): Solomonic authorship, the interpretation of “utterly enigmatic” against the perspective of immortality in the next life, and the recognition of tensions in the book. For Bartholomew, Luther, Melancton and Brenz challenged this interpretation in the sixteenth century to produce a literal and theological reading with “eating and drinking” referring to the legitimate enjoyment of God's creation whereas hitherto eating or drinking referred to the Torah or the Eucharist. Thus before the rise of modern criticism the epilogue was considered as the key to the whole book. Then the post-Enlightenment period produced a third watershed with its historical-critical approach. However scholars such as Childs and Dell are good examples of a reappropriation of precritical readings of Ecclesiastes in a post-critical period. Gregory of Agrigentum (559-630) was born in Preterium in Sicily and died about

630 leaving behind a commentary on Ecclesiastes (P.G. 98:748-1181. Gerard Ettlenger is preparing a text for the Corpus Christianorum, series Graeca.) and other treatises. The following is a reading from Gregory on Friday of the seventh week in ordinary time, accompanying Eccles. 8:5-9:10:

Come, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a glad heart; for what you do, God has approved beforehand. Ecclesiastes 9:7

This exhortation of Ecclesiastes is very proper if you take its words in their ordinary, everyday sense. If we embrace a simple rule of life and let our beliefs be inspired by a sincere faith in God, we should eat our bread with joy and drink our wine with a glad heart. We should not fall into slanderous speech or devote ourselves to devious stratagems; rather, we should direct our thoughts on straight paths and (as far as is practicable) help the poor and destitute with compassion and generosity – that is, dedicate ourselves to the activities that please God himself.

But the same text can be given a spiritual meaning that leads us to higher thoughts. It speaks of the heavenly and mystical bread, which has come down from heaven, bringing life to the world. Further, it speaks of drinking the spiritual wine with a cheerful heart, that wine which flowed from the side of the True Vine at the moment of his saving passion. Of this, the Gospel of our salvation says: When Jesus had taken bread and blessed it, he said to his holy disciples and apostles, Take, eat; this is my body which is being broken for you for the forgiveness of sins. In the same way he took the cup and said, Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood, the blood of the new covenant, which will be shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. For whoever eats this bread and drinks this mystical wine enjoys true happiness and rejoices, exclaiming: You have put joy into our hearts.

Moreover, I think this is the bread and this is the wine that is referred to in the book of Proverbs by God's self-subsistent Wisdom (that is, Christ our Savior):

Come, eat my bread and drink the wine I have mixed for you. Thus he refers to our mystical sharing in the Word. For those worthy to receive this are forever clothed in garments (that is, the works of light) shining as bright as light itself. As the Lord says in the Gospel, Let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven. And, indeed, oil will be seen flowing eternally over their heads – the oil that is the Spirit of truth, guarding and preserving them from all the harm of sin.

The Targum of Ecclesiastes (c.600) is a paraphrastic Aramaic translation which weaves Qoheleth's text into a coherent moralistic homily. Thus it expands 1:2:

When King Solomon was sitting upon the throne of his kingdom, his heart became very proud of his riches, and he violated the word of God, by gathering many horses, chariots and riders, and amassing much gold and silver. And he married from foreign nations, whereupon the anger of the Lord was kindled against him, and he sent to him Ashmodai, king of demons, who drove him from his kingdom's throne, and took away the ring from his hand, in order that he should roam and wander about in the world to reprove it. And he roamed about in the outlying towns and the cities of the land of Israel, weeping and lamenting and saying "Vanity of Vanities I am Qohelet, whose name was formerly called Solomon, who was king over Israel in Jerusalem". Likewise 8:15 proclaims the joy of obedience to the Torah.

In *Qohelet Rabbah* 1K8:1,22 is cited in support of authorship by Solomon. From approximately the seventh century, *Catena* (commentary anthologies) were produced from time to time. One of the first to deal with Ecclesiastes is that of the rhetorician and biblical exegete Procopius of Gaza (c. 475-c. 538) a leading figure of the School of Gaza. His works were first collected in J.P. Migne (PG. 87.1-2838) and consisted in commentaries on the Octateuch, Kings, Chronicles, Isaiah, Proverbs, the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. His Ecclesiastes is drawn



from six early Christian commentaries on Ecclesiastes which developed some of the interpretive concerns of Jewish midrash – new edition by S. Leanza (CCSG 4, 1978, pp1-50 with suppl. 1983)

Rashbam, a later medieval Jewish interpreter and a grandson of the famous Rashi (c.1080-1160), seems to have been the first to note that Ecclesiastes had a frame with the first two chapters as an editorial introduction and 12:8 introducing an editorial epilogue. In general Jewish tradition had its own way of understanding Ecclesiastes as it was grouped with the other Megillot scrolls and given a particular liturgical significance, where it was read at the festival of sukkot (Tabernacles).

Another outstanding Jewish work was by Samuel ibn Tibbon (roughly 1198/9 and 1221). It was a massive work and was one of the first major works of philosophical exegesis written in Hebrew and exercised considerable influence in southern France, Italy and Spain.

Ibn Ezra, from the twelfth century, is typical of medieval Jewish teaching on Qoheleth. He claims that 9:4b and 9:10 are views of others which Qoheleth rejects. He seems less disturbed by the unorthodox aspects of Qoheleth than the seeming contradictions in the book (e.g. 7:3). For him all human works were transient and unimportant. What can bring happiness and really matters is the fear of God through the Torah (i.e. wisdom). His text is full of philosophical and astronomical ideas but also careful grammatical remarks. He rejected the view that the title meant that the author was an assembly of Solomon's disciples who included their own frequently contradictory views.

In c.1100 Anselm of Laon compiled the *Glossa Ordinaria* on the entire Vulgate Bible, drawing on patristic and early medieval exegesis. Particularly he drew on Jerome's commentary on Ecclesiastes. Hugh of St. Victor, who was at the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris until his death in 1140, worked against the popular approach to Ecclesiastes and emphasised the literal sense. His 19 homilies on Eccl. 1:1-4:8 which were originally conferences for his fellow monks became a classic widely

used and quoted. He expounds his approach in his prologue:

And so in this work, I do not think that one should toil much after tropologus or mystical allegorical senses through the whole course of the argument, especially as the author himself aims less at improving, or at relating mysteries, than at moving the human heart to scorn worldly things by obviously true reasons and plain persuasion. I do not deny that many mysteries are included in the argument, especially in the latter part. As he proceeds, the author always, with increase of contemplation, rises above the visible ever more and more. But it is one thing to consider the writer's intention and his argument as a whole. Another to think that certain of his *obiter dicta* (incidental speech, which have a mystical sense and must be understood spiritually, should not be passed over (Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1952, p100).

In 1197 Rupert of Deutz wrote an unfinished commentary on Ecclesiastes from which the following quotation is taken (Christiansen, p10):

This book is like the basin which Moses made out of the mirrors of the women. For he taught not only to see men's faces in such mirrors, but to see their minds as well. Ecclesiastes also made this book out of the copper and mirrors of women for the viewing of the minds of men...Therefore Ecclesiastes sees in this mirror whatever men do in the world.

In c.1230-5 Hugh of St. Cher compiled a broad range of interpretations of Ecclesiastes from 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century commentators to supplement the *Glossa Ordinaria* while frequently letting quoted views take priority over his own. Christiansen notes (p20) that considerable attention was paid to Ecclesiastes in the period of 1500-1700 in moral academic and poetic discourse.

In the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Maimonides attributed the epilogue to "those

who edited the book” thus showing that he saw Qoheleth as a later edition/collection of Solomon’s teaching. He seems to have been the first to name a later glossator as the editor of Qoheleth.

The Franciscan theologian Bonaventure wrote his commentary in 1253-57. This was a very exciting period in which Bonaventure found himself, as Jeremy Holmes described (quoted in Eric Christiansen, *Ecclesiastes*, p34):

The thirteenth century was an exciting time to be an exegete. Biblical studies were moving from the monasteries to the schools, the works of Aristotle were being introduced into Europe, and the new mendicant religious orders were leading the way in a gospel-driven intellectual revolution; these converging forces were accompanied by an explosion of theoretical and technical innovations.

The fresh approach of the thirteenth century led to no less than thirteen commentaries on Ecclesiastes, of which the most important was that by Bonaventure. He exploited the growing influence of Aristotle and Gueric’s emphasis on the literal sense without abandoning the traditions of St. Jerome. While he did not reject the “contempt of the world” approach, he did force the objection that such a conclusion cast some aspersions on the God who created the world. Compared to God the world is nothing, but this does not make the world contemptible. Using the wedding ring analogy, he concluded that if a woman loves the ring more than her husband, it is wrong even adulterous, even though it is worthless by comparison. But only in a relative sense can we despise the world. Bonaventure considered the value of Ecclesiastes’ teaching to be relevant to the new sciences and study of the natural world which were developing in the thirteenth century. Like Origen he found Ecclesiastes related to natural science while Proverbs related to moral science. Thus Bonaventure stressed a literal approach more than his predecessors did, in the spirit of Gueric who had developed the influence of Aristotle. Bonaventure takes from Hugh St. Victor

(+1141) the idea of the triple vanity which he uses to produce a structured picture of Ecclesiastes. He views 1:3-3:15 as a logically structured whole, based on the idea of “vanitas mutabilitatis”, the transience and mutability of the natural order which Qoheleth is able to observe. It is paralleled in Aristotle whose works had recently been discovered. For Bonaventure, Rom 8:20 supported his reading that the whole of creation was subject to vanity i.e. mutability. His second division “vanitas iniquitatis”, stressed epistemology, and included 3:16-7:23 and the third “vanitas froenalitatis” included 7:24-12:7. Like Jerome, Bonaventure saw a potential conflict between his reading of Ecclesiastes and that of Genesis with its positive view of creation. He insisted that all human wisdom was folly in comparison with the mystical illumination which God sheds on the faithful Christian (see his *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*).

The first of the modern commentators was perhaps the Franciscan Nicholas of Lyra – his *Postillae Perpetuae* was the first printed biblical commentary (Rome, 1471-72). For Lyra the fear of God (Eccl 12:13) is the true source of happiness, in contrast to wealth and other topics expounded by Ecclesiastes.

The beginning of the Reformation according to Roland Murphy (*Word Biblical Commentary*, 23A, plii) was marked by three commentaries on Ecclesiastes. These were written by Johannes Benz (1528), Martin Luther (1532) and Philip Melancton (1550). All three rejected Jerome’s monastic appropriation of Ecclesiastes with its contempt for the spirit of the world. With a more literal approach to interpretation they concluded that “eating and drinking” referred to the enjoyment of the God-given creation. Thus Benz on 5:18-20:

There is nothing better than to be cheerful and enjoy one’s life: to eat, drink and delight in one’s employment...Some foolish persons not understanding these things, have absolutely taught contempt for and flight from the world, and have commented many foolish things themselves, as we read in the lives of the fathers that there were some who even shut themselves up from ever seeing the

sun...living above the world is not living out of the world...

Jerome's approach in fact denigrated the God who created our world. Luther was even positive about civic life as it struggled with the difficulties of poor leadership. Luther's *Notes on Ecclesiastes* were given as a series of lectures in 1526. His aim was to encourage the reader to trust in God's wide and constant control, and to make the text to be a humbling lesson in human limitations and to save the reader from scepticism but to encourage proper relations between God and people. Ecclesiastes for Luther is basically a book about politics and the family. It saw Solomon as a political figure deeply concerned about social life. Like Bonaventure before him, Luther used it to interact with the new empirical sciences and philosophy. It also helped him in his conflict over free will with Erasmus. Erasmus had written his *The Praise of Folly* in 1509 (reprinted fifteen times before 1517). For Erasmus the fool is deluded by his belief in his own wisdom and knowledge – the world is full of fools in the house of mirth whereas the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning. Erasmus is aiming to satirize misguided views of wisdom and folly. Luther, however did not completely reject the "contempt of the world" attitude which had lasted for a thousand years. It is often said also that in *Table Talk*, Luther was the first to question Solomon's authorship. Luther argued against Thomas Aquinas on Rom 8:19-20 that the created order is good and that it is human misuse alone that subjects the good creation to vanity. There he is quoted as saying: "Solomon himself did not write Ecclesiastes, but it was produced by Sirach at the time of the Maccabees...It is a sort of Talmud, compiled from many books, probably from the library of King Ptolemy Euergetes of Egypt". Some scholars could not find this text in Luther's work. If he is rejected as the source of the view that Solomon was not the author, the credit goes to Grotius (+1645) who (1644) pointed out that the language of Ecclesiastes showed that it was one of the last of the O.T. volumes. R. Rosen in his fine study (*Reformers, the Preacher and Skepticism*, Mainz, Philipp von Zabern, 1997, p124) summarises Luther's approach as follows:

If the text is taken apart from the faith perspective suggested by the book's closing verses and Solomonic authorship, then it is an expression of abysmal despair and abject scepticism. Luther is intent on guarding against such a plunge. On the other hand, when Ecclesiastes is read as the wise reflection of a believer, trusting in God's larger, constant control, then the text becomes a humbling lesson in man's limitations while directing attention instead to the proper relationship between God and man. Such an outlook preserves against scepticism and is just what Luther wants to underscore.

Melanchton in his brief commentary finds a doctrine on providence in Ecclesiastes, a God caring for his creation (14:95), an interpretation which he opposes to "the ravings of monks". He takes the threat of scepticism most seriously. Brenz likewise emphasises the teachings of the Reformation in contrast to the Monastic interpretation. He likens the book to an addition to the Mosaic law where people do not have to power to act virtuously as their own works merely lead to failure and circumcision avails nothing.

The Jesuit Juan de Pineda (+1637) wrote what Ginsburg would call a "gigantic commentary" without equal, following Thomas a Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*. There is a similar commentary by the Jesuit, Cornelius a Lapide, a contemporary of Pineda. H. Grotius (+1645) the outstanding polymath, perhaps the first modern to deny Solomon's authorship using the criteria of the book's haphazard composition and late language (many Aramaisms and posttextilic language) which Delitzsch would later catalogue, wrote in the *Praefatio* to his *Annotationes ad Qohelet*:

I do not believe that (the book of Qoheleth) is from Solomon. Rather it is written under the name of that king, as if he were led to repentance. As a proof of this I take many words which are not found elsewhere except in Daniel, Ezra and in the Aramaic

translations (*Annotationes in Vetus Testamentum*, Paris, 1644, part 1).

Grotius considered Ecclesiastes to be a collection of opinions from different sages, originally spoken to different peoples.

In 1751 J.D. Michaelis claimed that a prophet who lived after the Exile wrote Ecclesiastes in the name of Solomon. He wanted to use the person of the king so wise and happy to philosophise, all the more touchingly, about the variety of human happiness.

In 1765 an anonymous scholar write on *Choheleth or the Royal Preacher*, an anonymous poem paraphrasing Ecclesiastes and dedicated to the king, from which (pVI) the following quotation is often made:

When... I had made myself, as I apprehended, a tolerable master of the subject (of interpreting Ecclesiastes), I set about the work, which, after all, proved a far more laborious task than I at first imagined, not only from the phraseology peculiar to this Book, which in many places, is dark enough in itself, and rendered still darker from the prodigious variety of arbitrary interpretations, but sometimes also from the difficulty of finding out the true connexion of the several parts, which, on a cursory view, seem to have no dependence on each other.

In 1770 Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) published anonymously and significantly in Hebrew a commentary on Qoheleth – he also published commentaries on Deborah, Judges (1780) and Pentateuch (1780-83), Psalms (1783) and Song of Songs (1788). His writing Qohelet in Hebrew, a language not widely known among Christian scholars, suggests that he was not defending Jewish exegesis against Christian uses and misuses, with which he seemed clearly familiar. In his introduction he defends the traditional quadruplex scheme of textual interpretation: the literal or plain memory, the homiletic, the allusive and the secret. He insisted that an exegete's primary task is to articulate the plain

meaning. However the other three levels are of equal validity and should not be ignored.

In 1787, in his classic *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (p342), Robert Lowth, professor of poetry at Oxford, spoke words which are as true today as then: “scarcely any two commentaries have agreed concerning the plan of the work, and accurate division of it into parts or sections.” Lowth claimed that the variety of the world was exemplified by the experience of Solomon who is introduced as a person investigating a very difficult question – he thus practically admits the non-Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes (p XXIV).

David Friedlander (*Der Prediger*, 1788) claims that Wisdom Literature was called forth in response to new demands created by contact with Greek thought and life. He described how Qoheleth: “contemplates, teaches, mourns, comforts, imparts counsel, contradicts, and corrects himself...The author is no dogmatic and phlegmatic teacher, but a warm and animated examiner of truth. To a philosopher, it is essential to listen to the opposite opinions. He, without regarding his own system, listens to all objections which can be made, and does not fear the consequences of statements he admits...(He) candidly places before the eyes of the reader all the objections which he makes, and all that transpires in his inmost soul; he is not afraid to think aloud.”

There is however no evidence for a direct dependence on Greek philosophy. The best that can be said is that Qoheleth’s thought ran parallel to Greek philosophy. According to M.V. Fox (Hayes: *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, p348), G. Zirkel (1792) was the first to propose that Qoheleth was influenced by Greek thinking, language and literature. His view was revived by Hitzig in 1847, and in 1874 by Tyler who saw evidence for Greek linguistic influence. Many 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars followed him, including Graetz, Allgeier, Wildeboer, and Levy. While Luther was impressed by the disconnected character of the work, Keard (1701), Herder (1778), Eichorn (1779), also Doderlein, saw the text as a dialogue between a refined teacher and a pupil who interrupts him. Bickel thought the



pages became disarranged while Siegfried, McNeile and Haupt found later interpretations in the text. On the other side the unity of the text was strongly supported by Ginsburg, Zockler, Delitzsch, Plumtre, Wright, Briggs, Wildeboer, Cornill and Genung. In *The Age of Reason* II, 1794, Thomas Paine, a political deist revolutionary argued for a religion of reason, and was much influenced by the Quakers. He wrote on Ecclesiastes:

Written as the solitary reflections of a worn out debauchee, such as Solomon was, who looking back on scenes he can no longer enjoy, cries out All is Vanity!...From what is transmitted to us of the character of Solomon, he was witty, ostentatious, dissolute, and at last melancholy. He lived fast, and died, tired of the world, at the age of fifty-eight years...Seven hundred wives, and three hundred concubines would have stood in place of the whole book. It was needless after this to say that all was vanity and vexation of spirit; for it is impossible to derive happiness from the company of those whom we deprive of happiness.

After J.D. Michaelis the belief that Solomon did not write the book found increasingly wide acknowledgement: Eichorn, 1779; Doderlein, 1784; Spohn 1785; Dathe, 1789; John 1795. During the nineteenth century an increasing number of scholars accepted this view. Many dated it in the Persian period and then others in the Greek period.

In 1798, J.K. Nachtigal published *Koheleth*:

This book contains the investigations of several associations of literary men among the Israelites; it contains propositions which at that time formed the limits of philosophic speculation, and which seem to have been proposed intentionally, to agitate and to explain doubts, and thus to develop the intellectual faculties.

Most of the core of Qohelet's teaching as seen by most scholars since the end of the nineteenth century have been listed by M.V. Fox in Hayes (ed *Dictionary of*

*Biblical Interpretation* pp350-2). Fox summarised as follows the core of Qohelet as agreed by most commentators since the end of the nineteenth century:

Qohelet is pessimistic and sceptical. He declares the futility of human labor, the triviality of wealth, the transience of human life, and the impossibility of true wisdom. He attacks the doctrine of reward and punishment. All this constitutes a polemic against the wisdom school, which had become overconfident, rigid and dogmatic and which had made unjustified claims to possess knowledge. Qohelet commends wisdom for its relative practical value and urges fear of God and moderate enjoyment of life's pleasures.

#### MODERN INTERPRETATIONS

The poet Percy Shelley (c.1820) in an *Essay on Christianity* wrote:

Ecclesiastes had diffused a seriousness and solemnity over the frame of his spirit, glowing with youthful hope, and made audible to his literary heart:

The still, sad music of humanity,  
Not harsh or grating, but of ample power  
To chasten and subdue

In 1844 the father of modern O.T. studies published his conclusions on Ecclesiastes in the concluding edition of his O.T. introduction. De Wette claims that Qoheleth asserts the vanity of all things and the reality of enjoyment alone. He has no hope of a future life but inclines towards fatalism, scepticism and Epicureanism.

In *Cohleleth*, London, 1861 Christian D. Ginsburg (1831-1914) concluded his monumental, historical, and critical survey of both Jewish and Christian interpretations of Ecclesiastes, the product of seven years labor, as follows: "What a solemn lesson for the pious and for the learned to abstain from dogmatism, and what an admonition not to urge one's own pious emotions and religious conceits

as the meaning of the Word of God.” (New York, 1970 The Library of Biblical Studies) – Barton’s 1908 commentary continues Ginsburg’s work up to that date. In *Koheleth*, 1875 (Eng. TR 1877) F.S. Delitzsch proposed that Qoheleth was the quintessence of piety in contrast to Heine’s view that Qoheleth was the quintessence of scepticism, thus two opposite views. Further Schopenhauer insisted that no one can adequately appreciate Qoheleth until one is seventy. Such views have continued to this day. In a much repeated conclusion Delitzsch rejected the possibility of ever seeing a consistent literary movement within Ecclesiastes (p188). He considered the material from ch. 3 onwards to be disordered aphorisms: “All attempts to show, in the whole, not only oneness of spirit, but also a genetic progress, an all-embracing plan, and an organic connection, have hitherto failed, and must fail” (p188). Delitzsch’s 1875 commentary was important in sweeping away efforts to argue for Solomonic authorship as he insisted “If the book of Ecclesiastes were of old Solomonic origin, then there is no history of the Hebrew language”. Matthew Arnold (in *Literature and Dogma*, 1873) noted that: “The book of Ecclesiastes has been called epicurean; it is certainly without the glow and hope which animate the Bible in general.” Yet in *A Speech at Eton* (1879) he noted that it is “one of the wisest and one of the worst understood books in the Bible.”

Joseph Ernest Renan (1823-92), the well-known French romantic historian and biblical scholar, made many oft-quoted comments on Ecclesiastes, which I draw from Christiansen:

Ecclesiastes passed formerly as the most obscure book of the Bible. This is only the opinion of theologians, and in reality is completely false. The book, as a whole, is very clear; only the theologians had a major interest to find it obscure (1882).

Qoheleth has his place in the long history of the battle of the Jewish conscience against injustice in the world. He represents a pause in the world (1882).

The preacher, I am willing to believe, had felt all that man's heart could feel, but he had no suspicion of what man is allowed to know. The human mind and his day overpowered science, in our day it is science that overpowers the human mind (1870).

Ecclesiastes is a charming book, the only likeable book ever written by a Jew (1873).

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century many scholars began to reject Solomonic authorship and gradually the dating of Qoheleth began to come down to the Greek period. Doderlein and Dathe dated the book to the Babylonian captivity. Thus the date was first reduced to the Persian period and then others to the Greek period. Among those who held to a date in the Persian period were Ewald, Knobel, Hengstenberg, Heiligstedt, DeWette, Vaihinger, Ginsburg, Zockler, Moses Stuart, Delitzsch, Nowack, Wright, Cox, Vlock and Driver. In favour of the Greek period (from 330-100 BC) were Renan, Zirkel, Noyes, Hitzig, Tyler, Plumtre, Kuenen, Strack, Bickell, Cheyne, Dillon, Wildeboer, Siegfried, Davidson, Peake, Cornell, Bennett, Winckler, Sterne, Geneting, Haupt and McFayden. Clearly, an increasing consensus put Ecclesiastes in the Greek period. In favour of later interpretations were Siegfried, McNeile and Haupt. But the unity of the book was strongly supported by Ginsburg, Zockler, Delitzsch, Plumtre, Wright, Briggs, Wildeboer, Cornhill and Ganing.

E.H. Plumptre: *Ecclesiastes or the Preacher*, Cambridge University Press, 1881, has an extensive examination of Solomonic authorship but in the end decides against it. He believes that 1:16 ("before me") referred to Melchizedek and the Jebusite kings who reigned in Jerusalem before its capture by the Israelites. Qohelet's aim is to persuade those in search of the perfect good, of the quicksands in which Qoheleth nearly sank and to convince them of the vital necessity of the fear-of-God in which he at last discovered the anchor of his soul. For Plumptre the epilogue is the key to Qohelet's book:

This is what the Teacher who, as it were, edits the book, presents

to his disciples, as its sum and substance, and he was not wrong in doing so. In this the Debater himself had rested after his many wanderings of thought...From the standpoint of the writer of the epilogue it was shown that the teaching of Ecclesiastes was not inconsistent with the faith of Israel...From our standpoint we may say that it was shown not convincingly that the book, like all true records of the search after Truth, led men through the labyrinthine windings of doubt to the goal of duty, through the waves and winds of conflicting opinions to the unshaken Rock of the Eternal Commandment (pp229-30).

Plumtre finds two streams of Greek philosophical influence, one Stoic and one Epicurean, due to the different moods of the writer – Pfeleiderer (1886) also finds traces of Greek influence but tracks them to Heraclitus. Plumtre (like Galling, Herder, Kroeber, Ranston and Weiser) traced the lack of unity throughout Qoheleth as due to his troubled and conflicted soul which vacillated between extremes of faith and unbelief.

The Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz noted in his *Kohelet* that the third person is used for Kohelet beginning in 12:9 while the first person dominates the rest of the book. He notes that several remarks are directed against a tyrannical king and that these characteristics fit Herod the Great alone, who is described in the Talmud as the slave of the Asmoneans. Graetz considered the author to be a complete sensualist – but other scholars insist that Quohelet was no advocate of debauchery. Graetz tried to explain the contradictions in the book by a theory of dislocations. However he denied that the final six verses (12:9-14) were part of the original work. He seemed to have followed Spinoza for some of his views. A more radical theory of dislocations was produced by the Viennese Bickel in 1884 and 1886. In 1894 Paul Haupt in a paper entitled “*The Book of Ecclesiastes*” published in the *Oriental Studies of the Oriental Club of Philadelphia* wrote:

There is no author to the book of Ecclesiastes, at any rate not of the

book in the form in which it has come down to us...It reminds me of the remains of a daring explorer, who has met with some terrible accident, leaving his shattered form exposed to the encroachments of all sorts of foul vermin...In some cases there are half a dozen parallel strata of glosses.

Haupt published *Koheleth* (Baltimore, 1905) and *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Baltimore, 1905) with the theory that it was written in metrical form. Because the text was piled high with glosses, he retained only 124 out of 222 verses as genuine. He believed that the original was written by a prominent Sadducean physician in Jerusalem, who was born at the beginning of the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes and died in the reign of Alexander Jannaeus (104-79 BC). He was perhaps a king in Jerusalem. The genuine parts of the text are Epicurean while in the Pharisaic interpolations Stoic doctrines are found. The book may have been finished about 100 BC when the author was 75 years old.

Under the influence of Wellhausen, commentators discovered a variety of sources within the book. C. Siegfried (*Prediger und Hoheslied*, 1898) pioneered an extreme form of source-criticism resulting in a series of editors who tried to make the book more orthodox, correcting it with substantial additions. The result which many followed was two Qoheleths, two glossators, an indefinite number of glossators, two editors and two epilogists. Others such as Barton, Jastrow, McNeile and Podechard suggested that such glosses and additions were introduced in conflict with the original. More moderate and widely accepted were the views of McNeile, Podechard and Barton who distributed the orthodox passages between a pietist (Hasid) who speaks of God's justice and the need for human piety (2:26; 3:17; 7:26b; 8:11-13, also the second epilogue 12:13-14) and the wise man (Hakim) who defends the value of wisdom (1:2; 7:27-28; 12:8) and the first epilogue, (12:9-11). Here, in contrast to the typical pious Qoheleth of traditional commentaries, Qoheleth is consistently pious. Yet he certainly does not hesitate to criticise traditional wisdom with his consistent verdict of vanity – as

Proverbs 21:30 shows the wisdom tradition did not hesitate to accept his limitations.

Herman Gunkel initiated form critical analysis of wisdom literature but mainly applied his theory to Genesis and Psalms. Form-criticism had in fact little influence on the study of Ecclesiastes. However the analysis of the genre as a whole became more important as scholars increasingly compared the form of Qoheleth's speech to the genre of an ancient Near Eastern autobiography. Rather than examining the twentieth century in the abstract, it now seems to me better to describe a select series of scholars who have made significant contributions.

Johannes Pedersen: *Skepticisme Israelite* Cahiers de RHPR, Paris, Alcan, 1931, concludes from his brief history of exegesis, in which he emphasises J.D. Michaelis and Ernest Renan, that : "very different types have found their own image in Ecclesiastes, and it is remarkable that none of the interpretations mentioned is completely without some biases. There are many aspects in our book; different interpreters have highlighted what was most fitting for themselves and their age, and they understood it in their own way. But for all there was a difficulty, namely that there were also other aspects which could hardly be harmonized with their preferred view" (p20). For Pedersen it was a time of crisis in Israel's late period, a breakdown between God and people, between nature and humanity. God has become more sublime and the key virtue is fear of God and resignation to God's will. Qoheleth's scepticism is counter-balanced by his resignation. He recommends enjoyment of life and perseverance in trying all possibilities.

H.W. Hertzberg: *Der Prediger, Kommentar zum Alten Testament*, Leipzig, Gutersloh, 1932/63, insisted that clearly the author of Ecclesiastes wrote with a copy of Gen. 1-4 in front of him. He concluded his commentary with the statement that Qoheleth is "the most staggering messianic prophecy to appear in the Old Testament". The main point of the book is humanity's complete nothingness. There are three recurrent and key ideas in the book: 1) An exclusive

God who has no personal characteristics, yet decides everything; 2) all human striving for wisdom, wealth and happiness is nothing; 3) pleasure. The lot of humans is to accept the present and take passively whatever happiness is given. H.L. Ginsberg: *The Structure and Contents of the Book of Koheleth in Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (VTSup), 1955, pp138-49; *Kohelet*, Jerusalem, Newman, 1961. He proposed with Torrey and Zimmermann an Aramaic original of which Ecclesiastes is a translation. For this he was strongly criticised by Gordis. In Ginsberg's interpretation all is "futility", zero. Death cancels out every activity. The only real value for a person is the enjoyment of material goods.

Robert Gordis: *Koheleth: The Man and His Word* (1955, 1958), a Jewish scholar, noted the growing recognition of the unity of Ecclesiastes as the twentieth century progressed. He concluded that Koheleth's Hebrew was closer to that of the Mishnah than to Aramaic. He found 8:9 to be an insuperable crux. It can be translated: for all; by all; in all; on the whole; over everything; after all; always. Gordis finds that Qoheleth believes in God but cannot accept the platitudes used by the wisdom teachers. Justice in human matters is elusive and truth unattainable. People desire happiness, therefore the task of God who created them is to fulfil their search.

Gordis wrote in the 1962 version of his commentary: "Koheleth would have been shocked, even amused, to learn that his notebook was canonized as part of the Holy Scripture. But the obscure instinct of his people was building more truly than it knew when it stamped his work as sacred. Two millennia after Qoheleth's day, a pietistic movement arose in Eastern European Jewry at the farthest possible remove from the temper of the ancient sage of Jerusalem. Yet a classic tale of the Hasidic tradition reveals a remarkable affinity with Koheleth. One day, Rabbi Bunam of Pshysha found his beloved disciple Enoch in tears. The Rabbi asked him 'Why are you weeping?' and Enoch answered, 'Am I not a creature of this world, and yet I do not know for what purpose I was created and what good I am



in the world.' 'Fool!' said Rabbi Bunam, 'I also go around thus.' Thus Koheleth, too, went about, seeking the purpose of life and lamenting his ignorance. His book is the record of his lamenting and his sorrow and of the peace he finally attained. In the deepest sense Koheleth is a religious book, because it seeks to grapple with reality. The Psalmist had sung:

A broken and contrite heart,  
O God, Thou wilt not despise. (Ps 51:19)

The cry of a sensitive spirit wounded by man's cruelty and ignorance, this distilled essence of an honest and courageous mind, striving to penetrate the secret of the universe, yet unwilling to soar on the wings of faith beyond the limits of the knowable, remains one of the man's noblest offerings on the altar of truth (pp121f.)

Hartmut Gese (*The Crisis of Wisdom in Koheleth in Theodicy in the O.T.* E.T., ed. J. Crenshaw, Fortress, 1983, pp141-53). Gese identified Koheleth with a crisis of wisdom in Israel. However scholars became divided over the nature and extent of this crisis. Earlier wisdom believed that good or evil is the result of the good or evil which a person does. But Qohelet rejects this connection. Time even in its right moments is hidden from people to whom life is basically opaque. Yet the fear of God can help us replace the estrangement with an acceptance of whatever comes upon us. This openness includes the direct gift of God, accepting the enjoyment of life.

1974: John L. McKenzie in *A Theology of the Old Testament*, New York, Doubleday finds Qoheleth (p225) to be one of the strangest books of the Bible. It poses exegetical and theological problems which commentators have not solved, i.e., we do not know what the book means. McKenzie classifies it as anti-conventional wisdom. It is dominated by the conviction that life is uncertain because death is certain and life does reward people according to their righteousness/wickedness. Opposed to this uncertainty is the certainty that everything returns to its point of origin (1:5-11). Compared to Job, Qoheleth is an

atheist who does not speak or pray. The God who walked in Eden, spoke to Moses and Israel, and spoke through the prophets and dialogued with Jeremiah, is remote and almost uninvolved. Qoheleth seems to expect no concern, a fact which is key to his profound pessimism. Qoheleth leads straight to Lucretius and Catullus, two Roman exponents of hedonism and pessimism. It is less trouble to be a fool and much more fun. If he has a lasting message it is that wise people know nothing about God.

1979: Brevard S. Childs (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, London, SCM, 1979)

Childs begins with a summary of the different problems in Ecclesiastes on which scholars have reached almost universal consensus. He recognises that Solomon is nowhere explicitly mentioned as the author. The book consistently reflects late Hebrew and parallels O.T. Mishnaic Hebrew. Was the reference to Solomon a literary device?

On the basis of language the book is widely dated 300-200 B.C. However, efforts to date certain concepts in Qoheleth or the influence of a Greek philosophical stream have not been successful.

While some editorial work has been recognised in the prologue and epilogue, modern scholars increasingly accept the book as a unified composition of one author.

No consensus has been agreed on the structure of Qoheleth. Scholars such as K. Galling and Ellermeier find independent aphoristic units but claim no unified approach or sequence of thought. On the other hand A. Bea and A.G. Wright find an overarching unity and outline a development of thought. Perhaps the truth "stat in medio".

Scholars are divided as to the theological contribution of the whole book. Many see a mainly negative view as scepticism effected a breakdown in religious tradition (Von Rad). Others such as Zimmerli produce a more positive evaluation even though the crisis is disputed (Gese).

For Childs the problem is that scholars often “fail to deal seriously with the canonical role of the book as sacred scripture of a continuing community of faith” (p583). He agrees with S.R. Driver (*Introduction* (8), 1909, p470) that the key to interpreting Ecclesiastes lies in discerning the historical and psychological influences on the writer. This is close to a redaction-critical approach. Thus he finds the epilogue to be the key corrective within the broader wisdom tradition, not unlike the influence of James on Romans in the N.T. Childs finds the phrase ‘pleasing words’ (V10) is not an aesthetic description but meaning “fitting” and “appropriate”. Childs further comments (pp584):

In its canonical form the identification (of Qoheleth with Solomon) assures the reader that the attack on wisdom which Ecclesiastes contains is not to be regarded as the personal idiosyncrasy of a nameless teacher. Rather, by his speaking in the guise of Solomon, whose own history now formed part of the community’s common memory, his attack on wisdom was assigned an authoritative role as the final reflections of Solomon. As the source of Israel’s wisdom, his words serve as an official corrective from within the wisdom tradition itself. Once this point was made, the literary fiction of Solomon was dropped.

1980 Norbert Lohfink, my old Jesuit professor at Rome, tells us in the Preface that his commentary (which first appeared in 1980 and went through five German printings) is not aimed at professors as readers and is not in the form of an academic commentary. However, four elements together help to explain what is its new contribution – surprisingly Lohfink admits that if he were to write a new commentary it would be different from both the 1980 and 1990/2003 versions.

First he finds is the new awareness of the concrete literary form of the text of Qoheleth (the only piece of discursive prose in the O.T.) in which the author’s apparent contradictions are due to the fact that he is citing the ideas of others or playing upon them as he uses the form of the philosophical *diatribe*. On the

political, economic and social world of Qoheleth, Lohfink simply tells us that he learned most of all from the works of M. Rostarzeff in their original English editions. He finds that Robert Gordis wrote one of the best commentaries ever written on Qoheleth (*Koheleth, The Man and His World*, 1951).

Secondly, he realised that Qoheleth had begun to dispute with a broader, international (Hellenistic) wisdom. He seems to have been a peripatetic philosopher who walked around Palestine and taught Hebrew, not Greek. He does not hesitate to quote the opinions of others (6:11-9:6). He places the “religious critique” at the center of the book which appears in palistrophic form as follows

A 1:2-3	Frame
B 1:4-11	Cosmology (poem)
C 1:12-3:15	Anthropology
D 3:16-4:16	Social critique 1
E 4:17-5:6	Religious Critique
D <sup>2</sup> 5:7-6:10	Social Critique 2
C <sup>2</sup> 6:11-9:6	Deconstruction
B <sup>2</sup> 9:7-12:7	Ethic (concludes with poem)
A <sup>2</sup> 12:8	Frame

Thus he finds nine sections, Title and Prologue, Cosmology, Anthropology, Social Critique, Religious Critique, Social Critique, Deconstruction, Ethic, and Epilogue.

Qoheleth belongs to and writes for the upper class in Jerusalem in Ptolemaic Palestine. Proverbs was a first-level text and Qoheleth was used for higher grades. He dates Qoheleth “as late as possible” noting that the Hebrew is close to that of the Mishnah and that Sirach presupposes the existence of this book. It is a time of “an incredible enrichment of a small group of leading families and of the high priesthood” (p6). Qoheleth was not intended for everybody but rather “for a determined age group from a specific social class” (p13). It was a “modern” restatement of living faith which responds to the cross-cultural challenges of life in the Ptolemaic Empire. Surprisingly there is little reference to the Law, the prophets or other Jewish wisdoms, perhaps because it presupposes that the adult

audience was quite familiar with such material.

Lohfink finds an astonishing proximity between Qoheleth's thought and modern existential philosophy. He finds the writings of Karl Jaspers most helpful. Others chose Albert Camus for a reference point as does Michael Fox (1989). On 7:2-4 he notes that up to this Qoheleth has no desire to fix lines of grief on our faces "but rather to move us to joy in the face of death" (p93). "The essential discovery that constitutes us as fully human is when we realise that we are that being which is headed toward death...To know that we will die is the achievement that, above all, the book of Qoheleth desires for its readers..." (pp100,112). Further he highlights the elements of joy and balance in contrast to the depressing, lost and cynical parts.

Murphy (*The Tree of Life*, p173) finds that Lohfink's rather detailed reconstruction of Qoheleth and his activity ("a compromise. attempting to preserve biblical wisdom but with liberal inspiration from Greek writers") to be very hypothetical. It differs considerably from A.G. Wright's famous effort to explain "The Riddle of the Sphinx" (C.B.Q. 30 (1968) pp313-14; 42 (1980) pp38-51).

Lohfink does not always explain his choices, such as the translation of "hebel": as breath. On 7:26 he translates that womankind is stronger than death thus translating "more bitter" as stronger. He happily translates 7:1 in down to earth words as "Better a name esteemed than scented creams". He often suggests the text's reference as Alexandria rather than Jerusalem (2:3-10; 8:1b-4; 10:2-3, 16-17, 20).

1987 J.L. Crenshaw, in *Ecclesiastes* (OTL, Philadelphia, Westminster, 1987), provides a new introduction, translation and commentary. Crenshaw interprets Ecclesiastes as the product of a pessimist and sceptic. His analysis is tentative and resembles "in many respects" that of A. Schoors (OLP 13 (1982), pp91-116) who finds the structure of A.G. Wright to be "the best one can find". Crenshaw concludes with 25 units and recognises several glosses. Vanity for Crenshaw is a

metaphor for meaninglessness or emptiness. Crenshaw insists that Qoheleth teaches that “life is profitless; totally absurd.. The world is meaningless. Virtue does not bring reward. The deity stands distant, abandoning humanity to chance and death”. Yet in the same year (1987), Ogden published a commentary (1987/2007) in which he stated that his thesis is “that life under God must be taken and enjoyed in all its mystery”.

Writing in *Harper's Bible Commentary* (1988, p518), Crenshaw comments as follows:

The first-person pronoun punctuates the book of Ecclesiastes, leaving the impression that a single author is responsible for its content. However, the book concludes with a section that refers to the author in the third person (12:9-14). These comments resemble an epitaph (12:9-11) and a polemical corrective (12:12-14). Furthermore, since 1:12 seems to be the author's introduction to the book, 1:1 may be viewed as a secondary superscription based on 1:12. In addition, a thematic statement, which may derive from Qohelet, forms an envelope around the book (1:2;12:8). In any event, there is sufficient evidence to question the literary integrity of Ecclesiastes. This suspicion is heightened by the presence of contradictions, particularly with regard to the ultimate fate of the wicked. Does Qohelet think God will judge them or not? Because the book answers this question both positively and negatively, critics usually attribute these opposing views to different authors.

1987 H.D. Preuss and D. Michel (1989) have concluded, according to Roland Murphy (*Recent Research on Proverbs and Qoheleth* C.R. B51, (1993), p134) that the God of Qoheleth is an *Urhebergott*. Murphy quotes a very dramatic statement of Michael at the end of his book that Qoheleth's God is “not the God of Abraham, not the God of Isaac, not the God of Jacob, not the God in Jesus Christ”. For Preuss, wisdom is marginal to Israel's faith and the God of wisdom is

not Yahweh.

1989: Roger Norman Whybray wrote the *New Century Bible Commentary on Ecclesiastes*. There (pp59-60) he writes:

It has been argued that we need to view the Jewish religious tradition reflected in the Old Testament as being considerably more diverse than it was previously thought to be, and as having embraced a radical element from a quite early time. In this perspective the radicalism of Qoheleth would appear not as something quite new and outlandish, but as a development of earlier doubts about the purposes of God and dissatisfaction about the human condition which had already been voiced from time to time in opposition to the main, mainly optimistic stream of Jewish religious tradition.

In *Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy* JSOT 23 (1982) pp87-98, Whybray comments: “These seven (*carpe diem*) texts are clearly more than mere marginal comments or asides. They punctuate the whole book (2:24-26; 3:12-13,22; 5:17-19; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:7-10), forming a kind of leitmotiv; they increase steadily as the book proceeds” (p88) – note also Lohfink, “Qoheleth 5:17-19 – Revelation by Joy” (CBQ 52(1990) 625-35). Whybray also wrote the overview of Ecclesiastes in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, London, SCM Press, 1990 (eds. R.J. Coggins and J.L. Houlden), which he concludes as follows (p184):

Various attempts have been made to discover in the book a coherent philosophy or system of thought; but these have been frustrated by its literary disjointedness, which makes it difficult to discover where the main emphases lie. Is Qoheleth best described as a pessimist, a realist, or even, in spite of appearances, an optimist? Did he totally reject the conventional belief that righteousness leads to happiness and wickedness to disaster, or did he merely wish to point out that there are exceptions to the rule?

Did he regard God as a remote deity unconcerned with human affairs, or as beneficent giver of all good gifts? On these and other fundamental questions the book is susceptible to quite different interpretations, and there is at the present time no consensus of opinion about its basic message. It remains, as it has always been, an enigma which continues to fascinate its would-be interpreters.

1989 Peter Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1989. For Peter Kreeft, a professor of philosophy at Boston College, the book that first made him a philosopher, at about age fifteen, was Ecclesiastes. Today he concludes that the three most profound books which he ever read are Ecclesiastes (Life as vanity), Job (life as suffering), Song of Songs (Life as love). Here he finds Dante's great epic *The Divine Comedy*, played out from Hell to Purgatory to Heaven. Love is the final answer to Ecclesiastes' guest, the alternative to vanity, and the true meaning of life. These books are the epitome of the theological virtues of faith, hope and love and provide an essential summary of the spiritual history of the world.

Whybray gives a final description of the fascinating study which is ongoing today. He cautiously opts for a third-century Palestine provenance, with "good plain Jewish doctrine" (p59) in a basically unified book which brings the traditional teaching of Judaism up to date in a religiously committed dialectic. The author clearly likes self-contained units of sustained argument. Whybray tends to dismiss the influence of other cultures in Qoheleth but does admit that Qoheleth's radical view of faith which includes resignation is a product of the spirit of the times – for his view of *Qohelet, Preacher of Joy* see JSOT 23 (1982) pp87-98.

1992: According to Roland E. Murphy, a Carmelite scripture scholar who dedicated much of his biblical career to studying the Wisdom Books: "The message of Ecclesiastes has suffered from excessive summarizing (eg "all is vanity" or "fear God and keep the commandments"). It is truly difficult to give an



overall picture of the work. Qoheleth's thought is tortuous, and the danger of selectivity on the part of the interpreter is ever present. The following discussion of the message presupposes the translation and commentary in this book" (*Word Biblical Commentary* 23A *Ecclesiastes*, Dallas, Texas, 1992, p lviii). For Murphy, there is no satisfactory solution to the literary form of the book. Thus he rejects Von Rad's "Royal Interpretation" because the "king" fiction disappears after ch.2. Characteristic of Ecclesiastes is the genre called reflection by F. Ellermeier and R. Braun (*Word*, p xxxi). According to Ogden (p20) even though Murphy and Seow (1997) do not see everything in life as futile and meaningless, both find the term 'vanity' to be the most adequate to render "hebel". The reason seems to be that it is a type of "code word" which embraces the different shades of meaning found in Qoheleth's use of the term. For Murphy the boldest method is that of M.V. Fox who simply accepts that there are contradictions in the book (pxxxiv). The key was *hebel* which Qoheleth uses 38 times. Murphy prefers the translation "incomprehensible" (CBQ 53 (1991) 573). In *Recent Research on Proverbs and Qoheleth in Currents of Research* (1993) p133, Murphy notes that Qoheleth does affirm the pleasures of life. He quotes M.V. Fox in *Qohelet and his Contradictions* (JSOTSup, 71, Sheffield, Almond Press, 1989, p77)

Although Qohelet does not preach happiness, does not even have a word for it, the book is, for all its gloom, 'quelque manuel du bonheur' (as *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* describes itself (p167), for it teaches us ways to be closer to happiness, if not yet quite happy. It tells us how to make the best of a bad situation, where to find 'portions' and 'good things'. Qohelet hardly knows the way to happiness, but he does point the way to some things, including pleasure, that can take us a bit further away from unhappiness.

For Murphy (p xxi) the arguments for the sociological background of Qoheleth are drawn mainly from silence. Nowadays a fairly certain date can be assigned. The general consensus of critical scholars place the language and thought of the

book in the post-exilic period. Current scholarship favors the Hellenistic period. Drawing on O. Loretz, Murphy lists 562 favourite words (21.2%) among 2643 words, with an amazing amount of repetition. These include about 25 Hebrew roots (which occur from five to 30 to 50 times). Among the favourites are vanity, toil, work, wise, good, time, know, sun, see, fool, eat, profit, wind, death, just, wicked, portion, memory, vexation.

Qoheleth had an ambivalent attitude towards wisdom which he rejected for the security it seemed to offer. The sages did not test reality sufficiently but were content to teach and to persuade (plxiii). Ecclesiastes purified and extended its scope. He loved life and wisdom yet he was grieved by death and the vanity of life. For Murphy (p126) the epilogue is obviously putting forth "an ideal which has been developed elsewhere and which is not a concern in Ecclesiastes."

1993: Daniel C. Fredericks published *Qohelet's Language*, Mellen Press, New York (1987); *Coping with Transience: Ecclesiastes on Brevity in Life* (1993). Fredericks has questioned the use of linguistic arguments to fix a late date for Ecclesiastes. He also argues that transience is the key notion behind *hebel* in Ecclesiastes. Fredericks tells how he had been confronted with Dahood's Phoenician theory which few supported. In fact Dahood's position lost support because his evidence could be accounted for by the idea of Palestinian origin without Phoenician influence. Schoors interacted with Fredericks and concluded that the language of Qoheleth was in fact late Biblical Hebrew. Fredericks is neither sceptical nor pessimistic. To cope with transience one should find value in wisdom, the joy of work and especially in simple pleasures. Our duty is to resign ourselves to God's will and to accept that some circumstances are beyond our control.

1993 Theodore Anthony Perry in *Dialogues with Kohelet* Pennsylvania State University Press (1993) and *God's Twilight Zone, Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible*, Hendrickson, Peabody, Massachusetts, 2008

Perry in these unusual books assumes that Wisdom can be found strategically

throughout the Hebrew Bible often in difficult texts such as the story of Judah and Tamar, the riddle proposed by Samson and the words of Qoheleth reflecting on the advancing years of life. Thus he does not confine his study to the so-called Wisdom literature. For Perry, God's wisdom is profound and sometimes best viewed in the murky light of the twilight zone at the start and end of a day. His book is a dialogue between a pious sage-narrator, the "presenter" (P) who debates and hands on the wisdom of the sceptical person Koheleth (K), the person of experience. Perry argues that "Dialogue is both the structural essence of Koheleth and the key to the book's spirituality. It includes the effort fairly and respectfully to represent the other's point of view and then challenges it" (1993, p46). It rejects wisdom and faith unless they come from his own experience from which he affirms the value of labor, pleasure and wisdom. Finally he accepts that life is vanity but sees the need to fear God as the basis of our transience. *God's Twilight Zone* is for Perry a historically identifiable theological position or situation marked by the death of prophecy and the need to return to earlier religious practices ("ambiguous oracles and signs, dreams, riddles") (pXI). The problem faced is how to live with ambiguity as the wisdom in the Bible showed us. The final part of the study examines the much studied allegory in Qoh 12 which Terry reads literally. However, he does not see old age as an end to enjoyment but as a transition from the kind of engagement appropriate to youth and the bloom of life to another. Both youth and old age are good and must be appreciated at the proper time or season. Wisdom is connected with old age and both occupy the position of twilight between God and the world, life and death.

Perry's study takes the ancient view that the book is a dialogue and likewise produces a pious and optimistic author. He believes that he can identify the voice of the narrator throughout the book, sometimes even prying apart single sentences and giving one part to Qoheleth and another to the "presenter". On the one hand for Qoheleth "all is vanity" while on the other hand all things have their right time "a time to live, and a time to die". Yet these messages are contradictory for if all

is vain there is need to reflect on the proper time for planting, dancing, and laughing.

1997 Choon- Leong Seow, a professor of O.T. Language and Literature at Princeton Theological Seminary, produced a comprehensive commentary in the Anchor Bible Series which is the replacement of the much briefer work by R.B.Y. Scott. He summarises Qoheleth's message as follows:

In sum, Qohelet always begins his reflection with humanity and the human condition. He concludes at every turn that mortals are not in control of the things that happen in the world. They are not in control of their destiny. That is why Qohelet says that everything is hebel. He does not mean that everything is meaningless or insignificant, but that everything is beyond human apprehension and comprehension. But in thinking about humanity, Qohelet also speaks of God. People are caught in this situation where everything is hebel – in every sense of the word. God is transcendent and wholly other but humanity is “on earth”. Yet God is related to humanity, and God has given humanity the possibilities of each moment. Hence people must accept what happens, whether good or bad. They must respond spontaneously to life, even in the midst of uncertainties, and accept both the possibilities and limitations of their being human (pp59f.).

Seow comments that: “Scholarly opinion regarding the structure of the book falls between two poles. There are those who find no order whatsoever and those who discern a carefully constructed structure” (p43). There are many theories of multiple sources, unmarked quotations and interpretations, in which “The radical and pessimistic message of the ‘original Qohelet’ has been countered later by more orthodox glossators” (p39).

Seow dates Ecclesiastes to the Persian period (two Persian loanwords), and finds no Greek influence. He does not consider Jewish Wisdom books such as Ben Sira

and the Wisdom of Solomon from the late Second Temple Period. He agrees with Fredericks that there are more discontinuities than continuities with Mishnaic Hebrew. Like M.V. Fox he opposes theories about quotations or actual dialogue, although this cannot be held absolutely (e.g. 7:1-12).

Seow in his cautious analysis suggests that Ecclesiastes is written for “people facing a new world of money and finance” (p22) in the second part of the first half of the fourth centuries B.C. He shows that it is more interested in money and social structure than in the abiding questions of philosophy and metaphysics. While Qoheleth does not leave the reader “with the impression that wisdom is of no use whatsoever” he does insist that “practical wisdom is not a formula for success, but it yet may do some good. It yet may win one some favour” (p52).

Seow sees hebel used in Ecclesiastes in a variety of ways which no translation can adequately cover. It is used of human life and experience but never of God or the universe in general. Thus it is used in his anthropology. Yet what cannot be grasped either physically or intellectually cannot be controlled. Seow notes that “benefit” (yitron) is found ten times, “adam” (humankind) 49 times, “under the sun” 29 times, “labor” with its distinctively negative tone is found as verb (13 times) and as noun (22 times). Clearly he claims that people accept what happens and respond spontaneously.

1998 Trevor Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, Eerdmans, is quite familiar with such scholars as Blenkinsopp, Crenshaw, Fox, Ginsberg and Whybray. For him Qoheleth is a fictional person with a sceptical and pessimistic message. Similar fictional Akkadian autobiographies are found in ancient Near Eastern literature. “Hebel” is translated as “meaningless” and Qoheleth’s message is sceptical and pessimistic. The message of the book is determined by the authorial faith affirmation in 12:9-14: Life is meaningless without God. This is a final message. Longman’s strength is O.T. poetry (eg Hos 12:2) – note that he sees Wisdom of Solomon 1:16-2:11 as aimed directly at Qoheleth.

For Longman “so little is known about the transmission of the biblical text during

its earliest stages that we cannot rule out linguistic updating. The so-called late forms may not in fact have been original to the book but may reflect the updating of vocabulary and grammar by later scribes so their contemporaries could understand the book better” (p10).

1999 Michael V. Fox in such studies as *Frame Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qoheleth* (HUCA 48, 1997); *Tearing Down and Building Up* (1998) and *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up* (1999), *Ecclesiastes: The JPS Bible Commentary* (2004), was the first modern scholar to examine the presence of two voices in Qoheleth – one that spoke in the first person as Qoheleth, and the other, the frame narrator, who spoke about Qoheleth. Fox has done some very interesting work on a narrative approach to Ecclesiastes in Qoheleth and His Contradictions, Almond 1989 with some controversial conclusions which were developed by Longman (1998). The advice to “enjoy life with the wife you love” (9:7-9) is remarkably close to the advice given to Gilgamesh in tablet 10 (cf ANET:90). Fox comments as follows (p77):

Although Qohelet does not preach happiness, does not even have a word for it, the book is, for all its gloom, ‘quelque manuel du bonheur’ (as *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* describes itself (p167), for it teaches us ways to be closer to happiness, if not yet quite happy. It tells us how to make the best of a bad situation, where to find ‘portions’ and ‘good things’. Qohelet hardly knows the way to happiness, but he does point the way to some things, including pleasure, that can take us a bit further away from unhappiness.

Fox, who is a Jewish Rabbi, tells us that Ecclesiastes is traditionally read on the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, the harvest festival. It is concerned with universal philosophical characterizations of such traditional Jewish commentaries as those by Abraham Ezra, Rashbam, Samuel, ben Judah ibn Tibbon, Moses Alsheikh, Moses Mendelssohn, Shadel and the contemporary scholars: Barton, Ginsberg, Hengel, Murphy, Seow and Fox. Fox insists that Qoheleth is grounded in personal

experience rather than revelation or tradition. Since life seldom resolves the incongruities we meet, the result is inconsistency and contradictory views. According to Fox any interpretation of Qoheleth must answer three questions: What is he negating and complaining about? What is he affirming and recommending? What are his underlying reasons for each? Crenshaw in a review, claims that Qoheleth's main complaint is the irrationality of the universe; his chief recommendation is to have pleasure as far as possible. The reason seems to be that death makes null and empty every effort to achieve profit making the present moment crucial. Fox writes that Qoheleth describes God as powerful, unpredictable, autocratic, dangerous, distant, cold but not hostile even if sometimes perverse (3:10-11; 6:2; 7:14). Nevertheless according to Fox, Qoheleth ascribes justice to God in the face of many failures, yet projecting that justice into the future (3:17; 11:9). He speaks of God with no warmth and expects no fellowship with him. God controls the details of human life but this rather steely God keeps a distance yet is not hostile. For Fox, hebel ('absurd') indicated a disappointment of expectation, as what we want we cannot get. We are all going to die and will take nothing with us and find nothing waiting for us

Fox has an interesting reflection on George A. Barton's *Ecclesiastes* (ICC), Edinbergh, T&T Clark, (1908, repr.1959). According to Barton, Koheleth's conception of God is dark but his religion is sincere (p48). To a Christian the teaching is chilling and disappointing. Kohleth's negative work had "a function to perform in clearing away outworn conceptions before a new, larger, truer and more inspiring faith could have its birth" (p50). However Barton does not identify the "outworn conceptions" which Koheleth supposedly swept away. Neither the Jews of the pre-Christian era, nor Christianity discarded what Koheleth contradicted.

Fox proposes nine textual changes including 2:3; 3:11; 7:19; 7:28; 8:8; 8:12; 9:2. He believes that Qoheleth's positive advice is to find pleasure (whatever about the inclusion in 1:8 and 12:8). However:

The boldest, most radical notion of the book is not Koheleth's contradictions, his pessimism, or his observations of injustices. It is the belief that the individual can and should proceed toward truth by means of his own powers of perception and reasoning; and that he can in this way discover truths previously unknown. There are no external rules, no doctrines or traditions to which conclusions must conform. This is the approach of philosophy, and its appearance in Ecclesiastes probably reflects a Jewish awareness of thinking among foreign intellectuals (pp XI-XII).

2006: Martin Shields: *The End of Wisdom: A Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of Ecclesiastes*, Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns. Shields, an Australian artist and scholar, portrays Qoheleth as a kind of parody of a wise person.

2007: Graham S. Ogden: *Qoheleth* (second edition), Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007

According to Ogden, a translation consultant who lives near Melbourne Australia:

It would be correct to say that most modern scholars now accept that Qoheleth (1:2-12:8) is the work of one sage. Evidence for this position resides in the peculiar literary style, the constant return to a chosen theme, the repetitions, phrases, and concepts which bind the work together. A strong advocate of the unity of the book is Loader (1979). He concludes, on the basis of his literary investigations, that there is not one contradiction in the original book (1.2-12.8); rather we have a masterly-arranged series of 'polar structures'... (pp13-14).

For Ogden the inquiry into the advantage of work is the "programmatic question for the entire book" (pp22-28). He, however, sees 5:8 as "one of those verses whose interpretation we may never fully ascertain" (p86).

2008 Leo G. Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids,



Michigan.

“In my view”, writes Perdue, “Qoheleth is a piece of sapiential testamental literature. It sets forth the fiction of Israel’s most honoured sage and patron of the wisdom tradition, Solomon, engaging in the quest to determine the “good” in human living. The discovery of this greatest good will allow one to negotiate an ethical response to a life of virtue, because its experience is to provide the impetus for human behaviour. Solomon, through the imagination of a literary fiction, instructs his audience as an old king facing his own mortality. And, having lived centuries before the time of the fashioning of this testament, he also, like his Egyptian royal counterparts (Merikare and Amenemhet), instructs his audience from the grave” (p208). “The closest parallels to the literary genre and content of Qoheleth are found in Egyptian grave autobiographies and Greek inscriptions written on tombs, including Jewish ones.” (pp208-9).

#### SYNTHESIS

Doubtless Qoheleth is regaling his companions in some cosy corner of the after-life as he is informed that another effort at a synthesis of his thinking is being attempted. He describes in the beginning how not unlike the Greek philosophers, Socrates and Diogenes, he goes on a quest for the meaning of life. In this he seems to be at odds on the meaning of life and such issues as divine justice to be at odds with the main thrust of biblical tradition. He is even willing to deliberately quote traditional views only to refute them (8:12-14). To be quite honest he seems to have no clear path to tread. One could of course highlight such popular passages as the Catalogue of Times (3:1-8) and the equally popular *Allegory of Old Age* (12:1-7) but clearly such purple passages are not always the heart of the matter. One could paraphrase the repeated proverb “all is vanity and a chasing after wind” which Thomas Bolin (*Rivalry and Resignation*, Biblica, 2005, Vol 86, pp245-259) interprets as what René Girard calls mimetic rivalry: the conflict between humanity and the gods. He suggests that the proverb can be paraphrased “all is mortal but strives for immortality” or “all is fleeting, yet desires

permanence” or even “all is human, but strives for divinity”. In his two epilogues two editors (12:9-14) praise Qoheleth for his “integrity, reliability, and elegance” (Crenshaw in *Harper’s bible Commentary*, p524) “although conceding that his sayings provide painful education” and warn against any other works like this. Leland Ryken (*Words of Delight*, Baker, Michigan, 1992, p319) calls Ecclesiastes one of the greatest masterpieces in all literature and one of the most misunderstood books of the Bible. He notes that Herman Meville described it “the truest of all books” while novelist Thomas Wolfe calls it “the highest flower of poetry, eloquence and truth” and “the greatest single piece of writing I have known”. Ryken finds that it examines the most basic theme of the Bible “that life lived by purely earthly or human values, without faith in God and supernatural values is meaningless and futile.” (p320)

According to Leo G. Perdue (*The Sword and the Stylus*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2008) who has produced “the first properly historical introduction to the wisdom tradition” (John J. Collins), Qoheleth presents:

The most developed form of an internal scepticism that gripped the Jewish worldview in Israel and early Judaism. Scholars like Qoheleth seriously contested traditional affirmations in Jewish religious and sapiential circles. In his sceptical views of God, wisdom and human existence, Qoheleth appears to have drawn on similar Greek and Egyptian traditions of wisdom, religious teachings and philosophy vibrant during his time as a teacher. At least his book takes its place in a world in which scepticism was regnant in the cultural climate (pp199-200).

Perdue suggests (p224) that Qoheleth lived and taught before the Seleucid takeover (by 198) when life under Ptolemy IV became more harsh. He notes that the city blended Greek and indigenous aspects, also that the land of Judah experienced about five Syrian wars (274-271; 260-253; 246-241; 221-217; and 202-198) and the revolt of the Maccabees against Greek rule (167-164). Perdue is

confident that schools of different types existed in Israel from the First Temple to the Roman Empire. The epilogue seems to indicate that Qoheleth studied and taught in a school which was influenced by Hellenistic paideia (p240). The worldly Zadokite priests, the cosmopolitan Hasidim, and the sectarian apocalyptic seers would have been his opponents. Qoheleth may have been a wealthy Hellenistic Jewish sage who was involved in the education of some of the Jewish aristocracy in and around Jerusalem. He notes that zeal for the Torah is not evident in the family of Tobias, the writings of Josephus and the testament of Qoheleth: "Hellenistic teachings in his work include the important place given to fate and determinism and the conclusion that death in the tomb is the end of the human journey. His cautious view of cultic religion and the absence of important Jewish views of divine creation and revelation, the Torah and redemptive history permit the teacher to enter and dwell within a Hellenistic world that is not incompatible with his culture's own expressions of value and religious understanding" (p236).

A lot depends, as scholars like Craig Bartholomew point out (e.g. *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2009), on whether one reads Ecclesiastes as a negative and hopeless witness to the gospel or as a text with a positive and important contribution to make. It is best to see Qoheleth as writing in line with the goodness of creation, while celebrating life in a positive way under the images of eating/drinking/working and enjoying marriage. One could even read Qoheleth as a struggle between joy and hebel. Despite Pete Seeger's optimistic interpretation in his song "Turn, Turn, Turn", there is a tone of resignation to the famous 3:1-9. This famous passage has been invoked surprisingly in support of both military activity and its opposite pacifism. It shows the human inability to make sense of life as the following verses indicate:

What advantage has the worker from his toil? I have considered the task which God has appointed for men to be busied about. He has made everything appropriate to its time, and has put the

timeless into their hearts without men's ever discovering, from the beginning to end, the work which God has done. (3:9-11)

Qoheleth commends mirth "because there is nothing good for man under the sun excepting eating and drinking and mirth" (8:15). The subversive writer asks more questions than he can provide answers for. Death is a dominant theme in the book which tends to nullify any positive conclusions which Qoheleth might draw (2:14-16; 3:2, 19-21 etc). It tends to render futile any search for meaning.

For Bartholomew, Qoheleth's struggle is more intellectual than Job's and can be summed up in the rhetorical question: "What do people gain from all the toil at which they work under the sun?" (1:3). It depends on reason and experience in contrast to an approach which merely remembers one's Creator, with faith and obedience. Bartholomew agrees with Fox that epistemology is central to Ecclesiastes (p57). Fox's quest concerns how one can know whether work in its widest sense has meaning. Qoheleth stresses the basic principle of Greek philosophy, the basic autonomy of a person's reason. Roland Murphy remarks (p115) that Von Rad claimed that Qoheleth "had lost the trust that characterized traditional wisdom." Yet "one may wonder if he ultimately had a deeper faith than those who "trusted". He rejected the easy acceptance of the tradition, questioning it severely, but ultimately he accepted God on God's terms" (see Roland E. Murphy: "*The Faith of Qoheleth*", *Word and World*, 7, 1987, pp253-60).

Craig G. Bartholomew (*Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2008) claims that the vigorous debate among first century Jewish schools has continued to this day when the discussion is the extent to which Ecclesiastes is good news. While a minority of scholars find that it affirms joy, he concludes that the majority find it to be pessimistic, even hopeless. I like Murphy's insistence that biblical wisdom is basically a religious quest in contrast to many scholars who tend to label the wisdom books as secular. For the biblical writers paradox and ambiguity were central to the wisdom enterprise. The basic paradox lies in the tension that wisdom is acquired by

discipline and docility, yet it is a gift of God. Trust in God does not mean that paradox and ambiguity are not central to the mystery of divine activity.

Even a rapid glance at the many commentaries available warns us that there is no widespread agreement concerning the language, unity, literary genre, origin or overall message of this enigmatic book. It contains many proverbs, rhetorical questions, allegories, reflections. Even from its early days, its place in the canon was controversial. According to the Talmud some of the wise wanted to suppress it 'because its words contradicted one another'. According to the Mishnah, the followers of Hillel argued that it was divinely inspired, while the rural school of Shanami opposed this vigorously. Down through the ages it has provoked frustration, dislike and even resentment. Views have ranged from 'the song of scepticism' to 'the most moving Messianic prophecy' to 'the most heretical and fatalistic' book in the Bible. For some the vision is of a bleak, empty life. For others it is a life of faith, full of simple joys. Qoheleth, the focus of this book has been described as a sceptic, a cynic, a pragmatist, a stoic, a realist, a nihilist, a pessimist (9:3), an epicurean hedonist (2:24), a materialist (3:19), and of recent years, an optimist, a lonely existentialist, not to omit a practitioner of the 'hermeneutic of suspicion'. One thing is clear, he is not an atheist, because to him God exists yet humans cannot fathom God's purpose or discover any coherent pattern in our existence. God is never called by him "Yahweh" ("the Lord") his proper Israelite name. This subversive book is concerned with the meaning of life even though there are no references to the main events and characters in Israel's history. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* (VI, 349) once labelled the book as boring, repetitious, aimless, disorganised, blasphemous, wrong-headed, and heretical. Since Talmudic times it has been the fourth of the five Megelloth ('scrolls') which were read publicly at one of the annual religious festivals. These were: Song of Songs (Passover), Ruth (Pentecost), Lamentations (Ab), Ecclesiastes (Tabernacles, Sept.-Oct), Esther (Purim). The association with Tabernacles was a kind of reality therapy, "apparently in order to qualify the cheerfulness of that day

with the thought that life and its joys are fleeting and that everything has its time” (O.S. Rankin, *Ecclesiastes*, Interpreter’s Bible, V:4). Murphy (p199) calls William P. Brown’s *Character in Crisis*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1996 the most perceptive study of biblical wisdom because he captures the development of moral character within the three traditional wisdom books:

The ‘return’ of Qoheleth is not as spectacular as that of Job. It is manifested by a resigned attitude towards a life marked by toil, vexation and death – by “vanity”. He has no answers, but his well known recommendations (seven times) to enjoy what God “gives” mark a turn. “Qoheleth’s call is to relish each and every moment in gratitude, however sparse they may be. These redemptive moments cannot be had or made... They are rather extended serendipitously as ‘providential chances’” (p157). Brown’s work has set the path for a more trustworthy and profitable analysis of biblical ethics (Murphy, p200).

The first epilogue praises the author as the corrector of tradition, one who feared God and kept his commandments.

The three main ‘goads’ which provoke the author are the unfairness of life, our ignorance of its meaning and the certainty of death for all. They are a kind of reality therapy on the third day of festivities, a blunt reminder of the transience of the joys of life (3:11-22; 8:9ff) – this major pilgrim feast got its name from the booths in which the people lived, as they gathered and celebrated the harvest. One can interpret the book as a reflection on the fundamental theme of the bible that human life based on purely earthly or human values without faith in God is frustrating and without meaning. One scholar called Qoheleth a series of mood pieces on the journey of the mind and soul on the most important of all quests, to find satisfaction in life. One listing calculates 15 negative passages (‘under the sun’ is found in twelve of these), 13 positive ones (‘under the sun’ is only in four) – the positive ones have a deliberate emphasis on the God-centered life in sharp

contrast to the negative ones. Thus the author proposes himself as our travelling companion who keeps constantly alive the notion of a relentless search: "again I saw, then I saw, so I turned to consider, I have also seen, I turned my mind to know and to search out and to seek". There is a continuous reminder here of modern protest literature. The negative passages provide a modern flavour particularly in the light of the modern greedy rush which we have seen in the acquisitive community of recent years. The author clearly samples all the many things from money, sex, work, material things, knowledge, hedonism, power which have been relentlessly pursued. They produced such disastrous result in the Western economy in recent times as we ignore the positive alternatives which Qoleleth relentlessly highlights.

Most scholars agree that the attribution to Solomon is purely a literary form, a kind of patronage attribution, to give substance to the writer's argument. There is, indeed, the slight possibility that the author is one of the Persian governors who saw himself in the line of the Jewish kings. Much of the linguistic and cultural evidence suggests a post-exilic dating before the Maccabean Revolt in B.C. 164, perhaps between 225 and 250. The hypothesis that the original language was Aramaic seems untenable because of the discovery at Qumran of Hebrew fragments of the text. Two Persian loan words (*pardos*=park and *medinah*=province) are suggestive. After ch 3 there are no references to Solomon and the references to a king suggest that the author was a subject.

Nevertheless, on examination, one can find a progressive life story and reflection in the book: the enthusiasm and searching of youth in the first two chapters gives way to a more resigned appreciation of reality in the following chapters. By ch.12 we reach old age and the expectation of death, with an epitaph given as a second voice in the epilogue.

The literary form(s) include many proverbs, rhetorical questions, allegories and reflections, meditations and confessions, all permeated with a tone of melancholic scepticism. Generally the form is autobiographical with an epilogue reflection at

the end, all aimed at encouraging the reader to reflect on the human condition. They are not unlike the famous but rather loosely connected notes and reflections, the *Pensées* of Pascal.

Qoheleth, according to Perdue p246,

would have read and studied Jewish literature written in Hebrew and Greek and he appears to have read earlier Greek texts. He likely taught aristocratic youth in a private Jewish school he would have operated, possibly in his house. These youth, once they received their education, became government officials and administrators, accountants, scribes, lawyers and clerks. He addressed his students with the term of familiarity, "youth" (bohur, 11:9). The activities of Qoheleth as a teacher and scribe are listed in 12:9-10. These include "weighing" (i.e. "evaluating", *izzen*) "seeking out" (*higger*) and "ordering" (*tiggen*) "many sayings" (*mesalim harbeh*). Thus he assayed the wisdom he collected in order to determine its authenticity and truth.

It was a time of growing skepticism with the denial of the Olympian gods, a practical atheism which denied the gods were active or mattered in human life. Many encouraged the joyful celebration of life, before the eternal night descended. These found a ready ear in Qoheleth (for eight similarities to Qoheleth see Perdue, p248).

In a careful study of the structure of Qoheleth, Addison G. Wright (cf *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p489ff; CBQ 30, 1968, pp313-34) in the light of the "newer criticism" emphasised that one should concentrate on the linguistic evidence provided by the text itself. Although no consensus on structure has been reached, Wright's analysis has convinced a number of scholars including Seow. He distinguishes two major sections to Qoheleth: his investigation of life in 1:12-6:9 and Qoheleth's conclusions in 6:10-11:6. After the opening poem (1:1-11) and preface (1:12-18), the author reports on his investigation into life (1:12-6:9)



emphasizing the phrase 'hebel' ('vanity') and 'a chase after wind'. In 6:10-12, the second introduction, we find the structural elements, the two topics for the second half: no one can find out what is good to do (7:1-8:17) and no one knows the future (9:1-11:6). In ch.8 Qoheleth notes that people cannot distinguish the good from the bad. People are confused by the evident prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the just. He has no idea of a judgment during the afterlife – sheol, the underworld is a place of nothingness but darkness for all (9:5-6; 10; 11:8). Qoheleth's invitation to enjoy life is not the only one in ancient literature. In the well-known *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Siduri tells Gilgamesh who is frightened of death after the loss of his friend Enkidu that he should pursue the enjoyment of life instead of his search for immortality. Also in *The Harper's Song*, a focus on this life rather than the unknown afterlife is recommended. For Qoheleth we have little or no understanding of the game of life which is being played (1:18; 2:12-16; 10:14).

The implications of the structure are important. Clearly there is a tension between the traditional and more sceptical passages in the book. Early Christian commentators noted the contradictions. They tended to assign them to a dialogue between two people, a questioner and a speaker, and thus neutralize and refute the radical criticisms. In this way Jerome was content to use the book to persuade a certain Blesilla to reject the vanities of the world and embrace the monastic life – cf Jerome's Preface to his commentary on Ecclesiastes. Jerome notes in his commentary that Jews considered that it should be suppressed because it taught that all God's creatures are vain and empty, preferring eating, drinking, and transient pleasure to everything else. Jerome solved the problem of the frequent recommendations "to eat, drink and enjoy oneself" (2:24; 3:13; 5:19) by applying them to receiving the Eucharist – Jewish exegetes would apply them to studying the Torah. On 7:16 Jerome explained the warning to the self-righteous person against excessive justice. This leads us to the situation that we are never willing to forgive sin in others – V20 warns that there is no person so just as to do good and

never sin. The modern tendency has been to the opposite i.e. to take these sceptical Muggerridge-type statements as Qoheleth's critique of the common theological or wisdom orthodoxy which he is quoting – unfortunately ancient works did not use quotation marks. Nevertheless the current biblical hermeneutic tends to examine books as a whole, including all parts, particularly the end. This is in sharp contrast to the atomistic view which was brought to an extreme by the source-critic C. Siegfried who identified nine different sources in 1898. He proposed a whole series of editors who attempted to correct the book and make it more orthodox. It was a basically pessimistic document by an Epicurean Sadducee, a wisdom teacher, an orthodox Jew who believed in God's just rule. He was followed by other glossators, redactors and epilogists.

Therefore the final statement of the book, the supremely ironical comment on the sceptical tone of the book, is that the font of wisdom, the end of the matter is 'to fear God and keep his commandments'. For Crenshaw (*Old Testament Story and Faith*, Hendrickson, Peabody, Mass. 1992, p345): "The amazing thing is the impression of unity that pervades the book when so many factors combine to undermine this possibility. In short, even the present form of the book has a unity of theme and mood, and this introductory and concluding refrain captures both..." The commentator (12:9-12) gives approval to Qoheleth's wise words as "goads like nails driven home" (12:11), suggesting that their real goal is the fear of God. According to Perdue (p254) the one important thing in human experiences is the capacity for joy, even though joy is a rather limited good (p255). The expression 'fear of God' is the traditional expression in the wisdom literature. It is almost the equivalent of our word 'religion' for which there is no equivalent in the Bible. But such words receive new depth and nuance in Qoheleth. It is obviously modified by his insistence on the numinous mystery of the 'known' God's ways (3:13ff; 5:6; 7:18; 8:12). For it is God who alone decides to whom to give the gift of joy (2:24-26).

Qoheleth is deceptively simple in his small number of leading concepts such as

vanity, striving after wind, toil, lot etc. to which he returns again and again according to Von Rad (*Wisdom in Israel*, p227) – some 25 Hebrew root words account for 21% of the words used between 1:4-12:8. The problem is our uncertainty regarding the nuances of the words. Ultimately our interpretation of the book comes down to our interpretation of the key term “hebel”. The motif ‘hebel’ begins (1:2) and ends (12:8) our text and is found 38 times in all. Literally it means ‘breath’ (Job 7:16; 9:29; Ps 39:6-7; 62:10; 94:11; 144:4). Ogden prefers the translation ‘enigmatic’ while Murphy prefers “incomprehensible” and Miller relates it to the key meaning of ‘vapor’. Perdue summarises the definitions of scholars in five varieties (p251):

- 1) “Vanity”, a metaphor for “meaning lessness” or “emptiness”.
- 2) “Absurdity”, the difference between what is expected and what occurs.
- 3) The “irrational” that negates “human actions of significance and undermines morality”.
- 4) That which is inconsistent, unpredictable, and mysterious.
- 5) “Ephemerality/evanescence”, that is, everything quickly passes.

The different translations given to ‘hebel’ in modern versions demonstrate how elusive it is: Vanity (NRSV and NAB), Futility (New J.B.), Useless (GNB), Futile (The Living Bible), Emptiness (NEB). Drawing on A. Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, a number of Scholars conclude that hebel which in Hebrew means ‘breadth’ or ‘vapour’ should be translated here as ‘absurd’. Others suggest the modern “hot air”. Probably the best analysis comes from the Princeton doctorate thesis of Graham S. Ogden (1987, p22, also published by Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007) which as he says, not only provides a fascinating academic study but offers “profound insights into the real issues of faith in a broken and enigmatic world.” The question for Ogden is: does one emphasise the so-called unity-theme or the call to enjoy life under God in all its mystery and giftedness? Whatever one decides it seems clear that what Murphy called the three common assumptions of pre-modern exegesis (Solomonic authorship, the “utterly enigmatic” interpretation and the recognition of tensions within the book) have to a large extent been

undermined by modern, critical, exegesis (*Qoheleth Interpreted*, V.T. 1982, pp331-37).

For Ogden "hebel" conveys the idea that life is enigmatic and mysterious with many unanswered and unanswerable questions. This conclusion is not unlike the often-quoted conclusion to his survey of Christian and Jewish exegesis by C.D. Ginsburg in 1857: "What a solemn lesson for the pious and for the learned to abstain from dogmatism, and what an admonition not to urge one's own pious emotions and religious conceits as the meaning of the Word of God."

It is fascinating to read some of the modern scholars such as Edwin M. Good, Timothy Polk and Harold Fisch who have examined the theme of irony in Qoheleth (eg 4:13-16; 7:1-4; 9:1-10) – J.J. Spangenberg finds that the whole book of Qoheleth reflects an ironic tone. E.M. Good in *Irony in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1965, p182) translates hebel as incongruous or ironic. Timothy Polk in his aptly entitled study *The Wisdom of Irony* (Studia Biblica et Theologica, March 1976, pp3-17) highlights the creativity of Qoheleth's use of the term in the light of biblical tradition. Thus while 30:7 describes the seeking of Egyptian help against the neo-Assyrians as doomed to failure because Egypt is 'hebel' and empty. not unlike Eliot's hollow men, Jer. 10:5 maintains that idols are 'hebel' because they lack the breath of life. Ps 144:4 sees humans as 'hebel' because their days are like a passing shadow. For Polk 'hebel' has a touch of irony, an apt term for destroying the illusion under which people live, by exposing the gap between what really is and what should be, between reality and pretence. But Qoheleth is the first within the wisdom tradition to make the sweeping statement that all of life's experience is 'hebel' or to quote his other phrase like chasing the wind (1:17; 2:11ff; 4:4; 6:9).

According to Robert Davidson (*Wisdom and Worship*, London, SCM, 1990, pp61ff) Qoheleth has in many respects a typically conservative mind. But his shrewd coolly analytic questions are 'somewhat colder, more objective than the hurt cries which we hear in Job and in the Psalms. His questions are in two main

categories: the ‘who knows?’ or ‘who can do x?’ types of questions (3:21; 6:11) which come up against the frontiers of mystery and secondly the ‘what profit is there?’ or ‘What does a man gain by’ type which emphasises the pointlessness of certain human activities. The search for meaning takes one to certain frontiers beyond which it is impossible to go with any certainty. Davidson in a small book *Go By the Book* (Edinburgh, St Andrew Press, 1996, p1-3) comments that if you ask what it all means (3:2-4, 7-8) you will end up with a large question mark. Further: “We find Ecclesiastes looking at a society in which the poor are being denied their rights, where bribery is rife and where justice for many is only a pipe dream. There is no point, he says, in getting upset about it; it’s the system and you can’t beat the system (5:8)” (p2).

However one should not think of Ecclesiastes as “a solitary dissident challenging the otherwise accepted party line, the one cuckoo in an otherwise comfortable theological nest” (p3). Rather it is a clear warning sign which we will meet facing us right across the Bible, and across the history of the nation. He talks of a marriage service at which he once officiated. Later he asked the groom, after his wife had abandoned him, why he had chosen a reading from Ecclesiastes (3:1-8). He received the answer: “It is the only part of the Bible which continues to make sense to me at the moment.”

Davidson, who is thoroughly familiar with the wisdom tradition, uses a comparison with other biblical traditions to show the radical nature of Qoheleth’s thinking:

Texts such as Genesis 1 and Psalm 136 show a positive attitude to a “very good” natural world.

In comparison to prophetic calls to repent, change and love justice, Qoheleth reflects an aristocratic mentality. He insists that the crooked cannot be made straight and that we must accept the unfairness of life (1:14; 5:8). He is no advocate of enlightenment or of social change.

Qoheleth is aware of the authority of the law (3:14). But he does not have the love, security or joyful response of Deuteronomy or of Ps 1 but only 'fear the Lord' (5:6; 8:12; 12:13) which signifies 'cold terror' (p195).

Qoheleth speaks of worship (5:1ff), echoing the prophetic critique of superficiality and shallowness. But he would never cry 'Hallelujah' or 'Bless the Lord, O my soul'. He has no intimate prayer relationship with a caring God.

While quoting extensively wisdom sayings (e.g. ch 7,10,11), Qoheleth, like Job and Ps 73, clearly dissents from the view that the just enjoy peace and the wicked have suffering (7:15) or that merit and success are correlated in this life (9:11f).

Nevertheless there is a healthy modern positive advice regarding enjoyment. This can be seen in contrast to a typical passage from the Law e.g. James L. Crenshaw (*Story and Faith*, Hendrickson, Peabody, Mass., 1992, p349). Crenshaw gives a fragment of a clay tablet of the Gilgamesh Epic where Siduri advises Gilgamesh to enjoy life, using language very similar to that in Ecclesiastes. Thus Num. 15:39 reads "when you use these tassels, let the sight of them remind you to keep all the commandments of the Lord, without going wantonly astray after the desires of your hearts and eyes." Contrast Ecc 11:9: "Rejoice, O young man, while you are young, and let your heart be glad in the days of your youth. Follow the way of your heart, the vision of your eyes; Yet understand that as regards all this, God will bring you to judgement." Qoheleth emphasises the mysterious freedom yet generosity of God by using the verb "give" with God as a subject, some 12 times out of a total of 25 (e.g. 1:13; 5:17; 12:7). "The God", as Qoheleth refers to him, seems absent from the world of human dwelling, yet issues unalterable decrees. Thus the book is in no way escapist but can be fruitfully compared with Tom Wolfe's 1987 novel (*Bonfire of the Vanities*) about New York in the 1960s. A key theme throughout Qoheleth's book is God's 'giving' in the various

dimensions of life e.g. God puts eternity into man's mind (3:10-14). He continually exhorts his audience to respond by enjoying life, eating and drinking and finding enjoyment in their work (2:24; 3:12,22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9). He encourages them to avoid excessive use of energies in the wrong directions. According to William P. Brown (p157):

Qoheleth's call is to relish each moment in gratitude, however sparse they may be. These redemptive moments cannot be had or made, Qoheleth comes to realize in his lifelong pursuit as the royal sage. They are rather extended serendipitously as "providential chances". The marks or virtues that Qoheleth commends all operate in consort with the reception and stewardship of such moments.

There is a clear echo of Qoheleth's contemporary the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BC). Yet it is important to remember that it was the prophet Isaiah (22:13) in the Bible who proclaimed "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die" (Is 22:13) as he placed a note of prophetic disapproval on the idea. Murphy notes (p211) that for O. Kaiser the summa of Qoheleth's teaching is *carpe diem* (9:7-10). On the one hand Qoheleth says "remember death", while on the other hand he proclaims "forget your mortality". These are complementary views. They insist that life is short yet the only possible joy should not be neglected.

David Clines (p280) makes an interesting comparison with Proverbs on the understanding of enjoyment. For Qoheleth pleasure in activity is in fact the reward for the activity (2:16). In contrast to Proverbs, where reward is envisaged as something that follows after an act, Ecclesiastes sees the reward as the experiencing of the act, or rather the experiencing of it to the full, including the appreciation of it, not merely in terms of its use (2:2).

A comparison is often made between Job with his focus on tragic suffering and Qoheleth and his emphasis on happiness. Both criticise the oversimplification of their contemporaries. Job is a very emotionally involved poet whereas Qoheleth is

a quite clinically detached philosopher with a style that can easily be mistaken for prose. Job hungers to meet a personal God. Qoheleth's God is too remote. Job struggles to reconcile faith and experience, to make sense out of a tragic world. In Qoheleth alone in the Hebrew Bible, apart from the Song of Songs, practical experience is considered the measure of all truth. Qoheleth, for all the growing scepticism of his time, denies neither the reality of God (who is never called Yahweh), nor a meaningful role for men and women in the world. He believes in providence and total control (5:11 ff; 8:17; 11:5), expects divine judgement (3:17; 11:9; 12:13f) and even praises the divine wisdom (7:12,20; 9:12-18). Qoheleth accepts that there are many limits and that no one can really understand such matters. His concern is not so much with God as with human misunderstanding and illusions about God's activity. The more radical Qoheleth ends with his remote and silent God, with the ideal of keeping the commandments of a God to be feared. Job ends with God speaking to him, criticising his ignorance and restoring his lifestyle. Compared to Job one could describe Qoheleth as a practical atheist. The God who walked in the garden with Adam and Eve, wrestled with Jacob, spoke to Abraham and Moses, spoke through the prophets and could be accused of seducing Jeremiah is remote from Qoheleth, He has fixed times for our lives, to which man must accommodate himself.

*The Religious Value of Qoheleth:* Recent scholars have waxed eloquent on the contribution of Qoheleth to the biblical canon. For John Carmody etc. (*Exploring the Hebrew Bible*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1988, p351f) Qoheleth is "a dangerous work" and it is a tribute to the courage of the canonical editors of the Bible "to let the enemy come right into their treasury of authoritative writings and make its best case". Its lasting significance is its (positive) negativity, not unlike the idealistic schools of Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism – not to forget the similar language of a John of the Cross. It teaches the mystery at the heart of creation and warns that nothing worldly can give full satisfaction or can come without bringing pain after it. It recalls the restless heart of Augustine and like the



medieval Thomas a Kempis intones “Remember Death”. For Davidson (*The Courage to Doubt*, p202), Qoheleth, ending with a silent God and a view of the whole life as ‘hebel’, is the ‘joker in the O.T. pack – but what a superb joker’, when the experiential side of religion is gone (Prov 31:30; Ps 62:10).

For Crenshaw (*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol 2, p277) Qoheleth is a witness to a crisis among some intellectual circles in Israel – as Murphy (p212) puts it, it has been commonplace to speak of the crisis of Qoheleth as well as of Job. This crisis for scholars such as Horst D. Preuss (*Einführung Stuttgart*, Kohlhammer, 1987) was a failure of the religion of traditional wisdom. Thus Qoheleth taught:

by means of various literary types that earlier optimistic claims about wisdom’s power to secure one’s existence have no validity. No discernible principle of order governs the universe, rewarding virtue and punishing evil. The creator, distant and uninvolved, acts as judge only (if at all) in extreme cases of flagrant affront (for example, renegeing on religious vows). Death cancels all imagined gains, rendering life under the sun absurd. Therefore the best policy is to enjoy one’s wife, together with good food and drink, during youth, for old age and death will soon put an end to this ‘relative’ good. In short, Qoheleth examined all of life and discovered no absolute good that would survive death’s effect. p277).

For A.G. Wright S.S. (*The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p490) the religious value of Qoheleth is that its critical assessment is constantly necessary ‘to keep religion honest and in touch with reality.’ Its insistence on enjoyment needs to be heard by the ascetics who feel ‘that biblical religion in some ways militates against enjoyment.’ His negative assessment of the workaholic needs to be heard by those who view the assessment as ‘synonymous with religious dedication’. The lack of a close personal relationship with God gives dignity to the many good people who travel in the dark like Qoheleth. For the pious it is an

invitation to look honestly into their hearts to the grounds of their beliefs and unbeliefs.

According to Dianne Bergant in *The Catholic Study Bible*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p266:

Qoheleth would insist that the primary goal of life is living. All work, all progress has one principal purpose and that is the enhancement and promotion of life. Every other end is at best secondary or otherwise “a chase after the wind”. This is a profoundly religious teaching, for Qoheleth believed that it was the creator who placed the desire for happiness within each human heart, made living an exciting adventure and willed that every person be given the chance to find pleasure in life. He would strongly object to any materialistic point of view that might minimize or deny this basic connection. Qoheleth was a champion of the greatest of God’s gifts – life itself.

Qoheleth is a book on the threshold of the N.T. groaning for the revelation of the afterlife, given to the Jewish people only in the last two centuries before Jesus and described in Dan. 12:2f; 2 Macc 6-7; Wisd 2-5 and in the New Testament. It is a book, to quote the final author’s words, ‘of goads and nails, used against the common wisdom’. As Peter F. Ellis concludes in *The Men and the Message of the O.T.* (Collegeville, August, 1986, p487) these words “unsettle the complacent, shock the orthodox and trouble even the wise.” In the Christian tradition perhaps the best known comment is by Thomas à Kempis in his classic *The Imitation of Christ* (published in Latin c.1418): “Vanity of vanities and all is vanity unless we serve God and love him with our whole heart. On this is the highest and safest wisdom, that by contempt of the world we endeavour to please God”.

The author, in conclusion, does not reject out-of-hand the observations of Qoheleth but brings them under the wider tradition of fearing God and keeping his commandments.

Martin A. Shields, an Australian artist and scholar, composed *The End of Wisdom* (Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, Indiana). Shields provides an interpretation of Ecclesiastes which coheres with the mainly negative attitude towards human wisdom which is found in the rest of the Bible. He begins his final summary as follows:

Qoheleth's words have always troubled his readers, largely because of the difficulty of reconciling them with the remainder of the Bible. Qoheleth seeks answers, but he looks neither to God nor to other scriptures for the answers. Instead he ascribes evil to God (6:2), accuses God of making things irrevocably corrupt (7:13) and questions God's justice (6:2). His ideas explicitly contradict orthodox statements made elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. 7:15-18; 11:9). Indeed, I have argued that even the few brief sections of this work, that are sometimes interpreted positively are almost certainly far less affirmative than they appear to be (e.g. 2:24-26; 4:17-5:6/7).

I like the concluding comment of John F. Priest in the supplementary Volume to *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1976, p250:

All too often 'religious' people tend to overlook the painful discrepancies between their faith and the facts of life. Koheleth reminds us all that religious affirmations which cannot be looked at squarely with honesty and integrity, will not finally sustain us in the vicissitudes of life. He raises with vigor and precision the very questions which must be asked. One need not share his answers, stemming from his lack of an answer, but beliefs which avoid his questions are revealed again and again as shallow, if not false.

Even for those who do not share either Koheleth's views or those he contradicts, the book remains a source of wonder and delight. The hauntingly beautiful phrases, the cynical and ironical deflating of

beliefs too easily held and the heartfelt sorrow for a world gone sour continue to stimulate and irritate all who look beneath the surface.

The God of Qoheleth may in fact be rather remote and not subject to easy manipulation by our desires to maintain an unjust world. One can only admire and hope to imitate the honest and realistic approach which he takes to God. It is worth pondering on his challenging word in his most explicit statement on religious observance in 5:1-2 (Hebrew 4:17 – 5:1).

Guard your step when you go to the house of God.  
 Let your approach be in order to listen  
 Rather than the fool's offering of sacrifice,  
 For they know not how to keep from doing evil.  
 Be not hasty in your utterance and  
 Let not your heart be quick  
 To make a promise in God's presence.  
 God is in heaven and you are upon earth,  
 Let your words, therefore be few ....

Leonard J. Greenspoon in Michael D. Coogan (*The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p464) summarises the contradictory yet surprisingly appealing advice of Qoheleth as follows: "Go your own way, experience life fully, remember your roots, make God your master."

Surprisingly, perhaps, Qoheleth does not play an important role in the Christian liturgy. Only one Sunday in the three year lectionary is taken from Qoheleth (the 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Year C: 1:2; 2:21-23). Three lessons are used on weekdays in the 25<sup>th</sup> week of Year 2 (1:2-11; 3:1-11; 11:2-12:18). In the Liturgy of the Hours pericopes are read during the 20<sup>th</sup> week of the year.



## CHAPTER FOUR: THE BOOK OF BEN SIRA OF JERUSALEM

### INTRODUCTION:

The five books brought together when Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon are added to Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes produce “a very satisfying completeness”. This is a literary canon just as we have in the Pentateuch, the historical books and the prophets, according to James Barr (*The Concept of Biblical Theology*, London, SCM Press, 1999, p575). He finds this view emphasised in such O.T. theologies as those of G.E. Wright and von Rad who dedicated a whole chapter to the Wisdom of Jesus Sirach in his *Wisdom in Israel*. Childs also followed with positive remarks in his *Biblical Theology* (pp189ff, London, SCM Press, 1992). According to Kathleen Anne Farmer in *The Westminster Theological Wordbook of the Bible* (ed. Donald E. Gowan, p535) Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon “made use of the personification of Wisdom in order to make important points about human access to God”. Sirach is focused on Wisdom as it begins with a wisdom poem (1:1-10). It has another such poem in the middle (24:1-34) and still another at the end (51:13-30). Perhaps his most distinctive contribution on wisdom is not his association of wisdom with the Law but rather his focus on the history of Israel. For Murphy (*The Tree of Life*, p74) the three topics which deserve more detailed examination are retribution, wisdom and election, and fear of the Lord.

(see H.B. Kieweler: *Ben Sira zwischen Judentum und Hellenismus*, BEATAJ 30, 1992). Sirach identifies Wisdom with the Word of God (24:2) and sees Wisdom as the link between scripture and God himself and specifically associates her with “the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law that Moses commanded us” (24:23). Sirach also stresses the prominence of the Temple, the importance of Jerusalem and the hierarchy of priests. Different scholars interpret this key text as a way of nationalizing wisdom or of universalizing Torah. Greg Schenidt Goering (*Wisdom’s Root Revealed: Ben Sira and the Election of Israel*, Leiden, Brill, 2009) finds that Ben Sira distinguishes two types of wisdom. In one Yahweh gives a general wisdom to all human beings (1:9b–10a). In the other a special wisdom is granted to Yahweh’s elect, Israel, “those who love him” (1:10b). Thus wisdom like Torah can be a form of divine revelation. This involves the observation of Yahweh’s commandments – “fear of Yahweh” involves loyalty to the covenant and observance of its commandments. In the monarchy wisdom and fear of Yahweh were closely connected. In the time of Ben Sira the high priest fulfilled the role of the King. The special relationship to Yahweh is stressed in 17:17.

Very useful surveys of more recent Sirach research are written by D.J. Harrington, *Sirach Research since 1965 in Pursuing the Text*, Studies in Honour of Ben Zion Wachodler, pp164-76, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 1994; A.A. DiLella, The *Wisdom of Ben Sira, Currents in Research*: Biblical Studies 4, 1996, pp161-81.

The fifty one chapters of Sirach (about 60 years of age) make it the longest of the wisdom books. The original title in Hebrew has not survived but the Greek translation calls it The Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sira. Many Latin Vulgate manuscripts call it Ecclesiastes. This literally means a “church book” quite likely because it was widely used in Church worship rather than in the synagogue. It begins with the solemn statement “All wisdom comes from the Lord, and with him it remains forever.” The author describes himself as toiling ‘for every seeker

of wisdom' 'like a gleaner after the vintage' filling his winepress (33:17-18). He begins his long study with a reflection on wisdom: "All wisdom comes from the Lord (1:1) and its goal is life". He writes in his own name (1:27) without attributing the book to an ancient personage as do Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. His volume is one of the few biblical books, in fact, written by the author to whom it is attributed. Further he sprinkles the text with autobiographical incidents (24:30-34; 33:16-19; 34:9-13; 29:12-13; 50:27; 51:13-30). Neither is the work "a Jewish declaration of war against Hellenism" as M. Hengel (*Judaism and Hellenism*, London, 1974, p138) quotes that R. Smend Sr., once said in 1907 Sirach, as far as we can see, did write his study in the time before the Hellenistic reform and the revolt of the Maccabees. He wrote his very large volume "for all who seek wisdom" (24:34). The wise are those who are faithful to the religion of Israel (2:15-17). His prologue contains three long sentences or rather paragraphs in excellent and even sophisticated Greek. The situation is one where Ben Sira, an experienced teacher, is teaching a younger man ("my child") who desires to become wise. The latter is male and has financial resources and expects to become head of a household. He is being trained to become a scribe and to exercise public leadership (38:24-39:11). Ben Sira seems to be conducting his school for young men in Jerusalem, quite likely near the Temple (cf. 51:23-30) about 180 BC, when Palestine was under Ptolemaic rule. Although Ben Sira is often described as a conservative scholar, he was in fact, a pioneer in integrating biblical wisdom with the wisdom of the wider world. However, according to Dianne Bergant (*New Interpreter's Study Bible*, p1452) he used most of the literary forms associated with the wisdom tradition: the *mashal* or proverb proper (19:12); the hymn of praise (1:1-10); the prayer of petition (22:27-23:6); autobiographical narrative (33:16-18) onomasticon or a list of like objects (42:15-43:33) and didactic narrative (44:1-50:24). In his exhortations he also used makarisms or beatitudes, woes and "better than" comparisons (19:24; 40:18-27). Scholars, such as Daniel Harrington, have noted striking parallels with the Greek



poet Theognis and the demotic Egyptian *Instruction in Papyrus Insinger*. Daniel Harrington, S.J. (*Invitation to the Apocrypha*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1999) suggests a compromise approach to the text. He presents first a structured outline, then a topical outline of the whole book and next treats seven topics in some detail. In the structured outline he finds the series of wisdom poems which the text contains to be useful in dividing this large book into seven main sections:

The origin and nature of wisdom (1:1-4:10).

The benefits of wisdom (4:11-6:17).

Discipline as the way to wisdom (6:18-14:19).

Seeking and finding wisdom (14:20-23:27).

Praise of Wisdom (24:1-38:23).

Tradesmen and the scribe (38:24-43:33).

God's glory in Israel (44:1-51:30).

Among the topics which are treated in different places in the text, Harrington lists: Autobiography, Creation, Death, Fear of the Lord, Friendship, Happiness, Honor and Shame, Humility and Pride, Manners and Moderation, Money Matters, Parents and Children, People of God, Prayers, Rulers, Sacrifice, Sickness and Doctors, Sin, Social Justice, Social Relations, Speech, Wealth, Wisdom, Women. Harrington then treats seven topics in some detail as an example of how to read Sirach: Fear of the Lord, Friendship, Honor and Shame, Women, the Doctrine of Pairs (33:7-15), Death, Wisdom.

According to Daniel J. Harrington (*Jesus Ben Sira of Jerusalem*, Interfaces, Liturgical Press, Minnesota, Collegeville, 2005, p3):

Ben Sira can be regarded as the first "theologian" in the Jewish and Christian traditions because he joined together secular wisdom and divine revelation (Scripture). This deeply conservative and traditional Jewish wisdom teacher laid out the path on which much greater thinkers such as Philo of Alexandria, Origen, Augustine,

Thomas Aquinas, Maimonides, John Henry Newman and Karl Rahner have traveled after him. And so we should read and study Jesus Ben Sira's book in the spirit in which he wrote it: "Observe that I have not labored for myself alone, but for all who seek wisdom" (Sir. 24:34).

The basic component of Sirach is the *mashal* (from the root meaning "be like", "similar") – according to Jerome it was known among the Jews as *Meshalim* (Proverbs). The book is a mixture of proverbs and long essays on such wisdom themes as the use of speech, self-control, evil friends, the value of work, death, sickness etc. thus in 3:30 he says "As the water extinguishes a blazing fire, so almsgiving atones for sin". His style is frequently described as anthological as he often drew his vocabulary and phrases from the earlier books of the O.T. but combined them in fresh and new combinations, while remaining completely biblical in expressions and thought. The remarks of Mathias Delcor in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, Vol.2, p418, should be kept in mind:

Throughout Ben Sira's book, though by our standard it is not well ordered, a continuous motion, like a series of waves, carries the reader, or rather the disciple, from the practice of wisdom to the contemplation of God, of God exhibited in his well ordered works, in the world and mankind.

A common form of *mashal* is the beatitude where the emphasis is on the past or present in contrast to the NT emphasis on the future (14:1-2; 50:28-29; Mt 5:3-12; Lk 6:20-23). Ben Sira also uses numerical proverbs (23:16-18; 25:7-11; 26:5-6; 30:18-19). Both Proverbs and Sirach stress the importance of piety, the need to conceal one's thoughts and the ability to keep secrets.

In contrast to Proverbs, Sirach often groups together sayings on the same subject e.g. parents in ch.4; women in ch.9; the proper use of speech in ch.19; the value of wisdom in ch.1, 14, 24 and particularly in ch.44-50, a long account of the history of Israel which Sirach calls "In Praise of Famous Men", whom he describes as wise

men. As is evident from the large amount of text he gives to Aaron and the priests after him, he has a particular interest in priestly affairs. In particular he is enthusiastic about the profession of wisdom and its dissemination as he proclaims: "The scribe's profession increases his wisdom; whoever is free from toil can become a wise person. How can he become learned who guides the plow...?" (38:24-25). B. Lang (*Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority*, Sheffield, Almond Press, 1983, p.48) subtitles this text as "The Scholar as an 'Honorable Idler', Jesus Sirach" – note also 2Thess. 3:10. In his treatment of happiness (25:1-11) he even includes a list of ten happy thoughts (25:7-10). Good health, food and disposition are important (20:14-25).

Surprisingly, there is quite a variety of titles for the book. If there was an original title it has not been handed down in Hebrew. However the Greek tradition in general calls it *The Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach*. The commonly used Latin title *Ecclesiasticus* ("church book") dates back to the time of St. Cyprian (+258 A.D.). In his *Testimonia ad Quirinum* 2:1 Cyprian first cites Proverbs 8 then Sirach 24. However the phrase 'church book' may owe its origin to its extensive use as a *vade mecum* by Christians. In most Greek manuscripts its title is "the wisdom of Jesus and the son of Sirach". In English Bibles it is called "Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach" (NRSV); in the Catholic Study bible, *The Book of Sirach* (Ecclesiasticus), in the new Jewish translation (TNK), *Ecclesiasticus*; in the REB, *Ecclesiasticus, the Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach*. According to the Prologue it was translated into Greek, by the author's grandson, in Egypt about 117 BC. He also notes that there is "no small difference between the Hebrew and Greek texts". He is well aware of his grandfather's project to bring the Hebrew Scriptures into harmony with the finest insights of the Near Eastern wisdom traditions in order that Jews might make "even greater progress in living according to the law". He also refers in the preface to the law, the prophets and the other writings indicating that at least two distinct sections of the Hebrew Bible existed and that perhaps the third division was not fully fixed. He tells us in the

prologue that he began his translation after he came to Egypt in the 38<sup>th</sup> year of Euergetes (i.e. in 132 BC during the long rule of Ptolemy VII Euergetes (170-116) and suggest that his work was completed after that ruler's death. Curiously he makes no mention of the oppression by Antiochus IV and the revolt of the Maccabees (167-164).

Sirach is not considered canonical in the Jewish tradition (followed by Protestants). Nevertheless it is frequently included in the Talmud and other Rabbinic books, sometimes with the formula "it is written". It is part of the canonical Septuagint Bible of Catholics and most Orthodox groups. Particular respect was given to Sirach by Catholics who, following patristic views, seems to have believed it was written by Solomon (despite 50:27). According to Harrington: "The Christian churches generally followed the wider Greek Septuagint canon and for fifteen centuries almost all Christians regarded Sirach as "Sacred Scripture"" (*Jesus Ben Sira of Jerusalem*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2005, p9).

The text of Sirach had a unique history mainly because the original Hebrew text seems to have disappeared from the Western world for around fifteen centuries from the time of Jerome who quoted it some 80 times, to around 1900. However the Hebrew text did not disappear completely after its Greek translation. It clearly was used at Qumran and Masada where it was written in the stichometric style normally confined to sacred texts. These discoveries in the Dead Sea caves and at Masada led to what Murphy called "a veritable renaissance in Sirach studies" (*The Biblical Heritage*, Michael Glazier, Delaware, 1986, p91). It was the basis for the Syriac version and was copied in the manuscripts found in the Cairo Genizah. It was often quoted in the Talmud and other Rabbinic works being highly regarded for its meaning. Many of the Rabbinic quotations use the phrase "it is written", a phrase usually reserved for canonical works. However the Talmud justifies the exclusion of Ben Sirach for such faults as misogyny, Epicureanism, and misanthropy. It seems to have been kept alive among such

Jewish groups as the Karaite who were the source of the text which Solomon Schechter recovered from an old Cairo synagogue in 1896 and which for a time gave a new impetus to Ben Sira studies. Sirach was not cited directly in the New Testament – there is, however, a strong parallel in concepts and terminology between Mt 11:28-30 and Sir. 6:24-25; 51:26-27. A.C. Sundberg, in his *The Old Testament of the Early Church*, Harvard Theological Studies, 1964, pp54-55, lists some 50 NT passages where a connection with Sirach can be seen. Richard J. Coggins (*Sirach*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, p104) in his most useful introduction to Sirach, recommends *The Complete Parallel Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1993) which sets out four modern texts in parallel columns: the New Revised Standard Version, the Revised English Bible, the New American Bible and the New Jerusalem Bible. This helps one, for example, to see at a glance the psalm-like passage found in the Hebrew text after 51:2 which is given in the NRSV and NAB only. He also notes that Harrington's article on Sirach Research since 1965 devotes more than half of its space to textual problems (p105). The only Concordance seems to be that published by Eerdmans and Collins in 1983 (*Concordance to the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical Books of the Revised Standard Version*).

The earliest patristic evidence for Sirach (see F. Schurer: *The History of the Jewish People*, T&T Clarke, Edinburgh, 1986, pp205-8) is found in the quotation of Sirach 4:31 in Didache 4:5 and Barnabas 19:9. It is quoted as scripture by Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Cyprian, whereas Jerome denied it the status of a canonical book, designating it one of the ecclesiastical books. In contrast, Augustine considered it a canonical book and the Councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397, 418) included it in the canon of the church. Jerome had seen a Hebrew text of Ben Sira but did not make a new translation of it into Latin. He quotes Ben Sira some eighty times in his writings. Rabbi Akiba considered it an 'outside book' the work of a heretic (minim). S. Leanza in *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* (ed Angelo di Bernardino, Oxford University Press, 1992, p881)

comments that Sirach was overlooked in the patristic period more than Wisdom because of its contested canonicity: “What we read in the pseudo-chrysostom *Synopsis Scripturae* (PG. 56,3750376) is hardly more than a summary of the book. Paterius (or Ps. Paterius) collected for Sirach as for Wisdom the excerpts of Gregory the Great’s exegesis” (PL, 921-940).

Leanza finds it equally significant that Rabanus Maurus (9<sup>th</sup> c.) who commented on Wisdom was also one of the few to comment on Sir (PL. 109:763-1126). Rabanus’ allegorical interpretation was much used by medieval exegetes as is clear from the *Glossa Ordinaria*. Otherwise in the patristic period Leanza finds a commentary only by the ninth century Nestorian Syriac commentator Isodad of Merw, the publication of whose commentary was announced in CSCO. Luther followed Jerome in saying that it was an edifying book although not inspired as canonical. Recently R. Maisano studied the exegesis of Sirach in the letters of Isidore of Pelusium (Koinonia 4(1980) pp68-72), who however, did not write a commentary on it.

Over the years Sirach was translated in turn into Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Ethiopic, Armenian and Arabic, giving it a very wide influence. Daniel J. Harrington S.J. (*Invitation to the Apocrypha*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1999, p90) remarks that many Greek church fathers (Clement of Alexandria, Origen, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Jerusalem) and Latin fathers (Tertullian, Cyprian, Jerome, Cyril of Jerusalem) quoted or incorporated material from Sirach into their studies. The shorter Greek text is found in the four great codices, Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Alexandrinus, and Ephraemi and the longer form in the Lucianic recension and Origen’s recension of the Septuagint. Harrington claims that Sirach throughout the late patristic and medieval periods produced “a rich commentary tradition” (Harrington, *Invitation to the Apocrypha*, p90) whose history as far as I can see has not yet been written. C.S. Shaw writing in Hayes (ed) *Dictionary of Interpretation*, p314, comments that it “proved to be immensely popular and influential in both Judaism and Christianity.” He notes that Rabbi Akiba (+ 135)

banned its reading and claimed that those who read these “outside books” would have no share in the world to come. Interestingly Sirach became part of the Apocrypha. It was part of the King James translation until the third decade of the nineteenth century when the Apocrypha were removed for reasons partly theological and partly economic.

In the tenth century Saadya still knew a Hebrew text but it was not mentioned again until Solomon Schechter. In about 1511 the Dominican Bartolomé de la Casas used Sirach 34:18ff to condemn the actions of the Spanish in the New World as illegal and a great injustice. He decided to give up his slaves and preached to the other colonialists to do the same. Surprisingly in 1896 Solomon Schechter discovered medieval Hebrew manuscripts of Sirach in an old Jewish genizah (a storeroom for used liturgical and biblical Hebrew manuscripts) in Cairo. By 1900 fragments from four distinct Cairo manuscripts (A, B, C, D) were published and dated to the tenth-twelfth centuries. In 1931, a fifth ms (E) was brought to light. By 1960 J. Schirrmann had brought to light more parts of B and C. The Dead Sea discoveries in cave 2, produced fragments of 6:20-31 and also 51:13-20, 30 in the Psalms scroll from cave 11. The discovery of a manuscript of Ecclesiastes at the Masada fortress (1964) led to the publication of 39:27-44:71 from a manuscript written about a century after the book itself was written. The result is that approximately 68% of Sirach has survived in Hebrew manuscripts. Unfortunately in both Hebrew and Greek traditions of the text there are short and long forms of the text as in Job and Jeremiah – there are also short and long forms in the Greek tradition, short in the famous uncials Alexandrinus and Vaticanus and long in Codex 248 and ancient translations such as the Old Latin which Jerome used almost without change in the Vulgate. According to Mathias Delcor writing in *The Cambridge History of Judaism* Vol 2, p422: The Greek text “sprinkled the work with subtitles” (1:1; 18:30; 20:27; 23:7; 24:1; 30:1,14,16; 32:1; 33:25; 44:1; 51:1) but these normally only relate to the brief sections which follow but do not provide a real structure for the book. Only the title “Hymn to

the Fathers' which is also found in the Hebrew text (44:1) has the same title as the Greek text.

What we know about Ben Sira comes mainly from the prologue of his grandson and from the rather straightforward passages in the publication itself. For example his description of a scribe as one who travels in foreign lands (39:4) has often been taken as a self-portrait. He also saw himself as a wisdom teacher and his book as a source of wisdom (38:24; 50:27). He is a latecomer in the long wisdom tradition (3:16-18). According to E. Jacob: *Wisdom and Religion in Ben Sira*, in L.G. Perdue, etc., *In Search of Wisdom*, Louisville, KY, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, p94, Sirach was "the first to elaborate a true theology of wisdom in Israel." The grandson translated the book from Hebrew into Greek for the sake of "those living abroad who wished to gain learning". According to Joseph Blenkinsopp (*Sage, Priest, Prophet*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1995, p15), the rather pedestrian prologue to the Greek translation identifies Sirach as a didactic work, combining paideia (education) and Sophia (wisdom). He suggests that Sirach was a scribe 'perhaps also an inactive priest, to judge by his uncritical reverence for everything priestly' (p15) and also without undue modesty as one of the epigone (33:16-19). Murphy (p66) finds three significant passages (24:30-33; 33; 16-18; 50:27-29) which reveal Sirach's self-understanding. They compare wisdom to the great rivers of antiquity (24:23-25) which channel the water into the garden which he has planted. One should note also the centrality of creation in Ben Sira – the first act of creation is the forming of wisdom (1:4; Prov 8:22-31). The wonders of creation are sung in 42:22-43:33. Divine providence is celebrated through the leadership of the pious men in ch 44-51. In ch24 (found only in the LXX) we have the most celebrated text about Woman Wisdom in the whole book. In the first passage the progress of his teachings is like a prophecy which is destined for future generations. The reason is that progress is due to God's blessing as he toils for every seeker after wisdom. In the third section he identifies himself by name:



Wise instruction, appropriate proverbs,  
 I have written in this book,  
 I Jesus, son of Eleazar, son of Sirach,  
 As they gushed forth from my heart's understanding  
 Happy the man who meditates upon these things,  
 Wise the man who takes them to heart!  
 If he puts them into practice, he can cope with anything,  
 For the fear of the Lord is in his lamp (50:27-29).

This ideal self description is the goal which Sirach has set for himself. Here he reviews different professions in comparison to that of scribe:

Some have compared this passage with the Egyptian *Satire on Trades* (ANET, 432-34) but this is misleading. Sirach's perception of other callings is far from ridicule; he is remarkably enlightened, and even enthusiastic. His description is vivid, almost as if he had worked on a farm, or cut seals, or labored in a smithy or toiled at a pottery kiln. He ends up praising the noble work of various artisans: "Without them no city could be lived in" (38:32). At the same time, he ranks higher the vocation of the sage, who devotes himself "to the study of the Law of the Most High (Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, p66).

According to Perdue (*The Sword and the Stylus*, p54) some six factors show that the well-known sages belonged to the elite:

- 1) Only the well-to-do had time to study and learn.
- 2) The cultivation of the arts and behaviour of sages at court and later in the governor's office point to individuals of high position.
- 3) The important virtue of charity (gifts to the poor) could come only from the rich.
- 4) Affluence was praised (and wisdom more highly) but was possible only to the social elite.

- 5) Only the rich and those in high position had the opportunity to receive an education.
- 6) The texts show the respect for and importance of the rich.

Chronicles and Ezra (a second Moses) show us the development of the scribe as the authoritative and inspired interpreter of the Torah and the wider canon. For Perdue (p115, n14) it is not clear that, although the early wisdom texts had faith in God as creator and sustainer, they were traditional believers until Ben Sira who combined wisdom with the tenets of Second Temple Judaism. Ben Sira includes many hymns that are not only to be read but also can be used in corporate worship. In Ben Sira, to quote the popular sentence of Von Rad: "the teacher becomes the worshipper and cult becomes essential"<sup>1</sup> (Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult*, Missoula, 1977). Ben Sira's praise of Simon II shows a high-priest who had both religious and political power in Jerusalem (cf 43:27-31).

Scholars such as B.G. Wright (*Praise Israel for Wisdom and Instruction*, Journal for the Study of Judaism, Supp.141, Leiden, Brill, 2008) conclude that Ben Sirach lived in exciting times. He probably had witnessed the land being taken from the Ptolemies by the Seleucid king Antioch III, and quite likely did not witness the reign of Antiochus IV. Generally his theological outlook was a development of the deuteronomic history in which faithfulness leads to success and faithlessness leads to punishment. Scholars such as Skehan and DiLella suggest that the aim of ch.10 is to tell people how to stay out of trouble. But the emotional and passionate 36:1-22 seem to propose the opposite view. There, like the heroes of old he invites God to rescue his people in time of national trouble. Clearly he hoped for a time when foreign rule would end.

#### SYNTHESIS:

*The Wisdom of Ben Sira* was originally a handbook of moral teaching for early second century Jews. It shows how an upper-class Judean wisdom professor saw the social order of the world in the early second century BC. He clearly places the

search for wisdom and his basic theme the fear of the Lord above material possessions, authority over others and in particular honor from others. He also wants to rescue honor and shame from the changing whims of society (4:20-6:4; 10:19-11:6; 41:14-42:8). J.G. Gammie in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, IN, pp355-72, notes how the authors of Proverbs and Sirach both act as advisors. They stress the importance of piety, the need to conceal one's thoughts, the ability to keep secrets, self-control especially in avoiding adultery and the importance of care in the choice of friends. Gammie also finds similarities with Chronicles. Both stress pride in the Jerusalem priesthood and openness to foreigners. As Jeremy Corley points out, in his opening three chapters (see *Wisdom, Perseverance and Humility, Louvain Studies* 33, 2008, p273-286) Ben Sira stresses three virtues which are still relevant for Christians today: openness to wisdom (Sir 1:1-10: acceptance of testing (2:1-18), and humility of heart (3:17-24). From the emphases on the centrality of Jerusalem (24:10; 36:18; 50:1-24) and the detailed knowledge of earlier biblical books (44:1-50:24) it is quite possible that the author was one of the scribes of the Temple (cf. A.G. 12.3.3, 142). In 29:1-11 (which is often regarded as a self-portrait) he praises the scribe. He also accepts that other occupations are necessary in society (28:32). Ch.38:24-39:11 is often interpreted as a reworking of the very old Egyptian *Satire of the Trades* where the teacher tries to encourage his students to study the difficult hieroglyphics. Therefore he reminds them of the difficulties faced by the blacksmiths, brick-makers, gardeners and other manual workers. Thus the teacher concludes: "Behold there is no profession free of a boss – except for the scribe ... there is no scribe who lacks food" (Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p434). This study is conspicuous for its many references to the teaching and learning process and its praise of the scribe in 38:24-39:11. Sirach clearly acknowledges the necessity of divine assistance in both teaching and learning. His aim is to encourage a life in accordance with the law on the part of the pupils and a counterweight to the

encroachments of modern Greek imperialism. It was extensively used in the early Church and has continually received sporadic attention particularly in Catholic scholarship because of its inclusion in the Canon. As Crenshaw (*The New Interpreter's Bible*, p632) points out: "Ben Sira transforms the office of priest-scribe into that of teacher, whose authority rests ultimately on scholarship, insights and communicative ability". He remains quiet about Ezra because of "embarrassment over his strict policy and the ensuing suffering it generated". However it was not until Ben Sira that the Davidic covenant was mentioned in the Wisdom corpus.

Ben Sira was also seen as a key example of intertestamental thought among both Jews and Protestants. The latter tended to highlight the famous passage in praise of great ancestors (44:1ff) and to paraphrase the concluding exhortation in the well-known hymn 'now thank we all our God' (50:22-24).

According to Murphy (p70), efforts to distinguish a structure in Sirach have not been successful. Reacting to Martin Hengel's reflection on Ben Sira and the controversy with Hellenistic liberalism in Jerusalem in the first quarter of the second century, Murphy finds that Ben Sira is very much a conservative ('tradition is its own best argument') and a traditionalist, relying very strongly on the Book of Proverbs while stressing the Torah and Jewish fidelity. He does not seem to be an apostle to the Gentiles or even speaking to the Gentiles. J.T. Sanders (*Ben Sira and Demotic Wisdom*, SBLMS 28, Chico, CA, Scholars Press, 1938, p58) remarks that Sirach "is entirely open to Hellenic thought as long as it can be Judaized". Sirach is content to be an epigone "a gleaner following the grape-pickers" (33:16). In the Prologue he clearly is grateful for the "many important truths which have been handed down to us through the law, the prophets, and the later authors". It was indeed a time of Judaisms rather than a single Judaism to quote the Jewish scholar J. Neusner. For example, as some translate 31:15, no Pharisee could "eat what is set before you".

Johann Marbock finds three sections (1-24; 25-43;44-51), each concluding with a

poem or psalm which stresses the content of the particular section – these are ch. 24 a panegyric hymn of wisdom’s self praise where Sirach describes his own work as “teaching the prophecy” (v33); 42:15-43:33 a hymn on creation; 51:13-30 a poem describing Ben Sirach’s search for wisdom. The opening poem (1:1-10) preserved in Greek but not in Hebrew, describes the twin features of wisdom and creation. Whatever about the details of the structure, many would agree with the comments of M. Phua in the Longman/Enns *Dictionary of the Old Testament*, (InterVarsity Press, Donner’s Grove, Illinois, 2008, p724):

Sirach is about wisdom. It is constructed with a wisdom frame: a wisdom poem at the beginning (Sir 1:1-10), at the end (Sir 51:13-30) and in the middle (Sir 24:1-34). Ben Sira deals extensively with interpersonal relationships such as those among family members (e.g. parents, children, slaves), friends, women, rulers and the poor. He also touches on various aspects of social ethics – for example, speech, table etiquette and discrimination. He takes seriously matters of life and death, religious obligations, the problem of evil and the justice of God. As a wise teacher, Ben Sira not only learns wisdom but also contributes to it (see Sir 21:15). Compared to the teachings of the earlier wisdom teachers, his is the more comprehensive (von Rad, 241-2).

The clear teaching of ch.24 is that real wisdom is to be found in Jerusalem and not elsewhere but in “the book of the covenant”, the law of Moses (cf. Deut 4:5-8). Thus in fact, some scholars conclude that Ben Sira is demythologizing Women Wisdom: “the book of the Most High’s covenant/the law which Moses commanded us...” (24:22).

For Richard J. Clifford S.J., writing in *The Forgotten God*, (eds Das and Matera, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville 2002) Sirach is the only wisdom writer who signed his book – he may have conducted a boarding school if 51:23 is not a metaphorical invitation. It was arguably near the temple as its strong support of

the priesthood and temple seem to indicate. He writes on traditional topics such as wisdom, prudent speech, friendship, wealth and family but also on the new topics of the Mosaic Law and the history of Israel. Clifford finds this huge anthology organised into two parts with four sections each, and each introduced by an essay on wisdom (e.g. 1:1-10; 24:1-33). For Clifford, Ben Sira is the first wisdom writer “to speak descriptively and at length of God”. He has an obvious sense of the grandeur of God which included omniscience, omnipotence, mercy and severity. This “grand, purposeful, merciful, occasionally harsh, God” influenced early Christians, especially in James: Compare Jam 1:5 with Sir 18:18 and 20:15; Jam 1:6 with Sir 1:25 and 2:12; Jam 1:13 with Sir 15:11. Both James and Sirach deal extensively with speech and the evil of the tongue (Jam 1:19; 3:1; Sir 28:12-26; 5:11-12)

This, the longest and most comprehensive of the wisdom books, is unique among the unsigned O.T. books in that we know the name of the author, his father and grandfather from the epilogue (5:27-29). Yeshua (in Greek, Jesus) ben (son of) Eleazar ben Sira and from the prologue to the Greek translation made by his grandson in Egypt after 132 B.C. – he is normally called for short, Ben Sira. The author lived at a time when the change from the Ptolemies to the Seleucids took place and when Judaism was beginning to change radically even in Judah. According to Perdue many passages of Ben Sira suggest the plausibility of Ben Sira’s knowledge of Greek and important Greek philosophers and literary composers (*The Sword and the Stylus*, p257). He gives a summary list of Ben Sira’s relationship to Hellenism and Judaism (p258). J. Crenshaw (*Theodicy in the Old Testament*, p120) has pointed out the use in Sirach of an ancient debate form found in Egyptian texts and once in Koheleth 7.10 – this has three basic elements 1) an introductory ‘do not say’ 2) a direct quotation of the unacceptable opinion, 3) a refutation introduced by ‘for’(ki). Curiously the term ‘teacher’ (Melammed) is not found in the text although the verb ‘to teach’ is found. A good student learned to be wise, which was both a kind of behaviour and a profession.

The 'fool' by contrast who was uneducated did not 'fear God' or obey the Torah, rejected self-control, proper speech and lacked intelligence – it included oral and written dimensions.

The author gives his signature and a concluding blessing on those who concern themselves with wisdom and the ethical aspects of everyday life. The grandson who arrived in Egypt as a youth in 132 B.C. translated his grandfather's book "for the benefit of those living abroad who wish to acquire wisdom and are disposed to live their lives according to the standards of the law" (Foreword). Significantly he recognised that "it is impossible for a translator to find precise equivalents for the original Hebrew in another language."

It has been suggested that if Ben Sira had not, in our modern style, attached his own name to his work instead of giving it the name of an ancient hero, his work would have been retained in the Hebrew Canon. However, there are other aspects to this problem, not least the Pharisee concerns of those who finally established the Jewish Canon. Another suggestion is that its popularity in Christian catechesis made contemporary Jews uncomfortable with this book. Murphy (p173) comments that Martin Hengel entitles his remarks on Sirach: "Ben Sira and the controversy with Hellenistic liberalism in Jerusalem" during the first quarter of the second century. It was clearly a Hellenistic world and under Jason the high priest (174-171) the process of Hellenization was strongly promoted in Jerusalem (1Macc. 1:11-15; 2Macc. 4:7-17). In fact, Sirach was a strong conservative emphasizing Proverbs, Torah and Jewish loyalty. For Hengel, his "controversy is with those groups of the Jewish upper classes who as a result of their assimilation to foreign culture had become almost completely alienated from the belief of their ancestors" (Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, p174, where he comments that for Sirach, "tradition is its own best argument").

Howard Clark Kee (*Jesus in History*, Harcourt Brace & Co., Orlando, Florida, 1996, p77) notes that analogies have been drawn between the Gospel "Q material" and Ben Sira and Wisdom:

There are some points of similarity – such as Wisdom being pictured as seeking lodging (Sir 24:7) and as demanding discipline from those who follow her (Sir 2:25; 6:30-21) – but the entire outlook of these wisdom books is sharply different from that of Q. For these Jewish writings, wisdom is a matter of obedience to the Law of Moses (Sir 6:36). Ben Sira focuses on making the most of life, avoiding excess, eschewing pride or dishonesty. Some of the exhortations are as trivial as the contemporary cliché “Have a good day!” (Sir 14:14). By contrast, in the Q material, the response to Jesus is determinative of one’s eternal destiny ... Far from telling them to set their sights low, as Ben Sira does (11:10), or to avoid doing good deeds to strangers or sinners (Sir 11:29, 34; 12:14), Jesus is quoted in Q as urging his followers to give up every human tie and obligation in devotion to the announcement of the Kingdom (Lk 9:59-61; 12:22-31). And in Luke 7:34 he is described as “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners – scarcely an abstemious life-style of the kind enjoined in Sirach.”

There is widespread agreement that, shortly before 175, Ben Sira (aged about 60) published his long reflective text on Jewish wisdom when Seleucus IV Philopater (187-175) was ruler. He probably ran a “house of study” in his home as one of the many schools in Jerusalem during the Seleucid ascendancy before Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-163) attempted to wipe out Judaism and any Jews loyal to its Torah. The chief reason for the date is that the book makes no mention of the problems which Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the notorious enemy of Dan 7-12, caused in Palestine after his invasion (175-164). His desecration of the temple in 167 led to the Maccabean revolt. An interesting clue is the praise of the high priest Simon in 5:1-24. According to the prologue this was Simon II, who was high priest (219-196) and lived through the Seleucid conquest of Palestine, 200-



198 BC. This Simon had quite likely died recently. From the vivid detail given, the author probably lived and witnessed Simon's activities in Jerusalem. The author's interest in the temple, evident from his praise of Simon (50:1ff), Aaron and the Levites (45:6-26), his emphasis on the present life and the absence of any speculation of the afterlife (14:16; 17:27; 28:21 – he speaks of the traditional Sheol and also hints at the resurrection - all suggest that he is a forerunner of the later Sadducean attitude. This might indicate why the book was not popular in post 70 AD Pharisaical Judaism. Yet his emphasis on the Torah must have found favour with the Pharisees also. He combined a list of his wisdom, teachings, poems and hymns into his book. Perdue claims that he fully expected to have his work included in the developing canon of his time because he believed that his teachings were inspired (*The Sword and the Stylus*, p272)

Ben Sira seems to have been an urbane, confident, teacher assured that the mingling of true piety, worship and wisdom would produce a satisfying life. For him it was the Torah but not Greek philosophy which was the key of truth. His major themes include Torah as wisdom, the order of creation, wisdom as piety and the praise of his righteous heroes. This book is ideal for an overview of the topic of divine mercy and anger in the OT (e.g. 2:11; 5:6; 16:11; 18:11; 36:7ff; 50:19; 51:19). His ideal scribe, as described in 39:1-11, is a scholar and a person of influence; not only in government but also in the daily lives of his fellow citizens (see also 24:30-33; 33:16-18; 50:27-29). Ben Sira is the first known sage to combine creation theology with salvation history. For John J. Collins while Sirach is not at variance with the worldview of Proverbs (compare Deut 30:11-14; Prov 30:4) he reads the Torah through the lens of Deuteronomy and pays practically no attention to the Priestly laws of Leviticus (*Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age*, p225).

For a scholar like von Rad in his *Old Testament Theology* wisdom was on the periphery of OT theology (see G. Boccaccini, *Middle Judaism: Jewish Thought*, Minnaeapolis, Fortress Press, 1991, p77). However in the post-exilic period the

reflective work of Ben Sira (ch.24) tried to make a connection between the creation it encountered and the divine revelation which it received in the Torah. Ben Sira saw that leisure was required: “whoever is free from toil can become a wise man. How can he become learned who guides the plough...” (38:24:25). In 38:24-34, however, he seems to show an elitist depreciation of common workers and their tasks (38:24-34). Yet he is clear that sin can destroy any person (21:1-10).

This view is more Hellenistic than Jewish. In fact the Jewish tradition always esteemed manual work (1Cor 4:12). He can praise highly the noble work of different artisans though he insists that the highest vocation is “the study of the Law of the Most High who investigates all the wisdom of the past” (39:1). He praises the skill of doctors “finding a cure to save their patient’s life” (38:14), of craftsmen and designers “who make engravings on signets and patiently vary the design” (38:27), the smith “sitting by his anvil, intent on his iron-work” (38:28), the potter “turning the wheel with his feet” (38:29) – all these he remarks: “maintain the fabric of God’s world”. Ben Sira carefully distinguishes between two kinds of scribes, the ordinary and the inspired interpreter (29:1-8).

What is missing in Sirach, according to Robert Davidson (*Wisdom and Worship*, S.C.M, London, 1990, p117):

is the urgent search for meaning as it expresses itself in the repeated ‘whys?’ that we find in the Psalms, in Job and Kōheleth. He may reflect on the *Angst* of the wicked, but he himself seems to have been singularly free from *Angst*. He could not be like Kōheleth, since the praise of God and the pull of worship were central to his life. He could not be like Job since life seems to have dealt kindly with him. To those, who have never been stretched to the breaking point, he has much to say; to those who have been so stretched, his wisdom and his approach to worship need to be supplemented by the cries of more perplexed worshippers.

Ben Sira is well aware that Yahweh hears the cry of the poor: “Water quenches a flaming fire and alms atone for sins (3:29). Care for the poor was by then not only a duty of the king but also rested on the shoulders of the aristocracy. He realizes that he comes at the end of a long tradition which he has carefully studied. He urges caution in cultivating the rich (13:1-24) and insists that wisdom and fear of the Lord are much more important than economic status. Further he clearly emphasizes the free-will available to people e.g. 15:15 “to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice”.

Mathias Delcor in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, Vol.2, *The Hellenistic Age*, (p422) claims that Ben Sira’s “charm lies in the good natured way in which he approaches every problem and finds moderate but sound solutions, in conformity with the religion of his fathers.” (a sentence drawn from H. Duesberg and I. Fransen).

Thus Ben Sira has been well described as the last of the wise men in Israel (38:24) and the first of the scribes who brings from his treasure both new and old (Mt 13:52). Yet the word “scribe” is found only once in the surviving manuscript (38:24) and once more in the Greek (10:5). In 51:23 he makes publicity for his expensive school, inviting the ignorant to enroll for his wisdom at a high cost, which will bring “a large return in gold” (51:28). His aim was to provide a comprehensive compendium of wisdom dealing with every topic from the merely secular to the most religious, from the instructions for speakers at banquets, to the solemn ceremonies in the temple, to exhortations on the care of the poor.

However, in a deeper sense, Ben Sira can be seen as an anticipation of the future diverse Jewish response (e.g. Daniel, Maccabees, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah) to the common theology of Hellenism which was pervading the Near East and would nearly swamp the distinctive Jewish beliefs during the coming crisis under Antiochus IV and the Maccabean revolt (167-64 BC). However, as to the afterlife and human destiny, Ben Sira has little or no certainty. The blessings which he emphasizes are of this life and are promised to the pious person and his children.

He seems to have rejected any future life after death (7:17; 14:11-19; 17:27f).

According to Perdue (*The Sword and the Stylus*, p276):

The temple became the economic center for Jerusalem and Judah, and received sacrifices, gifts and the temple tax. Indeed, it may have been at the center of a banking system for the colonial economy. The temple and its priestly overseers would have earned profits from the number of pilgrims and sacrifices, necessary to keep the cultic operation functioning. Agricultural produce and farm animals were sold to dealers and possibly directly to worshippers for sacrifices and meat, while byproducts that included the hides for the production of leather would have been a means of income.

The Jewish relationship with their new overlords, the Syrians, began in 198 with concessions in gratitude for their assistance against their previous rulers, the Ptolomies of Egypt. The situation would soon deteriorate into a nightmare. Ever since the Greeks, led by Alexander the Great in the fourth century, had conquered Palestine, Hellenism had made profound inroads into Jewish culture and tradition. Well before the crisis of Antiochus, some 16 cities had been Hellenized, and the leading families of Jerusalem itself had taken steps to make Jerusalem a Greek city with its own gymnasium. As 1 Macc 1:12 points out; many Jews were attracted to the new ways, saying: "Let us go and make an alliance with the Gentiles all round us; Since we have separated from them, many evils have come upon us". Ben Sira lived in the calm before the storm of Antiochus. The conflict between Judaism and Hellenism was not directly confrontational as yet, but the beginnings were there. A careful reading between the lines of his book suggest a highly polarized social order between rich and poor, powerful and weak, male and female, pious and nonobservant, Jew and Gentile. In 28:2 one can see perhaps the basis for Matthew's parable of the *Unmerciful Servant* (Mt 18:23-35) when he writes on forgiveness in the spirit of the prophets: "Forgive your neighbor the

wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray” (28:2; 34:21). See his references to Edomites, Philistines and Samaritans in 40:25f; and 50:1-24 for his critique of competitors for the high priesthood. He was well aware of the dangers of Hellenism at first hand, because he had travelled widely to gain experience, often at great personal risk: “I have seen much on my travels; learned more than ever I could say. Often I was in danger ...” (34:11f; 38:2-4; 8:15f) – some suggest these travels are references to the diplomatic service in which some scribes were involved (31:8ff; 39:4).

James L. Crenshaw points to a conscious polemic against views which Sira considered misguided or perverse:

Such evidence seems to indicate that idolatry was flourishing, that renewed interest in divination was manifest and that wicked persons had launched a concerted effort at denying divine justice. Sirach ridicules images to which homage is paid as useless, because they can neither eat or smell the offering of fruit. Their impotency is likened to that of a eunuch who embraces a maiden and groans (30:18-20). Dreams are still another matter. Sirach recognizes their deceptive quality ...” (34:1-8). (*OT Story and Faith*, Hendrickson, Mass, 1992, p416).

Writing in a commentary on Sirach (*The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol.5, p625)

Crenshaw comments on Ben Sira and Hellenism:

This meager evidence of Greek influence on Ben Sira, indicates that he drew far more extensively from biblical literature than from extra-biblical, even when trying to persuade Jews that their legacy was just as universal as Greek philosophy. That was the point of identifying the Mosaic Law with cosmic wisdom. Ben Sira's teachings demonstrate an awareness of the seductive power of Hellenism, especially to young people, and he wages battle for the next generation of Jews. This struggle introduces new types of

discourse: psychological and philosophical arguments in the service of theodicy, discussion of free will and determinism, reflection about two ways (2:12). In essence, he sought to provide rational backing for his ancestral heritage. The assertion that wisdom comes from the Lord constitutes a declaration of war against Hellenism, where it was a product of human inquiry. Ben Sira dismisses all astrological speculation – and apocalyptic – as sheer arrogance or pride. “Be content with the knowledge God has bestowed on you” sums up his attitude toward striving to unlock hidden mysteries.

Ben Sira’s purpose in writing was not based on hatred for the new culture or to compose a systematic rebuttal of it or even like the Wisdom of Solomon to make a blunt critique of Hellenism. Rather he sought to deepen and strengthen the faith and culture of his people, by demonstrating to both Jews and Gentiles of good will, that the Jewish way of life was superior to the Hellenistic culture despite all its obvious attractions. Thus A.A. DiLella sees Sirach as cautioning against the futility of Greek speculation into the nature of reality (“*Conservative and Progressive Theology*”, C.B.Q. 28, 1966, p139). Sirach’s view is well summed up in 19:24: “Better to lack brains and be God-fearing, than to have great intelligence and transgress the law”. The main theme of his book is Wisdom and further his book is an invitation to come and learn wisdom. True wisdom is to be found in Jerusalem and its inspired books (24:11) rather than in Athens and the clever writings of Hellenism. Compromise with Hellenism would lead to disaster (2:12-14). This apologia for Jewish wisdom begins with a poem in praise of wisdom (1:1-10) followed by an enumeration of the basic elements of growth in wisdom – courage based on patience and trust is essential to enter on a career as a wise man (ch.2). The first steps are found in filial piety (3:1-16). This includes respect for everything beyond the capabilities of a beginner (2:17-17) – charity makes the apprentice lovable both to people and to God (3:18 – 4:10). In 3:21-24 he seems

to warn against the dangers of boldness and speculative thought. This leads to a hymn to Wisdom who leads her sons to glory through disciplinary testing (4:11-19) so that they learn what is truly good and to differentiate between confidence and presumption, between the benefits and dangers of friendship (4:20 – 6:17). Ben Sira is a strong advocate of free will: “If you choose you can keep all the commandments (15:15). But he insists that hard work is involved in achieving wisdom (6:18-37; 22:1-2). For Harrington: “Less oblivious but nonetheless troublesome are his obsession with honor and shame (despite efforts at reinterpreting them), his excessive caution in social relations and his quickness to dismiss many other persons as fools” (p90). However he does give us the most complete treatment of friendship in the Bible (6:5-17; 9:10-16; 19:13-17; 22:19-26; 27:16-21; 37:1-6). He provides practical advice about making friends such as pleasant speech (6:5) and warns against fair-weather friends (cf. Jeremy Corley, *Ben Sira’s Teaching on Friendship*, Brown Judaic Studies, Providence, RI, 2002). The best friends are those who fear the Lord (6:5-17). His positive ideal is ‘friends in the Lord’.

This apologia for Jewish wisdom concludes with an acrostic poem about his own lifelong search (51:13-30). The author places ch.24, (found only in the LXX) with its famous praise of wisdom as identified with Israel’s law (foreshadowing Jn 1:1-14, and often applied to Mary) at the very centre of his book. This hymn can be compared with the Egyptian hymns of self-praise for Isis – three verses (3-6, 7-12, 13-17) are a hymn of self-praise by Wisdom who dwells in the divine assembly. She lives on the Temple Mount Zion where she identifies not only with the Temple Mt Zion but also with the temple service and the Torah of Moses (note von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, pp240-62). In fact three passages about Lady Wisdom provide the core of the whole book.

Although often described as the most modern type of book in the Bible, Western scholars have found it quite impossible to discover a clear arrangement for the variety of subjects treated in the book apart from chs.44-50, the famous *Praise of*

*Ancestors* (see index in Murphy, p73). The same variety of subjects and lack of systematic arrangement is also characteristic of Proverbs, Ben Sira's favorite source for topics such as use of speech, self-control, evil friends, work, sickness, death. A careful examination by scholars such as Skehan and DiLella in their classic *Anchor Bible Commentary*, shows that Sira was not afraid to use non-Jewish authors as source material. Parallels to Theognis, Sophocles, Xenophon, Euripides, Hesiod and Homer can be found as well as such Greek ideas as the eulogy of ancestors, the idea of a rational universe, balanced in pairs (33:14-15; 42:24), the freedom/providence tension, attitudes to physicians, dining customs and the emphasis on authorship. Well known phrases such as "He is all" (43:28) could be drawn from such texts as Is 45:5-7; Deut 32:39. The little evidence of Greek influence on Ben Sira probably demonstrates that he borrowed much more from biblical literature than from extra-biblical. However he seems to have absorbed his foreign material completely into his own Jewish teaching. Thus he appears to suggest to his audience ('all who seek instruction', 33:18) that they have little or nothing to fear from foreign culture. DiLella describes the book as a series of class notes, accumulated over many years of teaching – the basic form is the collection of proverbs which are a veritable mosaic of biblical terms and allusions. This 'anthological composition' style is also found in the Greek composition, *The Wisdom of Solomon* and the *Hodayot* psalms from Qumran.

Scholars such as Murphy (*The Tree of Life*, p72) find it impossible to summarise the content of the message of Ben Sira. Two ways of reading Sirach can be suggested, according to Murphy: 1) to begin with ch.1 and be surprised at the variety of topics that present themselves and are even repeated. One can also make an index of the different topics which arise to discover a more synthetic overview. Leo G. Perdue (*The Sword and the Stylus*, p269) finds three sections (1-24; 25-43; and 44-51) each ending with a poem/psalm: (1) ch.24, a panegyric hymn of wisdom's self-praise; Olney Yahweh himself could make such a claim – the pillar of cloud was associated with God's presence during the exodus. (2)



42:15 – 43:33 a hymn on creation giving Sirach's understanding of the created order. (3) 51:13-30 a poem on Ben Sira's search for wisdom. For Perdue, the opening poem, preserved in Greek but not in Hebrew, provides the aspects of wisdom and creation, the dominant theme of the whole book (note the poems on personified Wisdom: 4:11-19; 6:18-27; 14:20-15:10; 24:1-34).

Murphy (pp74-79) finds that at least three topics in Sirach deserve more detailed consideration:

As to the great question of retribution and theodicy or the working out of divine justice, Ben Sira affirms the traditional doctrine, with reward/punishment for carrying out the Law meted out in this life, but with no mention of retribution in the next life. He was well aware from his observations of the anomalies of life that evil people often seem to prosper to the end while good people may die young and in pain. However, he accepts the tension between the principles of determinism with all in God's hands like a potter and clay (33:13). He also stresses the principle of human responsibility to choose life or death while not blaming God for one's failures. Like the rest of biblical writers, he makes no effort to reconcile determinism and free-choice but admonishes those who attempt to blame God for their failings. He also insists that all the words of God are good – even 'fire and hail, famine and disease' (39:29) are mere servants of God with tasks to perform. Thirdly, he elaborates the doctrine of pairs or opposites of which none is made in vain (e.g. 42:24), and 'one the opposite of the other' (33:15).

God is the opposite of evil, and life the opposite of death so the sinner is the opposite of the godly. Look at all the works of the Most High; they are in pairs, the one the opposite of the other (33:14-15)

This doctrine of opposites runs through the book; true and false shame (4:20-26; 41:14-42:8); true and false honor (10:30-11:6); the relativity of prosperity and adversity (11:25); the mixture of good and evil in a person (10:18; 27:17018); speech and silence (20:5-7); loans and alms (29:1-20); true and false sacrifice

(34:21-35:5); true and false counselors and friends (37:1-6, 7-18). This list from J. Marbock (quoted in Murphy, p80) concludes with 37:28: "not every food is good for everyone, nor do all dishes appeal to every taste". Murphy finds this optimism difficult to explain. Its aim is to strengthen the faithful but not to confront the hard question. It rather insists on humility and warns against the dangers of speculative thought (3:18-24). In this world, honor and shame tended to derive from one's social standing and what others thought of one. For Ben Sirach those who fear the Lord were worthy of honor and those who transgressed his commandments deserved dishonor and shame (10:19-11:6). Thus, not surprisingly, he urged caution in befriending the rich (13:1-24). He judged a person according to his deeds (16:11-14; 17:20). However one is surprised at such statements: "Better a man's harshness than a woman's indulgence/and a frightened daughter than any disgrace" (42:14). Here he is completely unaware of modern sensibilities as he discusses the "wickedness" and "anger" of women. The most important of the things not to be ashamed of is "the law of the Most High and his covenant". Shameful things (41:14-42:8) range from sexual immorality before one's parents to leaning on one's elbow at meals. His advice on the misuse of alcohol (31:25-30), food (37:29-31), self-control (37:27-31) and wise conduct (32:18-33) is quite useful for those who care for a strong, healthy and productive community.

Surprisingly, the only mention of Job is the casual reference in the shadow of Ezechiel (49:8-9; 14:14,20). Sirach's work resembles Proverbs (Not Qoheleth) both in style and in teaching. The nagging wife comes high on the hate list of both Proverbs (27:15) and Sirach (25:20). Sirach can be extremely negative about women (22:3; 26:12) but recognizes how dull life can be without women, even comparing a beautiful woman to one of the shining lamps in the Temple (26:17-18). Only mothers (always parallel to fathers) receive a completely positive portrayal. He does not seem to approve of the view that the just will receive eternal life, a view which seems to have been emerging in the Jewish community (17:27-28), and which is found in the Greek and Syriac texts (7:17b; 2:9; 16:22;

19:19; 1:12; 3:1). The conservative Ben Sira is like the later Sadducees rather than the Pharisees. He emphasizes honor/reputation as the one thing which survives a person's death (41:11-13).

Ben Sira seems to have been the first to create a bond between wisdom and the more typical traditions of Israel. This is clear in the identification of Wisdom with Torah (ch.24) and in the list of Israel's heroes (ch.44-50) which is entitled "the praise of the fathers" in many Greek and Latin manuscripts. One can consider the "Praise of Wisdom" to be the centre of the book and its heart as Wisdom gives an invitation to come to her banquet. The most original theology in Sirach is found in 24:23 where Wisdom and the Torah are identified. In coarse imagery he shows his utter disgust at the lazy and unprincipled with words which are much more elegantly expressed by Shakespeare (according to Alexander Di Lella) on 22:1-3: "Wisdom and goodness to the vile seem vile/Filths savour but themselves" (King Lear 4.2.39-40). Note also his exuberant poem which is perhaps autobiographical (39:1-8) and also 6:18-37, his 22-line poem which is his longest statement on the work involved in theoretical wisdom.

Scholars have disputed concerning the key theme in Ben Sira. Some argue that wisdom (a word used 55 times) is the primary theme. Others prefer "Fear of God" (found in different forms about 60 times – it is found 79 times in the Psalms). Murphy thinks (p78) that they are "practically one" and develop the basic theme found in Prov 1:7; 9:10; Job 28:28; Ps 111:10. In contrast to J. Haspecker (the fear of God is the total theme) and G. von Rad (wisdom is the fear of God) DiLella thinks that Ben Sira's primary theme is wisdom as fear of God (*In Search of Wisdom*, ed. Leo G. Perdue, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1993, p133). Ben Sira is surprisingly silent about angels, Messiah, images. According to Mathias Delcor in the *Cambridge History of Judaism*, 1989, pp415-422:

One of the central ideas in Ben Sira's teaching is that of the fear of the Lord (Phobos Kuriou). The concept appears persistently on

nearly every page. In his very first chapter the author asserts that the beginning of wisdom is to fear God (1:14). It is a glory, and honour and a joy (1:12). The fear of God is rewarded with long life (1:12). It proceeds from an absolute trust in God (2:8); it shows itself in obedience and in faithfulness to the commandments (2:15), and in respect for parents (3:7). But the fear of God makes it demands; it requires great sacrifices for the service of God may begin with much testing (2:1-6). It must be said that the courage of Ben Sira's disciples in the face of the persecutions brought on by Antiochus VI Epiphanes demonstrates the efficacy of his teaching. They had learnt from him a pride in their faith and a contempt for death..." (pp420-1).

In contrast to Hellenism, wisdom is neither a goddess ('Sophia') nor an independent human achievement. It is the creation and gift of the God of Israel. For Job, ch.28, wisdom is inaccessible to everyone except God. For Ben Sira, the Lord who created and 'saw' wisdom (Sir 1:9; Job 28:27), has communicated and lavishly bestowed this wisdom upon creation, upon all living beings and particularly on those who love him (1:10). This wisdom has even taken up residence in Jerusalem and is found in the Law of Moses. Ben Sira develops Job's view that this wisdom is the fear of the Lord by explaining that it is the beginning (1:12), full understanding (1:17) and root of wisdom (1:18). He brings together in ch.2 faith and works, knowledge of God and behavior, love of God and love of neighbor etc. The proper attitude of a wise person who fears God, is an absence of guile and unjust anger, patience, prudence, 'loyal humility' sincerity. Significantly "if you desire wisdom, keep the commandments and the Lord will bestow her upon you" (1:19-20). In simple terms, those who fear the Lord and seek to please him are those who love him (2:16; 4:11-19; 6:18-31; 14:20-27; 51:13-30). True greatness and honor belong to such people (10:24). He compares sin to a snake (21:2-3; Gen 3:1-5), a lion's teeth and a two-edged sword.

For Crenshaw (*Harpers' Bible Commentary*, p839f):

The tension between wrath and mercy lends immense pathos to the book which virtually begins and ends with an affirmation of both concepts. Besides the traditional arguments for divine justice – God's knowledge of events before they occur, the testimony of past experience, the anticipation of an eschatological (final) redressing of all wrongs, the necessity of acknowledging the limits of human knowledge - Ben Sira introduces two new arguments, one psychological and the other metaphysical. Sinners suffer inner stress and the universe itself fights on behalf of the virtuous. Both efforts to secure a rational theodicy, that is a defense of the justice of God, have parallels in the Greek culture of the second century BC. For Ben Sira, the harmony of creation manifests divine glory, a term that occupies an exalted position in the final chapters of the book.

The fact of death pervades this book (14:12ff; 17:25; 33:10ff; 38:21-23; 40:5). But it used in very positive ways by Ben Sira to challenge and improve the quality of life in the present e.g. "Remember your last days, and you will never sin" (7:36). He has a beautiful passage on forgiveness of injustice (28:1-7). Further he shows a skepticism about life after death in common with almost all the OT authors with the exceptions of such texts as Ps 73; Is 26:19; Dn 12:2. The Greek and Syriac texts of Sirach introduce eternal life references in such texts as (Sir 7:17; 48:11; 2:9; 16:22; 19:19; 1:12,20; 3:1). He does stress honor and reputation which are the main thing which survive after a person's death (41:11-13). For Ben Sira, God is a God of compassion to all peoples and not just Israelites (18:11) – he even quotes David's famous reply that it is better to fall into the hands of a merciful God than into those of men (2:18; 2Sam 24:14). Somewhat surprisingly, he does not have the kind of remark found in Proverbs, which places some blame for the poor on themselves. Rather he speaks of them (poor, widows, orphans and

sojourners) with respect (4:2-10). He calls on everyone to assume paternal responsibility towards people in need. He sees himself as a successor to the prophets (24:31) and puts much energy into helping his readers recognise their responsibility and duty to seeing the plight of the poor. While he does not condemn wealth as such he is quite critical of corruption and insists "For the sake of profit many sin" "as a peg is driven between fitted stones, so sin is wedged in between selling and buying" (27:2). The key text on the family is in three strophes in 2:1-16 – with emphasis first on obedience to the father, even when he is old and feeble, and then honoring both parents. This is in a world where the aristocratic males were held in esteem. Ben Sira is frequently criticized for his sexism (e.g. 25:13-26:27) but his views were not unique among Jewish writers of the Hellenistic times.

According to David Flusser in James H. Charlesworth (*Jesus' Jewishness*, New York, Crossroad, 1996, p167) the finest summary of the new Jewish ethics is found in Ben Sira (27:30-28:7). There such themes inter-relate with many of the sayings of Jesus and vice-versa. Scholars point out that interpersonal forgiveness is practically absent from the Hebrew Bible. But in Ben Sira we have the text: "Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray" (28:2)

Prayer with generosity and gladness is recommended "to a God of justice who knows not favorites" (35:4-14). On sickness and death (ch.38) he recommends four steps. He begins by recommending prayer to God, then, significantly, confession of sin, followed by "a rich offering to your means" (v.11): "Then give the doctor his place lest he leave; for you need him too" (v.12). Medicine too seems to have been part of the curriculum, as in his instruction (38:1-23) which describes the divine knowledge of the wise physician, the God of healing and the mourning rites for the dead. The book contains two prayers of petition for divine assistance. In 39:1-8; Wis 9:16-17 Ben Sira carefully distinguishes between two kinds of scribes, the ordinary and the inspired interpreter. In 22:27-23:6 ("Who

will set a guard over my mouth ... that my tongue may not destroy me?") he prays for control of his tongue and sexual appetite and is given instruction on both these topics (23:7-27). In 36:10 the prayer is clearly political as he asks God to raise his hand against the 'goyim', the gentiles who are quite probably the Seleucids who have taken over the country (in 50:25f he is against the Edomites, Philistines and Samaritans). In 39:6 there is a significant response to his prayer: "If it pleases the Lord Almighty, he will be filled with the spirit of understanding".

The Exodus wonders are to be repeated, the people rescued and all the scattered Jews restored to Palestine, to the temple where the divine glory will be manifested "Thus they will know, as we know, that there is no God but you" (36:4). John Riches (*Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism*, Seabury Press, New York, 1982, p71) suggests that it is, perhaps,

Not unduly harsh to say that Ben Sira is a fairly typical reactionary, reaffirming past beliefs and glories at a time when they are in fact being seriously challenged, freely issuing criticisms and advice to the Jewish aristocracy, whilst failing to grasp the political realities which were undermining the kind of Judaism he espoused.

Ben Sira seems to have been the first to attempt integration between wisdom and the specific religious traditions of Israel not only in the section praising their famous ancestors (44:1-50:21) but also throughout the book (e.g. 2:18) ranging from the wisdom books to Genesis, from Second Isaiah to the Psalms. See Crenshaw's extensive list in *Harper's Bible Commentary* (pp837ff) where he notes that Ben Sira's literary expression borrows heavily from Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. In much of the Wisdom literature it is rare to find a clear biblical allusion. But in Sirach 44-50 and Wisdom of Solomon we see texts constantly referring to biblical people and events. The people in Wisdom 10:1-20 are anonymous but their identities are easily recognizable.

Ben Sira's view of the universal presence of wisdom and its dwelling in human

beings is not unlike the Stoic view of the Logos (1:1-10; 24:8; 44:15; 51:1-30). Wisdom, for him, is a female personification who pre-exists creation and hears the surprising command from the Most High: "In Jacob make your dwelling, in Israel your inheritance. Before all ages, in the beginning, he created me, and through all ages I shall not cease to be" (24:8-12) – this is in sharp contrast to Job's view of the inaccessibility of wisdom (Job 28). Note how ch24 is the most significant text about Lady Wisdom in Sirach although it survives only in the Greek Septuagint. She lives on Mt Sion where she is identified both with the temple services (serving as a priest) and the Torah which Moses commanded us (24:22). The law is the divine wisdom sent on earth to teach the people – no wonder the author compares his teaching with prophecy (24:31). This gift is described as a kind of midrash on the rivers of Eden in Gen 2:10-14 (Sir 24:23-29). He understood the prophets as comforting mourners with confident hope, yet also revealing what was to happen at the end of time and the hidden things yet to be fulfilled (48:1-25). Wisdom is food which nourishes (24:19-22) and water which sustains (24:25-31). For von Rad wisdom began on the sidelines of Israelite tradition. But in an odd inversion it increasingly became the form *par excellence* in which all Israel's later theological thought moved (*Old Testament Theology*, Edinburgh & London, 1962, pp449-50).

James Barr (*The Concept of Biblical Theology*, London, SCM., 1999, p572) notes from an article by David Reimer that whereas forgiveness is at the centre of Christian New Testament identity yet interpersonal forgiveness is virtually absent from the Hebrew Bible. However in Ben Sira we do find (28:2): "Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray".

The unity of Torah and Wisdom is found in the roll call of heroic models found in ch. 44-50. However this section praises men rather than women or even God or Wisdom. There is a general pattern to the profiles of these heroes, covering office, divine election, covenant, piety, deeds, historical data, rewards. The lists include



rich householders, a governor (Joseph), a lawgiver (Moses), priests, heroes, judges, rulers, prophets, sages. Perdue (*The Sword and the Stylus*, p288), comments that among the literary genres of Jewish historiography in the Hellenistic period, such as chronicles, romances and epic poetry, there is a fourth category the *encomium*, (Sir 44-50) which surveys Jewish history, and is called the praise of "pious men". This encomium follows a hymn on the works of creation (42:14-43:33) and begins with a call to worship. Theologically, it moves from creation to history, to the temple service and the grandeur of the high priest Simon II. Thus the main theological emphases of Ben Sira are wisdom, creation, and the pious heroes of Jewish history, the temple and the priesthood. Enoch, the great traveler who revealed the heavenly secrets, is a very suitable character to begin and end his list of heroes (Gen 5:24; 44:16; 29:14).

The unity of Torah and Wisdom is clear from the select heroic models given in ch.44ff. For Perdue it is "a revisionist, romanticized history (written) in order to praise the great heroes of the past who were pious, righteous, faithful, honored and thus to be remembered" (p290). Other overviews of the biblical history are found in Ps 78, 105,106, 135-6 and Neh 9:6-37, and in the NT, Acts 7 and Hebrews 11.

The selective roll call of models begins with Enoch and the patriarchs, Moses, the exodus and desert stories. It ends with a further eulogy on Enoch (49:14). Then it continues with the former prophets and kings, then the Major Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, then a brief mention of the 12 Minor Prophets. Among the prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are barely mentioned while Isaiah is praised at length. Curiously the roll call does not refer to Saul or Ezra, so beloved of the Pharisees, although Zerubbabel, Joshua and Nehemiah from the same restoration period are mentioned. Some five competing explanations for the omission are discussed by Crenshaw in his commentary in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol.V, p632. Other prominent omissions are Joseph and Saul. While he applauds the Job of the prose narrative, he does not include Job's complaints. Most likely

he would have objected to much of what is said in Job's complaints. In particular he fails to face the problem of innocent suffering which Job presents so fearlessly. His treatment of 'pairs' (33:14-15) is hardly adequate. Clearly emphasized are those important in the history of the cult: Aaron and Phinehas from the early period, then Hezekiah and Josiah, the great reformers for the story of the cult and from later times, Zerubbabel and Joshua. In general he measures his heroes against three wisdom criteria: piety, glory and reputation (44:1-15).

The highest praise is given to Moses, Aaron, Phinehas and Simon II, priestly heroes, public administrators and leaders of worship, each of whom receives a covenant with God (45:1ff) – significantly Moses receives only 5 verses (45:1-5) while Aaron is given 17 verses. These describe his perpetual covenant, the conferring of his priesthood, his vestments, his sacrificial and teaching ministry and his unique place in the community. Moses (45:1-5) is credited with miracles, commandments and hearing God's voice from the cloud. But the deliverance of his people from Egypt is not mentioned. Only five southern kings (David, Solomon, Rehoboam, Hezekiah and Josiah) are included. Rehoboam is described as a fool whose folly led to the northern revolution. Solomon praised for his wisdom, brought shame on himself and God's anger on his people and ceased to be wise in his old age (47:14).t As one might expect from the rest of his book, Ben Sira does not refer to any women in his encomium! According to Crenshaw (p630) Ben Sira had a boundless erotic appreciation of woman's physical beauty which he described in terms of the holy artifacts of the Temple (26:17-18). In fact examination of the Greco-Roman environment and that of rabbinic Judaism shows rampant misogyny which made the Bible's attitude towards women seem tame in comparison. In 27:30-28:7, written about the year 185 BC, we find perhaps the finest summary of the new Jewish ethics. Thus in 28:3-5 he insists that it is a sin to withhold mercy from a person like oneself.

The survey ends perhaps not surprisingly, with a glowing eulogy of Simon, high priest and public administrator in Ben Sira's own day, at the end of the third

century and the early days of the second century. He repaired and fortified the temple and gloriously led the people in worship, especially the daily whole-offering, not the Day of Atonement as is often suggested. This sinner is described as the person:

Who in his life repaired the house of the Lord  
and in his time fortified the temple.  
He laid the foundations for the high double walls, the high  
retaining walls for the temple enclosure. In his days a cistern for  
water was quarried out a reservoir like the sea in circumference.  
He considered how to save his people from ruin, and fortified the  
city to withstand a siege. (Eccclus 50:1-4).

John H. Hayes and Sara R. Mandell in *The Jewish People in Classical Antiquity*. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1998. comment:

Simon's energetic leadership demonstrates that the high priest at the time was both the head of the cult and the ruler of the hierarchic state. In other words, both traditional civil and religious authority were in his hand. He was the equivalent of a monarch unto himself. It is not surprising, granted these circumstances, that Simon II was a moving force behind the policy of openness to the Seleucids.

Hayes and Mandell enumerate some four reasons for the pro-Seleucid policy.

1) Conditions such as pilgrimages, financial contracts and common language would be more favourable under Seleucid control as the Seleucids controlled the Babylonian and Persian diaspora in the East. 2) The Seleucids granted greater autonomy than the Ptolemies. 3) The more rural Judean community culture was more similar to the culture of the Seleucid Empire than the highly commercial Ptolemaic state. 4) Perhaps the inevitability of the Seleucid control suggested the possibility of fresh negotiations with the Seleucid overlord.

According to Murphy (*The Tree of Life*, p77) the tendency of the OT in recalling such heroes as Moses, Joshua or David was to stress what God did through his servants. But in this unique list something quite new in the Bible is added, the praise of men rather than of God. The preceding verses do emphasize the activities of God and his gift of wisdom to his *Hasidim* ('covenant people' 42:15-43:33). Different explanations ranging from the Roman *De Viribus Illustis*, the Hellenistic *Encomium* (Praise) to the epic poems of antiquity have been offered to explain Ben Sira's usage. Certainly it highlights the author's love of the cult and the high priesthood.

The poems which praise the ancient heroes down to the last legitimate high priest Simon (50:1-24) are followed by an epilogue denouncing Israel's enemies. Next comes the author's identification. The description of Simon celebrating the temple liturgy includes eleven metaphors from the natural world: the morning star (Venus), the full moon, the sun, the celestial body, the brilliant rainbow, the heavenly pledge of peace and harmony (Gen 9:13-15), flowers, incense, trees, the court of the sanctuary – in all a spectacular scene. The text also refers to the hated Edomites, Philistines and Samaritans, their long-standing enemies. Only in the Hebrew text after 51:12 do we find a text suggesting messianic hope: "Give thanks to him who makes a horn to sprout for the house of David, for his mercy endures for ever" – some also see messianism in 36:1-17. Finally there is a psalm of thanksgiving for deliverance from danger (41:1-12) and a personal testimony which like the conclusion of Proverbs, is in the genre of an acrostic poem which forms an conclusion with 1:11-30; 51:13-30. The reference to 'the house of instruction' (51:23) is frequently considered a reference to the setting or school in which the book was developed. Mss B has *bet midrash* whereas the Hebrew manuscript from Qumran has *bet musar* (discipline). Some scholars, such as Whybray, find the evidence for schools and professional teachers to be inconclusive (cf. ABD, 11, 312-17). Quite likely, however, a reading of Sirach (38:34-39:11) seems to suggest a school setting. The poem in v13-28 is

surprisingly also found in 11QPSa; also between Ps 138 and the apostrophe to Zion. This gives three recensions: the Qumran text; the Geniza text; and the Greek translation. The alphabetic organization of this poem suggests that Lady Wisdom orders the chaos of our life experiences and can do the same for his readers and those who come to his school or 'house of instruction' (v.23). There is a paradoxical note. On the one hand the author describes the intense pursuit and working at wisdom. On the other hand in his final words the author insists that the reward is a gift of God in his own time (51:30). Ch.51 thus contains three poetic works – only the central one is found in a Hebrew Mss. Close to the style of Sirach it is found separately at Qumran (11QPSa).

The book of Sirach has basically a positive and very optimistic note found in such texts as: "Do not miss a day's enjoyment or forgo your share of innocent pleasure" (14:14; 17:1ff; 39:16ff). Although caring is emphasized, the perspective is a typically Near Eastern masculine view as regards women (note ch.26; 25:24 also ch.9) and slaves (23:13-26; 7:19; 22:30; 42:14). However, Dianne Bergant in *The Catholic Study Bible (Second Edition, p278)* finds that Sirach:

contains some of the harshest statements about women found anywhere in the Bible. Proverbs may have warned the naïve youth to beware of wily and seductive women but this author seems to speak disparagingly against women in general. Ben Sira is the one who blames women for sin and death (25:23). It is further apparent that he expected wives to be subservient to their husbands for he seems to advocate punishment, even including divorce, if they refuse to obey (25:24f). Perhaps the worst example of this misogyny is found in the description of the unwed daughter (42:9-14). The author clearly considers her a liability, and his concern is exclusively with the reputation of the father.

Ben Sira is almost like a modern professor of business ethics. He is confident that wisdom, combined with genuine piety, can produce a rewarding and enjoyable

life: “If he puts them into practice, he can cope with everything, for the fear of the Lord is his lamp”. (50:29). An interesting comparison can be made between Ben Sira and *4Q Instruction*, a wisdom instruction found in Cave 4 at Qumran. It is found in six fragmentary manuscripts. Much of the text is typical of wisdom literature found in Proverbs and Sirach (e.g. money matters, social relations and family issues) as it integrates creation, eschatology and ethics. While Ben Sira seems to integrate wisdom and Torah even to the point of identifying them, the Qumran author gives particular emphases to the revelation of mystery (raz) which includes creation, ethics and eschatology. His teachings are regularly interrupted by invitations to study the mystery which is to come and which is elusive to us now – it is similar to the NT understanding of the kingdom of God.

Daniel J. Harrington (*Jesus Ben Sira of Jerusalem*, p101) gives a fine summary of Ben Sira’s “handbook for personal and spiritual formation”:

His varied, artistic and generally interesting ways of teaching help to convey his message. His emphasis on the search for wisdom and on fear of the Lord gives spiritual depth to his teachings. Much of his practical advice is still valid, or at least worth considering. Perhaps Ben Sira’s greatest achievement was his ability to integrate the common Near Eastern teachings and the various strands of biblical piety (wisdom, creation, history, worship, Torah, prophecy). His recognition that creation and Israel’s history show forth the glory of God is a wonderful way of looking at the world and our place within it.

Yet Ben Sira is well aware that the search for wisdom never ends: “When a man ends he is only beginning, and when he stops he is still bewildered” (18:7). He thanks God for his delivery from slander and false accusation (51:2-6). He concludes with a hymn of praise which resembles the traditional rabbinic *Eighteen Benedictions* and ends with a prayer for his prospective students, which promises those who work hard that they will finally receive the promised reward.



*Lectionary Readings*

In the post Vatican II lectionary the reading for Holy Family Sunday (between Christmas and New Year's Day) is normally from Sirach 3:1-16, on parents and children. For the Second Sunday after Christmas, Sirach 24:1-4, 8-12 (Wisdom's self-praise) is read. In the Sunday cycle, Year A, two texts from Sirach are read with Matthew's Gospel (Sir 15:15-20 with Mt 5:17-37 on the Sixth Sunday, and on the Twenty-fourth Sunday: Sir 27:30-28:7 with Mt 18:21-35). In Year C the Eighth Sunday joins Sir 27:4-7 and Luke 6:39-45; the Thirteenth Sunday joins Sir 35:12-14, 16-18 with Luke 18:9-14; the Twenty Second Sunday joins Sir 3:17-28 and Luke 14:7-14. In Year I of the Daily Cycle there is a continuous reading of twelve texts from Sirach. In the second Year the accounts of David (47:2-11) and Elijah (48:1-4) conclude a long series from the OT historical volumes.





## CHAPTER FIVE: THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

It has none of the anguish of the Book of Job or the pithiness of Proverbs but is fascinating first as a text that was familiar to the first Christians and then as a critique of the kind of skeptical, hedonistic society that we find in the developed world today ... The Wisdom of Solomon's critique of the permissive society of Alexandria in the first century BC goes some way to explain why, in an agnostic age, wisdom has gone out of fashion ... To the modern ear, there is something bleak and perhaps a little crabby about the teaching of this Jewish sage. Was he, one wonders, jilted in his youth or passed over for promotion? The nearest equivalent in the present day might be a disgruntled old Catholic priest in San Francisco or New York who feels that society has gone to the dogs – everywhere 'manslaughter, theft, and dissimulation, unfaithfulness, tumults, perjury, disquieting of good men, forgetfulness of good turns, defiling souls, changing of kind, disorder in marriages, adultery, and shameless uncleanness' (14:25-6). He seems to relish the fate that awaits sinners: and is delighted that God vents his wrath on their children too, but he is not as vindictive as he first seems ...

Piers Paul Read in *Revelations*, 2005, pp193-6.

According to John J. Collins (*Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1997, p178), “The most important wisdom writing from the Hellenistic Diaspora is undoubtedly the Wisdom of Solomon”. He concludes that it is now widely agreed that the book is “a unified, artful composition which uses the techniques of Greek rhetoric in a sophisticated way.” For Catholics it has the status of scripture but was relegated to the Apocrypha by the Reformers. Collins notes that in antiquity it was more widely considered canonical than any other “deuterocanonical” book and was cited as authoritative from the end of the second century. It was considered scripture by Clement of Alexandria although Origen in the third century pointed out that it was not held by all to have authority (*On First Principles*, 4.4.6).

The Hebrew search for wisdom against the background of the common theology of the Near East and, in particular, the Hellenism of the later centuries, is full of the unexpected. The confidence and prudence of Proverbs is radically shaken by the tragic experience of the incredibly pious Job. The story of Job in turn is followed by the more radical story of Qoheleth with his claim that “All is Hebel” under the sun and the grave is the end for everybody. The more conservative Sirach has no radical leanings as he tries to restore the Law and compassion to centre stage by identifying wisdom with the Law. In the end the author turns to God and confesses:

However much we say, we cannot exhaust our theme: to put it into a word: he is all. Where can we find the skill to sing his praises?  
For he is greater than all his works The Lord is terrible and very great, and marvelous is his power (Sir 43:27-30)

Finally, almost as if the struggles of Job and Qoheleth did not exist, we find the more progressive Wisdom of Solomon, the closest to the Hellenistic wisdom. It is the only OT volume composed in Greek, apart from 2 Maccabees. The author suggests that he is the Solomon who built the Temple – a claim that however was seen as a literary fiction by Origen (182-251) and Jerome (340-420). Without its

Greek cultural background which enveloped the Mediterranean it could never have been written as it is. Yet it remains an intensely Jewish volume. The writer has little or no place for pessimism or placid contentment but summons the reader to a bold and confident commitment to follow his own lead and explore the depths of divine wisdom. While the more conservative Ben Sira did not embrace Hellenism with open arms, the author of *The Wisdom of Solomon* gave it a much warmer embrace. He adopted Greek literary forms while also using the familiar parallelism of Hebrew poetry. Yet he condemns Canaanite sacrifices, sorcery and unholy rites, not to mention Egyptian animal and idol worship. The book describes itself as a speech by Solomon (who in his day would not have known Greek) to the other kings of the world. The meditative discourse is carefully structured, imitating the parallelism of the Biblical poetry. The aim is to show the superiority of Judaism and probably to persuade Jews who had given up their religion to return. Most agree that this is a wisdom book in which the word "wisdom" occurs more than 50 times. But it differs in many ways from the traditional books of wisdom. For example it has no collections of proverbial sayings or wisdom poems. It lacks the passionate speeches of Job and the lectures of his friends, not to mention the acerbity of Qoheleth. However, like Sirach, it does include the history of Israel within its orbit. Sirach's stress on God's mercy is strongly emphasized by the author of *Wisdom* in his repeated words on mercy in 3:9 ("Because grace and mercy are with his holy ones and his care is with his elect") and later in 15:1-2 ("But you, our God, are good and true, slow to anger and governing all with mercy. For even if we sin, we are yours and know your might; but we will not sin, knowing that we belong to you"). Yet typically Israelite aspects are absent from *Wisdom* such as the promises to the Patriarchs, the Exodus, the Sinai covenant. Apart from identifying Torah with wisdom (Sirach 24) and the list of heroes (Sir 44-50) the *Wisdom of Solomon* gives a midrashic treatment to the plagues (ch.11-19). Yet, in general, salvation history is missing from the *Wisdom of Solomon*. But wisdom could be identified with

Torah (Sir 24:23) as if to say there is no incompatibility between the saving God of history and the God of their experience.

It was a time when some prominent Jews (e.g. Tiberius Julianus Alexander, who was Roman governor of Judea, AD 46-48) had given up their Jewish beliefs or had reshaped them into a mainly Hellenistic religion. Our author most likely had attended a Greek school or a Jewish school attached to a synagogue. According to Perdue, the understanding of Sophia by the rhetor is drawn from three sources: the Stoic Logos, the Greco-Egyptian Isis and Woman Wisdom in earlier texts (Prov 1:20-33; 8; 9; Job 28; Sir 24). She is both transcendent and immanent and can be placed in six categories: “the divine spirit that permeates the cosmos, the instrument of creation, the redeemer of the chosen; the instructor of the righteous, the highly sought lover and the medium of immortality”. (Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus*, p352). According to scholars such as J.M. Reese (*Hellenistic Influence on the Book of Wisdom and Its Consequences*, AnBib 41, Rome, Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1970) Hellenistic aspects prominent at the time include the four cardinal virtues of Stoicism (8:7); the harmony of the elements (ch.19); the argument from design (13:1-5) the Stoic ideal of a world soul and the Platonic view of the immortality of the soul. Reese (p3) finds that the text is written in a good Greek style, which shows the influence of a training in Greek rhetoric (e.g. Wis 13:1-9). In particular Reese (pp140-45) notes five themes running through the book:

Religious knowledge of God.

Theological use of the concept of ‘seeing’.

Interaction of malice and ignorance.

Human immortality and related themes.

Didactic use of history.

William Horbury, in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, 2001, p650, notes four great characteristics of Wisdom’s teaching which can be discovered throughout the book:

An element of mysticism in the soul's quest for the divine (2:13; 13:6; 7:10; 8:2), the lover of souls.

A focus on the people of God even though Israel is not named – as in 1 Peter the church is central but not mentioned.

Zeal for righteousness in collective and individual morality – God helps the just and his punishments are just (5:20; 12:15; 16:24) and the heroes are exemplars of virtue.

In emphasizing the nation, Wisdom shows a deep familiarity with Scripture. Many biblical character are portrayed but like Israel are unnamed (4:10).

Although “philanthropia” is not found in the book, the adjective *philanthropos* (humane or benevolent) is found thrice applied to Wisdom (1:6; 7:23) and to God's mercy (12:19). According to scholars like David Whiston there appears to be an open break between Qumran and Wisdom concerning the divine attitude towards the righteous and the wicked. According to Qumran God loves the one while hating the other while in *Wisdom* God loves all equally (*In Search of Wisdom*, p164).

Perdue notes how three sociopolitical concerns stand out: the attraction of Hellenistic culture, the question of Greek citizenship in a city and xenophobia, which occasionally led to persecution (pp295-6). A date of composition in the first century BC seems most likely. However although any date from the second century BC to the first century AD seems possible, even during the reign of Augustus – note the strong polemic against Egyptian religion in ch.12.

Wisdom, written in not very elegant Greek, surprises us not only for its extensive use of Hellenistic culture, literary forms and language but also for its emphasis on the afterlife for the wise and judgment for idolaters. All is placed under the pseudonym of Solomon even though the author does not actually claim the name (ch.8-9) – yet the unnamed speaker in these chapters is easily recognized as Solomon. As Crenshaw points out (*OT Wisdom*, p179), the author leaves no room

for religious doubt, insisting that Wisdom comes only to those who fully believe (1:2-5). In his introduction he describes two different attitudes. For some we were born by chance, life is brief and there is nothing following this life. The practical conclusion from this view is to enjoy life and walk on others to get what we want. On the other hand those who believe and trust in God remain strong in God's kindly love. They often suffer and are ever persecuted. But when they have completed their task they will have life with God.

Betty Jane Lillie in the *abstract* for her study of *The Wisdom of Solomon* at Hebrew Union College, Ohio, in 1982, comments as follows:

The Sage draws heavily upon the language of Greek philosophy and writes in the style of classical Greek literature. Septuagintal references fall from his pen with facility. The theological emphases of the content of the book give it significance for his time and onward. The Philonic concept of *logos* appears, though not nearly so well developed as in Philo. Creation is described as *ex amorphous hyles* rather than *creatio ex nihilo*. Chapters 13-15 presents a polemic against polytheism and idolatry which are inherently opposed to Israel's faith and the pure worship of the One True God. An important advance is the doctrine of the immortality of souls which make way for the possibility of just retribution with rewards and punishments in the afterlife for each according to his deserts.

The title in the ancient Greek manuscripts (The Septuagint) is "Wisdom of Solomon" a title more likely drawn from such passages as 9:7-8 (7:1-14: 1K3:6-9) where the speaker describes himself as the king of God's people who built the temple. The Greek style seems patterned on the style of Hebrew poetry. Jerome's title, preserved in the Vulgate, "The Book of Wisdom" is probably a more suitable one. A questionable tradition from St Melito of Sardis (c.170) suggests that it was considered canonical by both Jews and Christians. Nahmanides, in the

preface to his commentary on the Pentateuch, mentions a Hebrew translation of the Wisdom of Solomon. The earliest references are those of Irenaeus (140-202, Haer. 3.4; 7.5), Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria (175-230), Silvanus, Melito (Paschal Homily), Old Latin version, Clement of Rome (2:24; 12:12) and the Muratorian Fragment (180-190) which includes it in the NT canon. Early third century writers such as Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria and pseudo-Hippolytus' *Remonstratio adversus Judaeos* clearly used it as Scripture. Origen seems to have had doubts but sometimes described it as canonical (*De Principiis* 1.2.5-13). It became part of the Catholic and Greek Orthodox canons. William Horbury (in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, eds. John Day et al., Cambridge University Press, 1995, p189) summarises Christian views of authorship in four points:

Solomon was widely considered the author – some number “the five books of Solomon”.

The friends of Solomon an inscription, found in the Muratorian fragment.

Philo was the author, a tradition known to Jerome.

Augustine claimed it was the standard view that Ben Sira wrote both Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus (De Doc. Chr. 11,8,13: “constantissime perhibetur”).

It has been described as the book, among the wisdom books, subject to the most diverse opinions regarding authorship, integrity, original language, place of origin. One probably must be content with the prevalent consensus. According to James M. Reese the problem is its broad scope for:

It is learned but contains simplistic arguments, traditional in content but original in form of presentation. It is hostile to pagan practices but sympathetic to certain aspects of Hellenism, that fusion of Greek and Near Eastern culture that developed in the centuries after Alexander the Great's conquests. In style it alternates between the parallelism characteristic of OT poetry and the elaborate periodic sentences found in Greek oratory. Its subject



matter ranges widely over philosophical problems, ethical questions, theological doctrines, historical descriptions, psychological reflections, and scientific teaching. Because of the broad scope of the *Wisdom of Solomon*, commentators are divided as to its date, origin, structure, unity, and even its original language. (*Harper's Bible Commentary*, p820).

Curiously, no reference is made in the *Wisdom of Solomon* to the synagogue, prayer house or associated school building. Many guesses, by Philo and others, have been made regarding the unnamed Jewish rhetor who exhorted the Hellenistic Jews in Alexandria to persevere in their ancestral religion. But no consensus among scholars has been reached. Origen, Eusebius and Augustine questioned the attribution to Solomon – most modern scholars accept this attribution as a literary device, common in OT Wisdom, apart from Sirach. As for the date, suggestions range from 200-50 BC. Several aspects of the book point to Alexandria as the place where *The Wisdom of Solomon* was written: his use of Greek and philosophical concepts, the emphasis on the Exodus and the polemic against Egyptian animal-worship (19:13-17; 17:16). James M. Reese suggests that the author had in mind the Jewish youth of Alexandria who may have been attracted by the literature of Isis worship (*Hellenistic Influence of the Book of Wisdom*, Rome, AnBib, 1970, p40). It is interesting, perhaps, to add here the view of Joseph Blenkinsopp (*Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament*, Oxford University Press, 1995, p173). He thinks that *The Wisdom of Solomon* is not highly regarded as a philosophical work or even regarded as a philosophical work at all. The reason is that it is “too philosophical for biblical scholars and too biblical for philosophers”. Most scholars conclude that the text was written somewhere in the Diaspora as a text of encouragement and exhortation for Jews living in the Diaspora (outside Israel) during the Greco-Roman period.

The author was not a philosopher, although familiar with the main schools of philosophy; but rather he was a rhetor and perhaps a teacher of rhetoric – he quite

likely lived in Alexandria and perhaps produced his *logos protreptikos* during the pogrom of Flaccus in his final year as Roman prefect in 38 BC. He merged together Greek forms and ethics, Jewish teaching on creation and redemptive history (plagues and exodus) and aspects of Philonic mysticism (Perdue, p321). A pogrom is suggested by the description of the views, language and actions of the evil people against the just in Alexandria in 1:16-2:24. Note also the reference (19:16) indicating that both Egyptians and Jews had the same rights.

*The Wisdom of Solomon* has much in common with not only Jewish but also ancient Near Eastern and classical literatures. To one who has read Proverbs the idea of gaining wisdom and the activities of Lady Wisdom are familiar. One can detect parallels to many passages in Ben Sira. Many of the ancient Near Eastern teachings from both Egypt and Mesopotamia are quite familiar as they stress the importance for inexperienced youth of acquiring wisdom. Law and obedience to it are clearly important from Deuteronomy and the prophets. The midrash on biblical history is based on Genesis and Exodus. Further, the text is full of allusions to Greek literature and philosophy (cf. Grabbe, *Wisdom of Solomon*, pp35-38). Peter Hayman (*Eerdmans' Commentary on the Bible*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2003, p763) comments that *The Wisdom of Solomon* draws heavily for its literary features on the Hellenistic diatribe, describing some seven forms which reflect this genre:

Personified abstraction (Wisdom throughout the book, Justice in 1:8; Death in 1:16, etc.).

Speeches of an imaginary adversary (chs. 2 and 5).

Rhetorical antitheses – particularly frequent in the second half of the book, e.g. 11:1-9

Accumulation of adjectives (7:22-24 is the most prominent example).

Elaborate similes (e.g. 5:10-12).

Exhortation (e.g. 6:1-11).

Invective (chs. 13-15).

Other genres for different parts of the book have been suggested, including apocalyptic, the Hellenistic syncrisis, midrash, epideictic and encomium.

The linguistic evidence and the use of Greek philosophical ideas and terminology point to the late first century BC or the early decades of the Christian era (e.g. *chiasmus* 1:1 through 4:8 and *sorites*, a chain inference, in 6:17-20 which recalls the mystical ascension in Plato's *Symposium* (210-12); and the 21 attributes (3x7) of wisdom in 7:22, ten of which never appear in the LXX). Philo, the Jewish philosopher who lived in Alexandria from 25 AD to 40 AD, seems unknown to the author. Many suggest a dependence on the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, which gives a date after 200 BC. The main themes are creation and redemption, Sophia (Wisdom) and anthropology. The ten plagues and the Exodus lead to the destruction of the Egyptians and the salvation of Yahweh's people. Yet Job and even Qoheleth (but note the attack on enjoying life in ch.2) seem to be unknown to the author. There seems to be an influence in Rom 1:18-32 and Eph 6:11-17 or at least a common background. Many conclude that *Wisdom* is the work of an Alexandrian Jew writing about 50 BC, thus making it the last of the OT books. The intense dislike of the Egyptians, who are worse than Sodom (19:13-17), points to a persecution of the Jewish community by Greeks and local Egyptians in Alexandria, the great intellectual and scientific centre and the home of a very large Jewish community. Among the political concerns which are evident in the text are the attractions of the Hellenistic culture, the question of citizenship in the city and xenophobia which seemed to be behind the outbreaks of persecution.

According to Reese (*Harper's*, p820), the author was "a pious Jewish intellectual, an enthusiastic supporter of traditional belief, but someone also open to cultural adaptation and doctrinal progress".

John H. Hayes (*An Introduction to Old Testament Study*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1980, p322) transposes the claims about "universal knowledge" into

contemporary idiom as follows: “the author would speak of his knowledge of earth sciences, meteorology, astronomy, zoology, demonology, psychology, botany and pharmacy”.

As with Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, in the eighteenth century scholars began to assign different parts of the book to different authors. However, the consensus today maintains the unity of authorship. Reese was the first to note the frequent and careful use of inclusion to mark off certain parts of the book, also the 45 flashbacks or cross references which support the overall unity. There is also widespread agreement that the book is an original Greek production. The opening chapters give some hint of being a translation from Hebrew/Aramaic. They are written in a type of free verse influenced by both Semitic (mainly antithetic) parallelism and Greek artistic prose. However, there are so many technical terms and expressions typical of Hellenistic philosophy, and a widespread use of such literary devices as paronomasia and alliteration, that it is quite unlikely to have been translated from Hebrew/Aramaic, original. The view of St Jerome was that it was written in Greek because it was ‘redolent of Greek eloquence’. Note the use of the *diatribe* (1:1ff; 12:1ff), philosophical enquiry (6:10ff), proof from example (10:1ff), *synkrisis* or comparison (11:1ff).

As far as we know, no Jewish writer of the early Christian centuries, quotes Wisdom. It was preserved by Christian writers who liked its message and included it in the great codices Sinaiticus and Alexandrinus. We possess no patristic commentary on Wisdom even though it is frequently quoted by the Fathers (cf. *Biblia Patristica*). It is first quoted in Clement of Rome’s *Epistle to the Corinthians* and later in Irenaeus, (*Against Heresies* 3:4; 7:5 to Wis 2:24; 12:10) Tertullian and Origen. Augustine quoted it some 800 times and included it in the canon in contrast to Jerome (cf. PL. 28:124). According to Cassiodorus (Instit.div.litt.5), Ambrose and Augustine preached homilies (now lost) on Wisdom. Further Bellator (6<sup>th</sup> c) wrote a full commentary in seven volumes (*Expositio Sapientiae* – also lost). Paterius collected the scattered exegesis on

Wisdom and Sirach of his teacher Gregory the Great (*Testimonia in libr. Sapientiae et Ecclesiastici*, PL.79:917-940). The earliest commentaries which we possess are quite late: Rabanus Maurus, 9<sup>th</sup> c. (PL. 109, 671-702). Anselm (+1117) and Bonaventure (+1274) wrote on it in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries followed by Nicholas of Lyra (1341) and Holkot (1349). Post-Reformation commentary comes from both Catholic and Protestant scholars: Nannius (1552), Grotius in *Critici Sacri* (1575) and Strigel (1575) followed by Lorinus and Cornelius à Lapede in the seventeenth century followed by Calmet (1724), Houligart (1754, 1777), Kleuker and Hasse in 175 and Nachtigal in 1799, Montefiore (1887), Farrar (1888) and Stevenson (1903), Gregg (1909), Harris (1929), Goodspeed (1939), Joseph Reider (1957). From the Middle Ages the *Glossa Ordinaria* PL. 113.1167ff; Hugh of St. Cher (*Opera* 111, Lyon, 1669). The oldest manuscripts are the fourth-century AD *Codex Vaticanus* and *Codex Sinaiticus*.

*The Book of Wisdom* is a unique example in the Bible of the fusion of Judaism and Hellenism. In three parts it deals

- 1) with righteousness and immortality (ch.1-5),
- 2) wisdom (ch.6-9) and
- 3) wisdom's role in the early history of Israel (ch.10-19). It seems to be aimed at "you who judge the earth" but in reality it is aimed at young Jewish intellectuals who were in danger of turning aside from their religious and cultural traditions and adopting pagan ways of thinking and acting (Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *Invitation to the Apocrypha*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1999, p57). Other scholars see the author changing rapidly at 10:1 with an emphasis on the exodus and wilderness period for the rest of the book, while the first part exhorts the reader to follow the way of wisdom and ch.6-9 is a personal appeal from Solomon himself. The main aim from 10:1ff is to produce evidence from Israel's history that Wisdom does save the righteous. It provides an overview of highlights from Adam until Joseph. Wisdom (rather than Yahweh) is the one who delivers the

godly. Wisdom is so close to God that it can be seen as a hypostasis or a concrete manifestation of God. Thus Adam was protected by Wisdom and Abraham resists the idolatry of Babel.

According to Kathleen Ann Farmer the emphasis in this book is:

More on the association between Wisdom and the Spirit of God: For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the almighty (7:22,25). As spirit, Wisdom fills the whole of creation and thus makes God accessible to all who seek her (7:22-8:8). The Prologue to the Gospel of John (John 1:1-8) makes use of these ideas concerning the Wisdom of God in a new way, speaking of the *logos*, the word of God who was with God and was God. Since Wisdom had been associated with the Word of God prior to the NT period, John's choice of *logos* as he uses material from the Wisdom tradition is understandable, as C.D. Dodd has demonstrated. (In D.E. Gowan (ed), **The Westminster Theological Word Book of the Bible**, Louisville, 2003, p535).

In the Wisdom of Solomon, according to Perdue (p355), God is creator, sustainer and redeemer as he acts mainly through his consort, Woman Wisdom – the story of the Exodus receives new emphases as it reassures Jews under persecution from the Egyptians. Wisdom is a lover, the means of eternal life for the just. The author insists that it was by the envoy of the devil (2:24) that death entered the world and that it is those of his persuasion who experience it.

On the one hand, to quote St Jerome who knew the book in Hebrew and claimed it existed nowhere among the Hebrews, 'even the style of the book stinks of Greek eloquence'. It contains the four familiar Greek cardinal virtues of Stoicism (8:7), a philosophical treatment of God and the argument from design in 13:1-9; the stoic ideal of a world soul, the use of the stylistic device of 'sorites' or chain structure in ch.6 and such periodic sentences as 12:27 and 13:11-15. In a total Greek vocabulary of 1,734 different words, some 1,303 are found only once, and

about 20% (335) are not found in the rest of the OT. There are quite a number of positive clues that Greek is the language in which the book was composed. Thus D. Winston (*The Wisdom of Solomon*, AB 43, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, 1979, p15) following C. Grimm remarks “the author of wisdom is quite capable of sentences in true periodic style (12:27; 13:11-15) and his fondness for compound words is almost Aeschylean. His manner, at times, has the light touch of Greek lyric poetry (17:17-19; 2:6-9; 5:9-13) and occasionally his words fall into an iambic or hexameter rhythm”. Winston, in his article in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, New York, Doubleday, 1992, p120, comments:

In contrast to Pseudo-Aristeas’ mild criticisms of heathen cults, the author of Wisdom’s wrathful exhibition of the innumerable crimes and corruptions connected with pagan idolatry and his unrestrained attacks on Egyptian theriolatry are an unmistakable sign of the complete rupture which had in his time sundered the Jewish community from the native Egyptians and Greeks.

According to James M. Reese, the literary form is an example of a protreptic or rhetorical exhortation, represented by the Clementine *Exhortation to the Greeks*. Others suggest that it is an encomium (praise), as used in Greek and Latin rhetoric with the aim of persuading the reader to admire some person, or practice a particular virtue. Late first century BC Alexandria was a ferment of religious and philosophical speculations in the wake of the decline of the classical philosophical systems of Plato and Aristotle. There was an intense search, as Reese documents, for wisdom and perfection and for the really powerful gods controlling the universe. Recent comment tends to place the book in Rome rather than Ptolemaic Egypt in the time of Augustus (Thus C. Larcher in one of the best commentaries, Paris, 1967; M. Gilbert); or Caligula (D. Winston, G. Scarpata). Wisdom is then an excellent example of early Judaism outside Palestine, seeking to express its traditional beliefs in the popular Greek culture (see 7:22ff; 11:17; 14:3 17:2; 19:2). The author is more a populariser of philosophical ideas than a creative

thinker. On the other hand the book is an intensely Jewish production with a preference for Genesis, Is 40-66 and Psalms. It contains a doctrine of immortality based, not on the nature of the soul or the composition of the human person but on the relationship of a person to God: for justice is undying (1:15). Twice in the first part death is referred to as an 'exodus': the death of the faithful (3:2) and in 7:6 the death of all people. Immortality is a gift of God to the just (5:5). It is the greatest gift of Wisdom (8:17-18). In fact, the idea of immortality and after-life seems to solve most of the traditional arguments against divine justice in this life. The just may seem to die and their passing to be an affliction but they are in the hands of God (3:11ff). Thus torment does not really reach the godly and death is only apparent. Here the writer's firm belief in the afterlife is shown. The final end for the godly is to be ruled by God and in turn to rule over the nations.

The midrash on the Exodus (ch.11-19) uses a literary type called 'synchrisis' whereby some seven contrasts between God's treatment of the Israelites are proposed for reflection. Surprisingly the author, in contrast to his tradition, is quite insistent on praising barren women, virtuous eunuchs and even those who die young (3:13; 4:1; 4:8). With his stress on the after-life, material, this-worldly rewards are no longer dominant. The noun immortality (*athanasia*) is found five times in The Wisdom of Solomon (3:4; 4:1; 8:13, 17; 15:3) and the adjective *athanatos* once (1:15). It is a gift from God, not a natural endowment of the person (5:15-23) and the description is based on the Genesis creation story (2:23-24) – the noun and adjective for corruption appear in total five times (2:23; 6:18-19; 12:1; 18:4).

According to John Collins (*Wisdom in the Hellenistic Diaspora*, p187) "Wisdom of Solomon breaks with the entire biblical tradition by stating categorically that 'God did not make death' (1:13) the contrast with Ben Sira could not be more stark. As Sirach reads Genesis, 'The Lord created human beings out of the earth and makes them return to it again' (Sir 17:1). Death is 'the decree of the Lord for all flesh' and represents the pleasure of the Most High (Sir 41:4)." But the God of



the Wisdom of Solomon loves "all things that exist and would not have made anything if you had hated it" (11:24).

As for the subsequent history of the book, little satisfactory knowledge is available. The homilies of Ambrose and Augustine are lost so that the first extant commentary is by Rabanus Maurus (856 AD) followed by the *Glossa Ordinaria* from the first half of the ninth century. Anselm, Hugh of St. Cher (1260) and Bonaventure wrote in the twelfth and thirteen centuries according to B.J. Lillie's list in John H. Hayes (*Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, p650). Next came Nicholas of Lyra (1341) and R. Holcot (+1349). P. Nannius (1500-1557) and V. Strigel wrote in the sixteenth century followed by H. Grotius (*Critici Sacri*, 1660) with Lorinus and C. à Lapide in the seventeenth century. Increased interest in the eighteenth century included D. Lalmet (1724), C. Houbigant (1753 and 1777) and Klenker and Hasse in 1785. Nachtigal (1798) claimed that Wisdom is a mosaic to which 79 sages contributed.

A large variety of outlines for the *Book of Wisdom* has been proposed (see L.L. Grabbe, *Guides to Apocrypha*, Sheffield, 1997, ch.1). Recent studies by A.G. Wright, S.S. (see his article in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*) based on the principle of inclusions (the repetition at the end of a section of a word used at the beginning, e.g. justice in 1:1-1:15) and the counting of the poetic verses indicates that there are two major sections, each consisting of 251 verses of poetry: (a) 1:1-11:1 (560 stichoi) the praises of Wisdom and (b) 11:2-19:22 (561 stichoi) God's fidelity to his people in the Exodus. According to James M. Reese (*Harper's Bible Commentary*, p820) more clear-cut divisions are difficult to isolate because of the flowing style and frequent asides. He isolates four sections (1) 1:1-6:11 and 6:17-21, an exhortation, in the Greek diatribe form of argumentative discourse, to blessed immortality. In ch.9 the author insists that even if the righteous are barren or eunuchs they can be blessed. Childlessness with virtue is better than evil offspring. Note how the attitude of the evil in 2:1-6 is not much different from that of many ordinary people today. (2) 6:12-16 and

6:22-10:21 the praises of Lady Wisdom, personified as God's throne partner. (3) 11:15-16:1a, another diatribe warning not to abandon divine wisdom for human folly. (4) 11:1-14 and 16:1b-19:22 a *syncretis* or Hellenistic comparison of two people, qualities or events, praising God as Israel's liberator. Here we have a comparison between God's treatment of Israel and his treatment of the Egyptians. Peter Hayman who commented on the *Wisdom of Solomon* in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, (Cambridge, U.K., 2003, p763) notes that it draws heavily for its literary features on the Hellenistic diatribe and lists the following seven forms which reflect this genre:

Personified abstractions (Wisdom throughout the book, Justice in 1-8; Death in 1:16 etc.

Speeches of an imaginary adversary (chs. 2 and 5).

Rhetorical antithesis – particularly frequent in the second-half of the book e.g. 11:1-9.

Accumulation of adjectives (7:22-24 is the most prominent example).

Elaborate similes (e.g. 5:10-12).

Exhortation (e.g. 6:1-11).

Invective (chs. 13-15).

Perdue finds a progressive movement from creation and cosmology (*The Book of Eschatology*, ch.1-6:21), to cosmic Wisdom's encounter and appropriation by Solomon (*The Book of Wisdom*, 6:22-11:1), to cosmic Wisdom's guidance of Israel out of slavery in Egypt to the transformation of creation (*The Book of History*, 11:2-19:22). God's portrait as a harsh judge is balanced with his portrait of a God who is merciful and loving towards all things which exist (11:24). His purpose is that people repent (11:23; 12:1-2), even the Canaanites (12:3-11). The Egyptians were punished by their own idolatry and the creatures they believed to be gods (12:27).

Michael Kolarcik, S.J. in *The New Interpreters Bible, Old Testament Survey*, p494, finds that three concerns (exhortation to justice, the gift of wisdom and the deliverance from Egypt) “make up the rich tapestry of the three main sections of the Wisdom of Solomon”. He finds that one of the best modern commentaries on Wisdom comes from the Protestant scholar C.L.W. Grimm (*Das Buch der Weisheit*, Leipzig, Hirzel, 1837). While in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries it was common to ascribe different parts of the book to different authors, Grimm in 1860 made a very convincing case for the unity of the book on the basis of language and style. He thus contradicted the views of scholars such as Bretschneider and Eichorn who concluded that the book consisted of three parts, independent of each other. Friedrich Focke revived this approach in 1913 but was not successful – he claimed that chs.1-5 were originally composed in Hebrew while a translator added chs.6-19 – however his arguments that there was a lack of Greek philosophy and the absence of the personified figure of wisdom in chs.1-5 have not been accepted by scholars. Collins concludes (*Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age*, p.180) that it is generally agreed that the *Wisdom of Solomon* is “a unified, artful composition, which uses the techniques of Greek rhetoric in a sophisticated way” Collins quotes with approval the view of D. Winston (A.B. 43, New York, Doubleday, 1979, pp15-16) that the author uses

chiasmus (1:1, 4, 8; 3:15) hyperbaton, the Sorites (6:17-20),  
antithesis, assonance, homoioteleuton, paronomasia, isokolia  
(balance of clauses), litotes, anaphora (c.10 and Greek  
philosophical terminology (see Reese, Hellenistic Influence,  
Rome, AnBib 41, pp 25-31).

According to Lester L. Grabbe in *Wisdom of Solomon* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) the scholars’ three major divisions of the book (ch.1-5 Book of Eschatology; ch.6-9 Book of Wisdom; ch.10-19 Book of History) have not changed substantially since the nineteenth century. Scholars such as J.M. Reese and David Winston have identified the genre of the whole book as the Greek

genre of 'exhortatory discourse' (*logos protreptikos*), which was first suggested by Focke (1913) and followed by Reese (1970) and Winston (1979). This type was first defined and discussed by Aristotle. A blend of philosophy and rhetoric, its aim was to persuade or convince others of a particular course of action. Another proposal was to apply the characteristics of the encomium, which was also examined by Aristotle in his Rhetoric. It can be applied to *Wisdom* as follows:

Exordium (introduction): Wisdom 1-6.

Encomium proper: Wisdom 6-9.

Synkrisis (comparison): Wisdom 10:1-19:9.

Epilogue and conclusion: Wisdom 19:10-22.

In sharp contrast to Proverbs and Sirach, *Wisdom* does not present a collection of individual maxims on social relations in a loose sequence. Rather it is a composition divided into three logically connected parts with a developing theme. It is more a book about the benefits, nature and role in history of wisdom than a book of practical advice like Proverbs and Sirach.

In the first part (1:1-6:21) the rhetor speaks as the long-dead Solomon (ch.7-9) addressing the hostile judges of the earth and kings (1:1-6:1). It begins with a simple blunt command "Love justice". It discusses the faith of the just and the wicked and in particular the problem of the suffering of the innocent, and ends with an invitation to love wisdom. In reality the opponents were quite likely the Egyptians of Alexandria, who seemingly were also denied citizenship and the opportunity to frequent the gymnasia (cf. Ps2). He advises them to seek wisdom and justice wherever they are found because they ultimately bring victory and immortality to pious Jews (ch.1-15) even though evil now seems to have the upper hand. The ungodly summoned Death by their words and deeds and even considered Death to be their friend and made a covenant with him. Not surprisingly, Lester L. Grabbe (*Wisdom of Solomon*, London, T&T Clark, 2003,

p50) claims that the attitude, alleged to be that of the wicked, is very much espoused by many ordinary people today.

Michael Kolarcik (*The Ambiguity of Death*, AnBib 127, Rome, 1991, p62) finds a concentric nature to the opening section as follows

1:1-15: exhortation to justice.

1:16-2:24: speech of the wicked, explaining their reasoning.

3:1-4:10: four diptychs contrasting the just with the wicked.

B<sup>1</sup> 5:1-30: speech of the wicked in a judgement scene.

A<sup>1</sup> 6:1-21: exhortation to wisdom

Further sections insist that wisdom is divine in essence (ch.6-9). A review of the history of Israel shows how wisdom brought blessings to Jews and disasters to the Egyptians in the Exodus (ch.10-19). Retribution is prominent in the author's thinking, as in true diatribe fashion he allows the evil to speak for themselves and reveal their thinking and plans. In a caricature of Epicurean philosophy they are described as being concerned that this life is all, in their blindness (2:1-9). A materialist understanding of human nature is clear in 2:2ff where "breath in our nostrils is a smoke and reason is a spark at the beating of our hearts, and when this is quenched, our body will be ashes." They conclude that they can live without morality or stewardship. They derive the utmost pleasure from enjoyment – Robert Herrick's "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may" comes from 2:8. The wicked (2:2-12) claim that the just were born by mere chance and decide to oppress the just because they are inconvenient and reproach themselves for sins against their training. Yet the wicked do not hesitate to kill the just person, whose very life is a rebuke to themselves.

Suffering, barrenness (3:13-4:9), even early death, are not necessarily evil, because God is the vindicator of the poor, honest person (2:10ff; 3:6-9; 4:1). The key counter argument of the writer emphasizes the immortality of the soul. God creates the world. He is the "ruler over the cosmos who providentially redeems

the chosen and guides them to their final days” (Perdue, p352). Those who die will serve as judges to condemn their persecutors (4:7-20). For God created a person to be imperishable in the image of his own nature (2:23). The death of the just is the entrance to a happy eternity. God the creator rules the cosmos and redeems the chosen and guides them to the end (eschatology). Like the Enochic passages but in contrast to Daniel, *Wisdom of Solomon* does not speak of a resurrection. Rather it emphasizes an exaltation to the heavenly realm – likewise the *Dead Sea Scrolls Hodayot* avoid resurrection language but mentions exaltation and fellowship with the angels.

For Perdue the understanding of Wisdom can be put in six categories: “the divine spirit that permeates the cosmos, the instrument of creation, the redeemer of the chosen, the instructor of the righteous, the highly sought lover, the medium of immortality” (p352). Immortality is a gift from God but not a natural endowment (5:15-23). Wisdom wants all people to become “the friends of God and the prophets” (7:27). What is valued is beauty, nobility, knowledge, wealth, practical wisdom, justice and virtue (8:2-6). Wisdom is to be preferred to scepters, thrones, gold, silver and jewels. The unknown author enthusiastically carries forward Sirach’s stress on divine mercy especially in a refrain which is found twice in the book:

Because grace and mercy are with his holy ones and his care is  
with his elect (3:9)

But you, our God are good and true, slow to anger, and governing  
all with mercy. For even if we sin, we are yours and know your  
might but we will not sin, knowing that we belong to you (15:1-2).

Even the Canaanites (‘merciless murderers of children’) were given sufficient warning so that they would have an opportunity to repent (12:3-11). The whole world is little more than a speck of dust, yet God has mercy upon all (11:22-23).

Surprisingly, in contrast to other writings of the period, there is no mention of a

resurrection of the body (Dan 12:2; 2Mac 2:13). The author of *Wisdom* is the first biblical writer to distinguish between body and soul (9:15) and to use the word immortality (8:13). Despite the view of the evil that death marks the end of human existence, he insists that “The souls of the just are in the hand of God and no torment will ever touch them” (3:1). Their hope is ‘full of immortality’ (3:4). Note also how the author uses the Platonic division of body and soul, providence (6:7; 14:3), conscience (1:11), and cardinal virtues (18:7) as he invites the non-Jews to see for themselves that the way of Judaism was a valid Wisdom way of life (1:1-2; 10:15-11:14). This section closes with a Hellenistic ‘sorites’ (6:12-21) or chain collection of reflections reminding the kings that if they honour wisdom they will ‘reign as kings forever’ (6:21).

The second part (6:22-11:1) is an answer to the philosophical problem (‘aporia’): “What is Wisdom and how does she come to be? (6:22). It discusses Solomon’s prayer for wisdom and wisdom’s role in Jewish history. The personification of wisdom as feminine has long baffled commentators who seem to despair of a satisfactory answer, (Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, p146). For many the feminine portrayal is “much more vulnerable and accessible than the masculine images of father, judge, warrior, and king more usually applied to God in the Bible and it is an enormous and valuable addition to the biblical concept of God” (Paffenroth: *In Praise of Wisdom*, p37).

Our author, who rejects the divine kingship of Ptolemaic and Roman rulers and who seems to play the role of Solomon, presents himself as a mere human being. Solomon (his name according to Hellenistic conventions is not explicitly given) describes his dedicated search for Lady Wisdom, confessing his weak and ephemeral nature – he received the gift of wisdom in answer to prayer (Is 11:2; 1K 3:5-9; 2Ch 1:9f). Solomon’s search is a model for the reader. The description of wisdom is truly encyclopedic including astrology, cosmology, time, astronomy, zoology, demonology, (‘powers of the winds’), psychology, botany, medicine, ‘secrets’. The personification of wisdom is carried much further than in any other

Judaic book. Wisdom can teach all this because wisdom had shaped creation (v.22), and is the champion of justice, the mistress of providence and the giver of beauty (7:29) and human benefits, the arts, rhetoric and philosophy and above all immortality. Similar word-tributes are found in inscriptions and documents of the devotees of Isis. Note how in 7:17-22 the author describes Wisdom as teaching the basic subjects which formed the curriculum of a Greek school: philosophy, physics, history, astronomy, zoology, botany and medicine.

Wisdom is 'a kindly (or philanthropic) spirit' (1:6; 7:23) – the *Kindly Light* of Cardinal Newman? – resplendent and unfading (6:12), the artificer of all (7:22), teaching even the four cardinal virtues (8:7). But it can only be gained by prayer (8:19-21). In such description the personification of Wisdom is carried much further than in any parallel texts in Jewish literature. Wisdom will not enter a soul that plots evil (1:4) nor dwell in a body under debt of sin. Yet it holds all together and 'fills the world' (1:7) and has its own laws as the basis of incorruptibility (6:18). God is the guide of Wisdom (7:15). He created the world out of 'formless matter' (11:17). A similar view of wisdom as 'your holy spirit' (9:17 and as the source of the holy life (7:27) is found also in the writings of the Jewish Philosopher Philo of Alexandria (c.20 BC – 50AD). While for Ben Sirach, wisdom is the Torah and dwells in the Jerusalem Temple, for the *Wisdom of Solomon* it is the world soul to be found everywhere dwelling in everything.

Reading such books takes one far from Brueggemann's rather sad comment on our "prose-flattened world" where we tend to saturate ourselves with scientific descriptions and mountains of prose and tend "to reduce all language to a dead level of provable 'facts'". By prose Brueggemann refers "to a world that is organized in settled formulae, so that even pastoral prayers and love letters sound like memos. By poetry, I do not mean rhyme, rhythm or meter but language that moves like Bob Gibson's fast ball, that jumps at the right moment, that breaks open old worlds, with surprise, abrasion, and pace" (Quoted in William L. Hollada, *Long Ago God Spoke*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995, p24).



In a famous passage, quite similar to a well-known Stoic hymn to Zeus, twenty one (the perfect number  $7 \times 3 =$  a triple perfection) attributes are listed. They include intelligence, holiness, mobility, omnipotence, interpenetration, reflecting the increasing emphasis on the transcendence of God in later Judaism (7:22-30). Wisdom is a pure emanation from God and is loved by Solomon like a bride. Her works are the four cardinal virtues of moderation, justice, courage and practical wisdom as defined by the Stoic philosophers of the Hellenistic time. She represents the entire range of the natural sciences: cosmology, physics, astronomy, biology, botany in addition to all esoteric knowledge (7:17-21). Only God can give these gifts. The listing of 21 aspects highlights the pervasive influence of divine wisdom in all areas of life. Wisdom (7:22ff) can be seen as the climax of OT teaching on wisdom, as she is described as a woman with exclusively divine characteristics – later Christian tradition would see here glimmers of the Trinity. Ch.7:8-11 most likely came from the elite in Jewish society, people who valued beauty, nobility, knowledge, wealth, practical wisdom, justice and virtue (8:2-6). In 8:19-20 Solomon insists that “I was indeed a child well-endowed having had a noble soul fall to my lot, or rather being noble I entered an undefiled body.” Using Solomon’s request (9:1-18), the writer turns it into a royal petition for Wisdom to help him rule and judge a people (9:1-8) and to have dominion over all creatures (Gen 1:26-28). In 9:13-14 he bluntly asks “For who can discern what God wills? For the reasoning of mortals is worthless, and our designs are likely to fail”. Wisdom 9:15 is quoted some 82 times in Augustine’s works and is obviously a key text for him. It describes how the corruptible body weighs down the soul. Such texts introduced Platonic elements into Western doctrine. The criticism of the pagan religions, particularly the Egyptians, especially in ch.10-19, is according to Perdue (p319) a reaction to their “assault on Jewish identity, national character, traditions, religion and privileges granted by Greek and Roman rulers.” The greatest boon given by Wisdom is the gift of immortality (8:17-18). The author illustrates here saving and punishing

power by listing seven righteous heroes and their evil counterparts: Adam and Cain; Noah and the Flood generation; Abraham and the confounded nations; Lot and the Sodomites; Jacob and Esau; Joseph and his critics; Israel led by Moses and the Egyptians led by Pharaoh.

Chapters 10-19 can be described as a midrash on God's and wisdom's activity in history from Adam to the conquest of Canaan with extensive reflection on idolatry and pagan worship. In ch.10 Wisdom is even credited with being actively involved in salvation in Israel's early history – specific examples include Adam, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Jacob, Joseph (not named). In 10:18 “she took them across the Red Sea”. Wisdom takes on the saving role reserved to Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible. She saves from water, fire, imprisonment etc. just like the God Isis does. Each of the patriarchs is saved by Wisdom. The noun savior is not used but the corresponding verb is (0:18). Thus the writer who has denounced the Jewish skeptics of his time produces a historical religious philosophy (ch.10-12; 16-19) and identifies Wisdom with the traditional spirit of the Lord. This is a bold theology of saving wisdom in history to be compared with Sir. 44-50. Ben Sira had identified wisdom and Torah and stressed compassion. Here the transcendent God is brought even closer to humans themselves and their salvation history (7:25). Wisdom is an image of God's goodness (7:26). God's wisdom is mercy and love and extends to all that exists (11:24). The emphasis on the chosen people is frequent (3:9; 15:1-2) but God's favour is not limited to Israel – gentiles are given time to repent. The Egyptians, even though killed, do not suffer the indignity of having wild animals turned loose upon them (note the excursus 11:15-12:22). Wisdom itself rather than people is often the subject of praise. Thus in ch.10 each of the patriarchs discussed is saved by Wisdom and the exodus story is reduced almost to an allegory of the just and the unjust. Wisdom is a mediator figure (8:2-9), who protected the first man created (10:1), preserved Abraham blameless (10:5), saved Lot (10:6), delivered all who served her (10:9), including the just man Joseph from sin (10:130), the devout people from a nation of

oppressors (10:15). Thus for John S. Kloppenborg (*Isis and Sophia in the Book of Wisdom*, H.T.R. 75, pp57-84) what is distinctive in the *Wisdom of Solomon* is:

The saving rose of Sophia (Wisdom, corresponding to Isis's major function);

The selection of events which the author used as examples of this role

The allusive re-telling of these events in such a way that they resonate with the mythic pattern characteristic of the Isis-Horus cycle.

Surprisingly, it is only in passing that Wisdom refers to the Torah (2:12; 6:4; 16:6) – for our author Moses is a prophet not a lawgiver (11:1).

The final section, what has been called *The Book of History* (11:2-19:22), refers to those saved by Wisdom from creation (Adam) to the Exodus and wilderness (Moses, Wis. 10:1-11:1). For Wisdom nature is ever protective of the just but destructive towards the evil (11:5). Because God is merciful and loves his creation he only corrects little by little (11:21-12:2). One is punished “by the very things by which one sins” (11:16). The punishment fits the crime. He selects in particular seven antitheses on the workings of divine providence, contrasting the two modes of God's action for good and evil – even sparing the Canaanites and giving them time for repentance (12:10, 27). These antitheses show how wisdom has brought blessings to Israel and disasters to the Gentiles. His series of seven contrasts is interrupted by a theological reflection (11:15-12:27) and an excursus on idolatry (13-15). Thus the fourth contrast (16:15-29) describes how hail and lightning came from the heavens upon the Egyptians while manna came down upon the Israelites. The fifth, darkness, came upon the Egyptians while light came upon the Israelites in the Exodus (17:1-18:4). In particular the author describes how in the Exodus plagues (seven are mentioned) God saved Israel and punished the Egyptians. He concludes his description dramatically with the confident

couplet that “For every way, O Lord, you magnified and glorified your people, unflinching you stood by them in every time and circumstance” (19:22). These chapters are often described as similar to the *haggadic midrash* (from the Hebrew verb ‘*darash*’ meaning to seek, search, examine) used to apply the deeper meanings to new situations. It is also an example of the Hellenistic form (‘*syncrisis*’) in which two people, events or qualities are compared to show the truth of the concluding couplet.

The section on nature worship (13:1-9; Rom 1:19ff; Acts 17:27-31) is unique in the Bible. Here people failed to distinguish between the Creator and creation. A ship made of wood is not guided by praying to an idol made of wood! or even to an idol of a dead child. This is influenced by Greek philosophical thinking, especially in its use of ‘analogy’ in 13:5: “From the greatness and beauty of created things, their original author by analogy is seen”. The ancients took the existence of god(s) for granted. But the issue at stake here is the confusing of nature with the divine. In the important reflection on natural theology Wisdom hesitates to blame human beings for not arriving at the knowledge of the true God (13:1-9). His question is to the point. If people had the power to know so much, why did they, in fact, fail to discover the Lord of all? Idolatry is a major concern of ch.13-15, referring back to “the work of your hands” (1:12). Idolatry is the root of all sins and vices (14:27). Errors on the difference between right and wrong come from errors about the nature of God. God will punish people even if their own idols cannot. Our God (15:1) is true, patient, kind and merciful. The potter himself was made from earth and at death returns to earth. The motives of the idol maker are foolish. Such people know that they are sinning. The Egyptians were the most foolish idolaters as they oppressed the Israelites.

James Barr (*The Concept of Biblical Theology*, London, SCM Press, 1999, pp470-1) comments that the *Wisdom of Solomon* contains arguments which are very close to those of *Romans*. The importance of this is that here we are saying “that a Greek book, and one outside the Hebrew canon, had a central importance

for the thought of Saint Paul and thus served not lonely as a link in transmission but also as a creative and transforming force in the passage of ideas from the Hebrew Bible to nascent Christianity” (p471).

Three different explanations of the origin of idolatry are given: vanity, grief and aesthetics. Thus, to pay adequate respect to a distant king, an idol is constructed according to the king’s likeness. A mourning parent could make an idol as a permanent memorial of a dead child. Thirdly, love of beauty could lead to a creative and lucrative craft. Writers such as Euhemerus of Messene had used similar arguments. Other philosophers such as Plutarch, Cicero and Horace, likewise ridiculed idolatry and would agree with the taunts against Egyptian polytheism in 15:14-19. The basic sin for Wisdom is idolatry leading to such dreadful sins as confusion, bloody murder, deceitful theft, corruption, treachery, tumult, perjury, agitation of decent people, ingratitude, soul defilement, interchange of sex roles, irregular marriages, adultery and debauchery (14:22-28). In Wisdom it is Wisdom rather than human beings which is worthy of praise. Wisdom seems to take excessive pleasure and length in caricaturing idolatry and blaming it as the source of the corrupt character of the gentiles in the long excursus in ch.13-15. This develops the polemic of Isaiah, Hosea, Deuteronomy and Psalms (Ps 115) and was used by the early Christians – a passage which influenced Rom 1:18-30. Thus they condemned the Egyptians because they considered their idols to be gods, even though they had no power and were manufactured by human beings. In fact, they worshipped “hateful animals” and did not have the good taste to choose intelligent and beautiful animals to worship. This critique of idolatry finds resonances in the *Letter of Jeremiah*, also in Bel and the Dragon and quite dramatically in Paul’s teaching on idolatry as the source of ignorance and sin (Rom 1:18-32). Nevertheless, the total condemnation of the Egyptians in 18:13 contains an implicit invitation to the Egyptians to accept Israel as God’s elect. Clearly the ancient Egyptians and Canaanites were symbols of the Romans and Alexandrians of the writer’s own day. But the model proposed by

their attitude is God's compassion and the ideal or blameless person to be followed is not the zealot, the Maccabean ideal of Phineas (Num 25), but the prayerful intercession of Aaron (18:21ff). He can intercede for all people because "on his full-length robe the whole world was depicted" (18:24). Thus it is surprising that some scholars find "undisguised particularism" in this part of the Wisdom of Solomon. Here the author never mentions Israel by name but uses such titles as "a holy people and blameless race" (10:15), your people (12:19; 16:2ff), your children (15:10ff), the holy children (18:9), your holy ones (18:2) and also "the son of God" (18:13). The sufferings of the Israelites did not last long – Wisdom praises Aaron's role in diverting God's anger.

Ch.19:18-22 is an appropriate ending for the book. It ends with a suitable conclusion for the text and a precise summary of the theme of the main part of the volume, the address to the Lord taken up in 11:2. The aim of the author is to strengthen the faith of the Alexandrian Jewish community under attack by powerful forces during Roman rule. The final chapters of the book from 11:15 onwards contain a series of seven contrasts between the fate of the Egyptians (the wicked) and the fate of the Israelites (the righteous) as one is punished by the same element by which the other is blessed: 1) 11:9-10; 2) 11:15-16; 16:1-4; 3) 16:5-14; 4) 16:15-29; 5) 17:1-18:4; 6) 18:5-25; 7) 19:1-22. In the last one the Egyptians are drowned in the sea but the Israelites pass through on dry land. The message of the book is that absolutely nothing is outside God's plan which will not be frustrated.

This is a unique work, the climax of the OT teaching on wisdom. Its teaching is that of the OT in a Hellenized form. Its main aim is to strengthen and deepen Jewish believers in their struggle for true wisdom, by convincing them of the greatness of their God and of the superiority of their faith and traditions. It also aims to restore Jews who have lost much of their traditions to the Hellenistic culture and to help convince Gentiles of their idolatrous ways. It is an invitation to a full life, a life transcending even death. Among the things valued as we have

seen in 8:2-6 are beauty, nobility, knowledge, wealth, practical wisdom, justice and virtue. Our author nevertheless provides a profound existential interpretation of the human angst (9:13-16):

... who can conceive what the Lord intends?

For the deliberations of mortals are timid and unsure are our plans.

For the corruptible body burdens the soul and the earthen shelter weighs down the mind that has many concerns.

And scarce do we guess the things on earth ...

Some scholars have not been impressed by the philosophical depth of Wisdom. Yet no one can deny its remarkable originality as the author attempts to expound Judaism against a wide Hellenistic background, ranging from history to immortality. The author has a basically positive attitude towards the world of the Gentiles. For A.G. Wright (*The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p512) Wisdom is a remarkable fusing of the wisdom tradition, the study of sacred texts, salvation history, apocalyptic (5:17-23) and Hellenistic culture. He is not content to repeat past solutions but takes seriously the missionary cultural developments of his day. He ends with a dramatic expression in a single couplet in 19:22: "For in every way O Lord! You magnified and glorified your people; unailing, you stood by them in every time and circumstance" (Wis 18:8; Liv 26:44; Ps 126:3). Thus he concludes with a summary of the key point of book: God will always help his people.

This concludes the discursive and homiletic meditation addressed to God based on seven contrasts in the Exodus narrative, where God's people are exalted and glorified by God's assistance at all times. Thus the writer draws an encouraging conclusion for his fellow Jews (an inclusion with 18:7-8!). The theological theme that God is now also saving his people, is summarized in the last verse of the book: "For in every way O Lord! You magnified and glorified your people; unailing, you stood by them in every time and circumstance" (19:22). Twice the

author refers to death as an exodus (3:2; 7:6) as he tries to encourage people facing the real possibility of death (3:1-9) and hints at the idea of the soul's immortality (1:15; 2:23; 3:1-9; 15:1-3). Even the anonymous heroes of the past are models of wise living (10:1-21). In general one can say that the aim of the anonymous writer is to bring comfort and hope to a suffering people by his careful intermingling of ancient stories and their present situation.

Collins (p200) asks bluntly whether the author of *Wisdom* had really grasped his philosophical sources or does he produce a superficial combination of contradicting systems. He notes one of the most learned modern commentators on *Wisdom*, Chrysostom Larcher, who concludes that *Wisdom* "had read a little of everything but had failed to grasp the totality of any philosophical system or to appreciate the differences between the various schools". He notes also that Larcher agreed with Paul Heinisch, who found *Wisdom* 'very superficial'. He also comments that more recently David Winston finds the background of *Wisdom* in Middle Platonism, which gave God a real place in the Stoic system "over against the cosmos". Collins finds the closest parallels to *Wisdom* in the Jewish compatriot Philo of Alexandria. Thus, while *Wisdom* was probably not a philosopher he developed his ideas far beyond those of Ben Sira against the background of the Middle Platonic philosophy of his time. He had clearly a good education and his understanding of *Wisdom* is developed far more than that of Ben Sira. Collins rightly notices that the understanding of natural theology 'inaugurated by the *Wisdom* of Solomon and Philo received an influential endorsement in the epistle to the Romans (1:19-20; 2:14) (*Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age*, p231f). But he also notes, that Paul (1Cor 1:22) sets "Christ crucified, the foolishness of God, over against 'the wisdom of the Greeks' as if these were antithetical". Nevertheless many scholars explain the evident resemblances to *Wisdom* in passages of the Pauline tradition (e.g. Rom 9:21-23; (Wis 12:12-18); Eph 6:11-17 (Wis 5:17-20)) as drawn from direct use of *Wisdom* by Christian writers.



Richard J. Clifford, S.J., writing *On Proverbs As A Source for Wisdom of Solomon* in *Treasures of Wisdom*, BETL 143, Leuven, Peters, 1999, pp255-63, has some fascinating remarks on the widespread view that *Wisdom of Solomon* is an extraordinary blend of ancient Hebrew literature and Hellenistic Greek philosophy and rhetoric. Thus ch.7-9 develop Job 28, Prov 1-9 and Sir 24.

Ch.10 is a reshaping of the Pentateuch and Deuteronomistic History showing great individuals guided by wisdom. Ch.11-19 expounds the Pentateuch and Psalms in the form of seven great comparisons. Further he develops the view of P.W. Skehan that *Proverbs* is an important source for *Wisdom of Solomon*, which is a call to Jews to remain faithful to their national traditions. Both volumes begin with the wicked expressing their philosophy of life (Prov 1:11-14; Wis 2:1-20). Both early on warn against folly and its destructive effects (Prov 1; Wis 1-5) and then describe the value and fruits of wisdom and virtue (Prov 2, 8, 9 and Wis 6-9). Next both describe Wisdom as a dispenser of divine knowledge, witness to God's work and protector of the righteous. Both have the theme of reified Wisdom (cf. D. Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, AB 43, p34-36) but Clifford finds at least five other themes in common as he expands on the observations of P.W. Skehan in his 1930s dissertation (CBQMS.1):

The righteous person as the locus where divine action becomes visible;

God as a father who teaches his son by a process involving correction and even punishment (paideia).

The wise king

Life and death as more-than-biological realities

The world (kosmos) protecting the righteous and punishing the wicked.

Thus for Clifford *Wisdom of Solomon* drew from Proverbs not merely its outline, pace of presentation and some sayings, but also a number of important themes.

The book of Wisdom is frequently in the Breviary and in the Missal. The latter

includes Cycle A, Sundays in Ordinary Time 16 and 32; Cycle B, Sundays in Ordinary Time, 13, 25 and 28; Cycle C, Sundays in Ordinary Time, 19, 23 and 31; and in the daily Lectionary, Friday of week 4 in Lent. The Lectionary for Ordinary Time uses it in Week 32, for the funeral rites of Adults, the Common of Doctors and the votive Mass of the Holy Cross.



## CHAPTER SIX: AFTERWORD

A fascinating book on biblical Wisdom is Kim Paffenroth's *In Praise of Wisdom* (New York, Continuum, 2004), which examines biblical wisdom under five broad categories and uses later theological and literary works as a comparison: the destructiveness of folly, the feminine side of wisdom, the folly of Christ as the Wisdom of God, the inadequacy of reason and the problem of suffering. Paffenroth's strength is his consideration of the theological and psychological importance of Christian literature as a fuller elaboration and a source of helpful illustrations. He examines the destructiveness of folly in Proverbs and Sirach and then in Dostoevsky who makes folly and evil the necessary foundations of life, goodness and freedom. Proverbs, Sirach, the Book of Wisdom, Augustine's writings, and Goethe's Faust provide examples of the feminine side. The NT and Shakespeare's King Lear provide examples of the folly of Christ and the Wisdom of God – Lear finds redemption when he abandons the worldly wisdom of appearance and power. The inadequacy of reason is shown in Ecclesiastes and Pascal's *Pensées*. Job and Melville's *Moby Dick* vividly illustrate innocent suffering.

John L McKenzie has a thoughtful paragraph on Wisdom in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990, p1305, par 124):

Personal morality in the OT is principally the concern of the wisdom literature (Wisdom Lit 27:5). The maxims of wisdom,

often paralleled in other ancient wisdom literatures, instruct the young man on how to manage his life. The morality of the sages has often been called pedestrian, and to a degree it is; the sages deal with the situations of everyday life, and they have no occasion to teach a morality of crisis or to propose heroism. Their motivation at times appears less than noble, although it is not positively ignoble; moral conduct is recommended because it assures success and happiness. Against this eudaemonism must be measured the conviction of the sages that morality is wisdom, and vice is folly; the full essence of wisdom is the fear of Yahweh. The belief that moral conduct will assure worldly success is too simple and needs further refinement; but the sages do not believe that one can ever advance one's success by wrongdoing. Only by righteous conduct can one be certain of "peace", the state of well-being with God and with one's fellows. Peace is a gift of Yahweh, and he does not grant it to the wicked (Is 57:21). The wisdom literature, except for Job and Eccl, does not meet the problem of the righteous person who suffers; and traditional wisdom really lacked the resources to meet this problem. But the principles of wisdom demand that the problem shall not be met by abandoning righteousness. The "peace" of the wicked is neither genuine nor lasting.

Laurence Boadt, writing on Wisdom in *Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. David Noel Freedman, 2000, p1382), points out that:

Wisdom as a major category gave way to Torah study in post-biblical Jewish reflection but it was never excluded from the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures because it is identified with the restless human search for God, respect for the mystery of God's freedom and awareness of the vast moral sphere of decision making beyond

formal cultic worship. Even Qoheleth the sceptic could be brought into this vision by adding a final editorial note (Eccl 12:13-14).

The late Roland Murphy, the indefatigable worker in the world of wisdom, gave an excellent overview of the Wisdom tradition in the NT (in articles such as *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier, Harper, San Francisco, 1996, p1215), which we in turn summarize here. He concludes that the five wisdom books provide a practical instruction on how to live life properly and successfully, e.g. Prov 1:1-6; Jam 3:1-4:17). He finds it continues through the intertestamental period (Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon) and is found in the NT and Judaism (Sayings of the Fathers). Jesus is found described in the Synoptics as a wisdom teacher, a rabbi (e.g. the sayings in Mt 6:19-7:27 also parables and comparisons). Jesus' person and life and moral ideals tend to overshadow his practical every-day wisdom which is recorded so fully in the Gospels. Although his parables are well known, their association with OT wisdom is not often mentioned. He stood in the line of OT prophets but also was solidly formed in the tradition of the OT wise. The apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas* is a collection of Jesus' sayings which shows the importance which the early Church attached to the sayings of Jesus. Matthew's saying on the lamp of the body is an outstanding example of a wisdom saying (Mt 6:22; Mk 8:35). The beatitudes are a continuation of the 'Happy' OT sayings. Jesus, like personified wisdom, also issued an invitation to learn from him (Mt 11:29; Sir 51:26). His wisdom is greater than that of Solomon's (Lk 11:31; Mk 6:2; Mt 11:1-19, 28-30). "Wisdom" does not occur in John but Jesus is described as the divine word incarnate.

In 1Corinthians, Paul contrasts worldly wisdom with the foolishness of the Cross (1Cor 1:17-25; 2:6-16). Paul describes Christ as the foolish wisdom of God which the Corinthians neglect (1Cor 1:24). In Ephesians (5:15; Col 1:15-20) a Christian is to walk in wisdom and the spirit of wisdom is a gift from the Father (Eph 1:17). Jesus is the firstborn of all creation and the image (Col 1:15) just as Wisdom was created before all else (Prov 8:22; Sir 24:9). The Epistle of James as a whole

resembles traditional wisdom, a gift because of its parenetic and hortatory nature. There wisdom is from above and is peaceable, full of mercy and good fruits (3:13-18). Murphy insists that the persuasiveness of the wise person was all the greater for the low-key appearance of the teaching. Thus the preaching tone of Proverbs 1-8 yields little or nothing to the intensity of the preaching of Deuteronomy. The humanness and earthiness of the literary character of Job has in fact tremendous power – the same can be remarked of some Psalms, Qoheleth, Isaiah 53 and the confessions of Jeremiah. Murphy notes that in current Church reading more readings are taken from Sirach than from any other Wisdom book. This is because Sirach was a kind of *vademecum* for catechumens. However, he is adamant that the lectionary is badly in need of revision because the other Wisdom writings are quite inadequately represented.

Other biblical wisdom themes are found in such post-apostolic writings as Didache, The Shepherd of Hermas and such Gnostic writings as The Gospel of Thomas. In recent times scholars speak of a “wisdom Christology”, which seems to have taken root rather early in some Christian circles. In this Jesus is depicted as God’s holy wisdom, a type of street preacher calling out to humanity. Here divine wisdom models Jesus co-creating, planning and directing the universe. The wisdom hymns tend to articulate the development of Christology and the unique relationship which exists between Jesus and God.

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