

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE USE OF OLD TESTAMENT WISDOM LITERATURE IN PRACTICAL LIFE: AN AFRICAN REFLECTION

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This chapter examines the use of Old Testament wisdom literature in practical life, with African reflection. The aim of this research is to explore the broad spectrum of Old Testament wisdom in wisdom literature, which was achieved through the use of major objective, that is, investigating and articulating the use of wisdom in African *sitz im leben*. The methods adopted for this research were descriptive, analytical, historical and theological. It was discovered that Old Testament wisdom shares common ground with African worldview in almost all aspects. It was also discovered that wisdom in practical life is not extinct from spirituality. Both material and spiritual are within the basic understanding in the Old Testament. It was later discovered that the Old Testament did not separate the spirituality and material in its understanding of wisdom. The chapter, therefore, recommends to all and sundry that wisdom is a gift of life from God and must be used in this life appropriately.

Key words: wisdom, reflection, wisdom literature, African life, contextualization

Introduction

Wisdom is one of the major themes in the Old Testament. Its tradition is as ancient as the time of creation, in other words, it is fundamentally believed that wisdom is the chief means that God used to bring about his creation. Creation explicitly displays the wisdom of God. From the book of Genesis to the testimony of the prophets and beyond, it is hard to pin

down a rich and diverse tradition of thinking that is fundamentally organizing itself around God apart from wisdom.⁷²⁸ Walter Brueggemann sees wisdom tradition as a way of God speaking to various parts of Israel's life, where "the main claims of the core testimony are not persuasive, rather wisdom speaks of a God who is undefined, seemingly absent yet deeply present in every detail of human life and engagement."⁷²⁹ Therefore, this chapter explores wisdom in wisdom literature especially in Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. To achieve this, a cursory look at Old Testament background, its unique characteristics, development, function in Jewish tradition and its relevance in African *sitz im leben* are also examined.

Historical Background of Old Testament Wisdom

It is interesting and informative to note that biblical faith was communicated through the forms of story and history, and so one has to take history seriously considering the magnitude of wisdom and the morals of society as they evolved over a long period of time. Biblical scholars are excited by wisdom's international origin and character within the Ancient Near East (ANE) environment as Christopher Wright opines;

The Israelites sages did not simply plagiarise the traditions of other nations. The distinctive faith of Israel, especially in those areas we have explored early in this book (their monotheistic assertion of the uniqueness of YHWH as God and their covenant affirmation of Israel's relationship with him) came into conflict with many of the underlying worldview assumptions to be found in the wisdom texts of other nations....⁷³⁰

For instance, how could someone searching for the distinctive character of Israel's faith finds it in religious and moral views that are common to many ANE cultures? Israel's distinctiveness was undoubtedly marked by her predilection for history, and this contrasts

⁷²⁸ www.jonrogers.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Wisdom-Essay(Accessed July 15 2018).

⁷²⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 23.

⁷³⁰ Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God* (Nottingham: IVP, 2006), 444.

with the beliefs and values common to the ancient Near Eastern communities that their gods wielded cosmic powers that could astound even the incredulous. Furthermore, wisdom's epistemological approach to revelation and moral instruction combined the powers of observation of nature and social life with critical reflections on human experience. Yet this approach was not an exclusive Israel heritage, but one that could also be found in the neighbouring ANE cultures. Apparently, there was no place in wisdom literature for special revelation through either history or law. According to Wright, wisdom articulates a clear view of natural revelation, but it does not set forth a theology of the word that proclaims and interprets the meaning of history. However, it is to Gerhard von Rad that we turn when we explore the relevance of wisdom to history in Old Testament Theology.⁷³¹ Von Rad underscores the centrality of an ancient Israelite creed often embedded within a larger narrative context. Again, Israel confessed this "little creed" within a liturgical context of festival. The confession contained the following list of redemptive acts of God: the promise to the fathers, the exodus from Egypt, the wandering in the wilderness, and the gift of the Promised Land. In fact some of the psalms are devoted entirely to the historical experience of Israel, while no other mention of this is made in the other Wisdom books.⁷³²

Similarly, Edward M. Curtis makes an intelligent search when he observes:

Israel recognized the presence of wisdom in other cultures. The wisdom of Egypt is acknowledged in Isa. 19:11–13; that of the Edomites in Jer. 49:7, Obadiah 8 and perhaps in the book of Job (the setting of the book seems to be in Edom and the wise men mentioned in the book presumably were from Edom). The wisdom of the Phoenicians is mentioned in Ezekiel 28 and Zechariah 9:2; that of the Persians in Esther 1:13 and 6:13; that of the Babylonians in Daniel 2:12–13 and 5:7.⁷³³

The interaction of the Israelites with these nations, possibly suggests the background to Israel's wisdom. Curtis still contends that;

⁷³¹ Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 22.

⁷³² Perdue, 23.

⁷³³ Edward M. Curtis, "Old Testament Wisdom: A Model for Faith-Learning Integration" *Christian Scholars Review* 15:3 (1986), 213.

In some instances the wisdom associated with these other nations is viewed negatively in comparison with Israel's wisdom, because of their pride or because the wisdom was associated with divination and magic, but often the wisdom is recognized and is acknowledged as legitimate. The Wisdom of Solomon is, in fact, compared with the wisdom of the "sons of the East" (perhaps Edom) and Egypt and the point of the comparison in 1 Kings 4:29–34 is that the readers would be impressed by the fact that Solomon's wisdom surpassed that of the very people who were so well known for their wisdom.⁷³⁴

When the wisdom literature of Egypt and Mesopotamia is compared with that of Israel, it is quite apparent that there are significant similarities in both content and form. Many of the same themes are found (the problem of the righteous sufferer) as well as similar forms (acrostics and maxims among others). In addition, the content of many of the proverbs are very similar to those found in the Bible and while the question of dating is particularly difficult, there is the strong probability that at least some of these proverbs existed in Mesopotamia and Egypt, before they found expression in Scripture; there is even the possibility that some of these proverbs were borrowed by the biblical authors.⁷³⁵ Curtis further adds;

Yet when the content of the biblical wisdom literature (many of the proverbs, for example) is considered and compared with the similar material from Egypt and Mesopotamia, it suggests that this material comes from God in what appears to us to be a secondary sense. Many of the proverbs articulate principles that can be identified by any insightful person who carefully observes the world around him and it appears that Israel and her neighbors did, in fact, recognize many of the same principles that contribute to a person's success. It does not require direct revelation from God (what theologians have traditionally called special revelation) to realize the benefit of diligence and the way it contributes to a person's success; the same is true of the problems that a bad temper can generate for a person

⁷³⁴ Curtis, 227.

⁷³⁵ Curtis, 223; Also, Lambert points it out in his material, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 1-2.

or the value of patience or the dangers involved in making rash judgments or commitments.⁷³⁶

Moreover, the discoveries of close parallels between Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Canaanite didactic literature and biblical wisdom literature show something of its international character. A large section of the book of Proverbs, for example, borrows heavily but also significantly alters in certain places, from an older Egyptian source called the *Instruction of Amenemope* (Prov. 22.17–24.22). Thus, scholars presume that wisdom literature was a widespread mode of discourse in the ANE that emphasized generally available knowledge and downplayed cultural particularities and nationalistic narratives.⁷³⁷

The above excerpt is not too far from Amadi's position who submits that,

The interesting thing is that each interpretive insight into these historical events results in newer interpretations and reformulation of the creed to emphasize rising hopes and promising occurrences in both the individual and national life. It is easy to mix creation with the redemptive acts of God in history. Only when one is able to draw a line between the creative ordinances and the validity and authority of the commandments surrounding the created order, can one be able to distil both the sapiential heritage of the Jew and the innate ability to relate to both mundane or to divine things. Wisdom is a divine gift from God to humans and revealed to them the will and nature of God, though considering God to be mysterious and beyond the limits of human comprehension.⁷³⁸

Rogers siding with Amadi's position suggests that,

We find wisdom themes in so many different parts of the Old Testament scriptures, which is no surprise when we consider the latest redactors were the scribes and sages of the second temple era. It is, however, safe to assume that some of these themes may have been already present, since the traditions written down in the Proverbs are much older than the latest redaction of the book in the fifth century BCE. As a theme in Jewish thought, wisdom appears to

⁷³⁶ Curtis, 224.

⁷³⁷ Amadi E. Ahiamadu, National Open University of Nigeria Course: CTH 815. [www.http://nouedu.net/site/default/files/2017](http://nouedu.net/site/default/files/2017) (Accessed 6th August, 2018).

⁷³⁸ Ahiamadu, "CTH".

have started small and early, building to a crescendo in the Intertestamental period with the final redaction of the older texts and the writing of new ones.⁷³⁹

Though the origin of wisdom literature is a source of constant scholarly debate, it seems clear that wisdom literature collects teachings from several spheres of life. Some sayings in the book of Proverbs, for example, seem to reflect the setting of a family or clan (cf. Prov. 24.13) living an agrarian lifestyle (cf. Prov. 10.5). These sayings seem to be the traditional teachings of a community that seek to teach children how to be pious, industrious, contributing members of the community. Others, however, sound more like instructions for raising a child in the midst of a royal court (Prov. 23.1). These sayings, which were composed for a privileged group, tend to emphasize social protocol and wise self-governance, and have little to do with religious sentiments. Wisdom, originating in the royal court may have been designed to help train bureaucrats and future rulers to exercise their powers justly, righteously and prudently.⁷⁴⁰ Having considered the general background of wisdom in the Old Testament, what then is wisdom? As we engage in this discourse we will be clarifying some terms that are key to this chapter.

Wisdom

Generally, wisdom has many aspects and themes; it is not simple to pin down. Wisdom is an elusive word, evading definitions, though many have been multiplied. Zimmerli defines it as ‘Mastery of everyday life and its concrete secrets’. S. H. Blank defines wisdom in modern terms as cleverness, shrewdness and cunningness.⁷⁴¹ It could also be seen as intelligence and good judgment.⁷⁴² The book of Proverbs states twice that “the fear of YHWH is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverb 1:7 and

⁷³⁹ Rogers, 6.

⁷⁴⁰ Brennan, 2.

⁷⁴¹ Walter Zimmerli, "The Place and the Limit of the Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology," *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* (J. L. Crenshaw ed., New York: KTAV, 1976), 852.

Walter Zimmerli, "Concerning the structure of Old Testament Wisdom," *Studies in Ancient Israelite*, 175.

⁷⁴² S. Rankin, *Israel's Wisdom Literature* (Edinburg: T&T Clark 1954), 3.

9:10),⁷⁴³ and also in Psalm 111:10 and Job 28:8. Wisdom is given by YHWH (Proverb 2:6) and it covers a broad spectrum from practical skills and wise rule to moral living. It seems that every author has a distinct perspective of wisdom. Job 28:12 asks “where shall wisdom be found?” To Stalker, wisdom can also be defined as the ability to succeed; it is the ability to form a correct plan to get a desired result. The principles that enable a person to succeed in a particular endeavor is called "wisdom" as well.⁷⁴⁴ In the Biblical sense, wisdom is the "ability to judge correctly and to follow the best course of action, based on knowledge and understanding".⁷⁴⁵ The wisdom teachings of the Bible follow from the two great themes of the Ten Commandment: reverence to God, our Creator, and respect for all persons, everywhere.

Root of Israel's Wisdom

Israel's source of wisdom is rooted in reverence and commitment to God. The basic worldview of Israelite wisdom is that God is the creator, both of his people and the physical world; everything else in wisdom arises from this conviction. As a creator, God has imbedded truth in all of creation; another way to say this is that all of creation reflects the wisdom, nature, and character of its creator, and therefore all of creation is a way to learn about God and His purposes for the world. It is in God that creation is truly a "cosmos." Human responsibility to God involves finding the truth of God in the world as reflected in how the world operates according to the harmony of its creator, and then living within that harmony of God's order. Being wise is to search for and maintain the order of God in the world in order to live well as God has created humanity to live; a "fool" is one who does not recognize God as creator and therefore does not seek to live according to the harmony of God's creation. The "way of wisdom" is an ethical system in which humanity is

⁷⁴³ Ranking, 3.

⁷⁴⁴ Curtis, 227.

⁷⁴⁵ Lockyer Herbert Sr ed., *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986), 1103.

responsible for searching, finding, and doing the things necessary to secure their wellbeing in God's cosmic world.⁷⁴⁶

Characteristics of Old Testament Wisdom

Generally, wisdom in the Old Testament has some basic characteristics which clearly distinguishes it from the ANE. Dennis Bratcher provides the following characteristics of Old Testament Wisdom; first, wisdom is concerned with the issues facing humanity in general, the typical and recurring aspects of life that face human beings on a daily basis. Much of the rest of Scripture is concerned with those unique events in history in which God reveals himself. Second, there is little interest in history, politics, miracles, sin, forgiveness guilt; these things are not discounted, only that the concern is focused on daily living on what might be called the mundane aspects of life, such as raising children, providing economic security, and finding the appropriate wife, among other such life challenges. Third, the world view is not mythical or cyclical, but it is concerned with stability and order, the *status quo*, especially in the social arena; the goal is to live in harmonious relationship with God, others, and the world. Fourth, the perspectives of wisdom are not unique to Israelites; although in Israel, wisdom commitment to God is simply assumed (cf. Prov. 1:7). Fifth, the focus is on interpersonal relationships, as well as reflective questions about the meaning of life and how to live it.

Bratcher brilliantly explores more on wisdom not appealing to revealed truth when he suggests the following;

Wisdom does not address the human condition from the divine perspective, but rather from the perspective of human needs and concerns, and in terms of what human beings can and should do to address those concerns. That does not necessarily undermine its divine origin. Wisdom attempts to give expression to the way things are; it is descriptive and not prescriptive, describing and defining the world and the existing social order as a means to live within both in productive ways. Wisdom thinking grapples with understanding the world, especially the physical and social environment in which they

⁷⁴⁶ Bratcher, "The Character of wisdom: An introduction to the Old Testament Wisdom Literature," *The voice of Biblical and Theological Resources for the Growing Christians*, 2013.

must live; as such, it is reflective, rational, and concerned with knowledge. It is concerned with learning enough to be able to choose the proper course of action for wellbeing in life, often expressed metaphorically as the "two ways" or the "two paths" (cf. Psa. 1).⁷⁴⁷

Wisdom's Claim lies in Tradition and Observation

There is no "thus says the Lord" grounding of authority in wisdom thinking; rather the truth of life is already there in God's creation awaiting discovery. Tradition represents the wisdom of experience, both in individuals and in the collective experiences of the community; preference is usually given to age and established and proven ways of doing things. Wisdom is grounded in social structures, such as the family, the "schools" of the wise elders, or the king and the royal court. Wisdom perspectives do not demand radical change, for example, in dealing with social problems.

Wisdom in the Pentateuch

Zimmerli and others have argued that the wisdom of the Old Testament is based around a theology of Creation⁷⁴⁸ speaking of a God who creates and upholds rather than a God of covenant, the God of Israel. Creation for the ancient Hebrew meant both the origins of everything and also the world in which they lived. Both Proverbs and Job emphasize the role of God in original creation and in holding back the forces of chaos.⁷⁴⁹ There are many facets to the wisdom depiction of God the creator and the role of Wisdom in the act of creation. Many layers of metaphor are used to show God as both in this world and outside of it, as an architect, judge, teacher and warrior.⁷⁵⁰ Wisdom does have much to say about the nature of God and the relationship between God and this world. It also

⁷⁴⁷ Bratcher, "The Character of Wisdom."

⁷⁴⁸ W. Zimmerli, "Concerning the Structure of Old Testament Wisdom," *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* (Crenshaw ed., New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1976), 175.

⁷⁴⁹ R. E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Creation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104:1 (1985), 5.

⁷⁵⁰ Perdue, "Wisdom Literature," 121.

has something to say about the human response to the Lord.⁷⁵¹ Concurring with this, Witte opines, "The dominant theme in the wisdom literature seems to be the theme of creation; this appears to be the case because creation constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for successfully perceiving truth by studying the world and the people in it."⁷⁵²

The message of Proverb 3:19 are similar to the concept in Proverb 8:22ff, which says, "By wisdom, the Lord founded the earth." The Hebrew word for "founded" is also used in the context of God's creation in Psalms 24:2; 78:69; 89:12; and 104:5. Wisdom is a part of God's creation from the very beginning. Wisdom is built into the very fabric and foundation of all God's work.⁷⁵³

Phillip McMillion uses the truths in the book of Jeremiah, Proverbs and the Psalms to confirm the wonderful works of God in creation. Thus, in Jeremiah 10, for instance, the prophet condemns the idols of the nations around Israel because they are powerless. In fact, they are no gods at all. In Jeremiah 10:11, he states, "The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens." This is followed immediately in verse 12 by the words, "it is He who made the heavens by His power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens." This verse refers to the Lord's wisdom at creation, and it echoes a number of terms from Proverbs 8:22-31 that also link creation with wisdom. The opening phrase in Jeremiah 10:12 which reads "He made the earth" is exactly the same in Proverbs 8:6. The poetic term for "the world" in the second line of Jeremiah 10:12 is also found at the end of Proverbs 8:26. The word for "established" in Jeremiah 10.12 is found in Proverbs 8:27, and the word "heavens" is found both in Jeremiah 10:12 and Proverbs 8:27.⁷⁵⁴

McMillion still posits that Jeremiah 10:12 has clear connections with the wisdom tradition and the important role of wisdom in creation. God's work in establishing the universe with its order and symmetry is important evidence of God's wisdom. God has set everything in its

⁷⁵¹ Philip McMillion, *Creation and Wisdom* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

⁷⁵² Curtis, 218.

⁷⁵³ Murphy, 117.

⁷⁵⁴ McMillion, *Creation and Wisdom* 3.

proper place and placed boundaries for the rivers and seas. God's great wisdom as exhibited in creation is in sharp contrast to the idols of the nations. Jeremiah 10:14-16 paints a graphic picture of the dumb idols that can do nothing and the foolish people who place their confidence in the work of human hands (cf. Psalms 115:1-8).

In Job 38-41, McMillion says God's wonderful work in creation is a source of wonder and awe. God has done things far greater than Job can comprehend. God's creation is far above human understanding. Job acknowledges that he has spoken about things that he did not really comprehend. Job humbles himself in faith before the Lord. One of the great lessons of Job is that one can still have faith, even when life is difficult to understand. Job does not get the answers he sought, but he still maintained his faith in the God who was the source of wisdom and understanding.⁷⁵⁵ McMillion also contends that;

In the Psalms of creation, God's work is a source of praise for all the works that God has done. This is seen especially in Psalm 104. This is one of the classic creation psalms, and it is significant that it opens and closes with praise for the Lord of creation. In Psalm 104, there are several links between creation language and wisdom as already seen in the comparison between Jeremiah 10:12 and Proverb 8:22-28. In Psalms 104:2, God is praised as one "who has stretched out the heavens like a tent." The verb "stretched out" is the same root as the one used in Jeremiah 10:12 when God "stretched out the heavens." God laid the foundations of the earth. He set the mountains and valleys in their places. God set the boundaries for the sea so that they should stay in their place. Just as in Genesis, God not only created all the living creatures, but he provides for their needs as well. God created the plants for the animals to eat. He made the habitation of the birds of the air. The trees are watered so that they will grow and the birds can build their nests in them. Even the heavens are set in proper order with the sun and moon to mark the times and the seasons. The point in all this is that God's creation is in proper order with everything in its proper place. God cares for all parts of creation, and each creature has what it needs to thrive. Every creature has both food for nourishment and a place to live.

⁷⁵⁵ McMillion, 74.

God not only creates, but he cares for and provides for his creation.⁷⁵⁶

He adds;

In Psalm 104:24, the psalmist breaks forth in praise for the wonderful way that God has designed and carried out his creation. In wisdom God has made the world and all the creatures that dwell in it. Only a God of great wisdom and power could have conceived of this magnificent cosmos and then brought it to fruition. The psalm comes full circle and returns to praise of the Lord in the last section of the poem. In verses 31-35, the poet breaks forth in praise once more. The psalm concludes as it began with the phrase, "Bless the Lord, O my soul." Then the final word is that one Hebrew word known to most people as Hallelujah, or simply "Praise the Lord."⁷⁵⁷

McMillion concludes that;

In Psalm 104 the work of the Lord in creating and sustaining the universe is a cause for praise and adoration. The psalmist recognizes that only God's great wisdom could have brought about this marvel of the creation. The psalmist uses striking images of God riding on the chariot of the clouds, or God as the master builder establishing the foundations of the earth. These were familiar images to the people of ancient Israel, but they communicated that the Lord, and no other, was the true creator and controller of the forces of the cosmos.⁷⁵⁸

This suggests to us that the locus of the wisdom literature is on wonderful works of God's creation rather than in redemption and salvation, as suggested by many scholars. In the words of Witte, the first eleven chapters of Genesis are in 'the spirit of late wisdom' and in the Bible, according to Walter, particularly in the Old Testament, wisdom at one level describes skilled arts and artisans, like weavers (Exodus 35:25-26), and architects (Exodus 35:30-36:1).⁷⁵⁹ This is the brim of wisdom which enables the creation of the world and things in the world.

⁷⁵⁶ McMillion, 74.

⁷⁵⁷ McMillion 74

⁷⁵⁸ McMillion 75.

⁷⁵⁹ Walter, 2.

Wisdom in the Prophetic Books

The influences of wisdom have been found in many of the books of the classical prophets, from Isaiah to Malachi. According to Bratcher, the Old Testament prophets tended to be revealed during times of crisis. God used the prophets to provide direction and wisdom during times of crisis. They were also used by God to remind the people of their covenantal promises.⁷⁶⁰ While the prophets scorn those who claim to be wise, they use many 'wisdom forms' in their writings⁷⁶¹ and take up the themes of wisdom such as justice towards the poor⁷⁶² and the powerful God of creation.⁷⁶³ The techniques of wisdom and the issues of the sages were close to the heart of the prophets and in this spirit, Hosea points out that the truly wise will find God (Hosea 14:9). The application of wisdom could also be found in the military strategists and statesmen (Isa. 10:13) and of women skilled in lamentation (Jer. 9:17).

Habakkuk finds the way to answer his query in a poem which resembles the psalmists' summaries of holy history, which were used to rehearse the acts of God at Israel's great feasts like the Passover and the Tabernacle. Habakkuk concludes his book with an expression of confidence similar to those used in the Psalms of lament and thanksgiving. Illustrations of the interdependence of the various offices in Israel could be multiplied. Lamentations, for instance, combine the artistic interests of wisdom, especially in its use of acrostics, the laments used in the *cultus*, and the theology of doom and hope characteristic of the prophets. The functions of the leaders were not absolute, if only because, in a sense, they were all extensions of the ministry of the king, who as God's adopted son and anointed servant carried the weight of the covenant upon Him and had ultimate responsibility for its enforcement in the common life of His people.

Isaiah strikingly combines the use of wisdom techniques (for example, the allegory of the vine in chapter 5 and the parable of the farmer in 28:23-29) with a scathing attack on the empty wisdom of Israel's political pundits (for example, Isa. 29:14). Though we may not go along with Fichtner's interpretation of this evidence as indicating that

⁷⁶⁰ Bratcher, 3.

⁷⁶¹ Shields, 881,

⁷⁶² Bratcher, 3.

⁷⁶³ Rogers, 4.

Isaiah had originally been a wise man, we can readily admit his indebtedness to the wisdom movement.⁷⁶⁴

Jeremiah, too, shows his acquaintance with the tools and techniques of wisdom. Lindblom calls attention to his frequent use of רסומהקל (to take correction: 2:30, 5:3, 7:28, 17:23, 32:33, 35:13), an idiom which occurs several times in Proverbs, where the noun רסומ is found some thirty times. It occurs about fifteen times in the rest of the Old Testament. Though Lindblom attributes the passage in Jeremiah 17:5-11 to redactors of a wisdom school, he goes on to say that “the fact that reminiscences of wisdom are spread over the whole book suggests that Jeremiah himself as well as his disciples had special connections with the wisdom school.”⁷⁶⁵

Of the many themes which the wise men and prophets share, only one will be mentioned here as an emphasis on rewards or punishments granted or meted by God to individuals.⁷⁶⁶ Although Jeremiah and Ezekiel are the first prophets to bring the doctrine of individual retribution into bold relief (Jer. 31:29-30; Ezek.18:1ff.).

When the great 8th century prophets began to sound their indictments against the injustices of their day and when Jeremiah and Ezekiel made it clear that individuals were to be punished personally for their disloyalty to the covenant terms, they were not heralding new standards but calling the people back to old ones.⁷⁶⁷ In other words, they were drawing on one of the rich traditions of Israel's faith—a tradition present in wisdom literature but not exclusively so. Gerstenberger's summation is noteworthy: “The (prophets') process of taking over the old ethical rule and applying them to the new situation—in the name of Yahweh proves that the prophets believed that this very order of society, of which the wise men were the guardians, was the order sanctioned by Yahweh which had to be maintained.”⁷⁶⁸

⁷⁶⁴ Fichtner, 75.

⁷⁶⁵ J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Blackwell: Oxford University Press, 1962), 238.

⁷⁶⁶ Harry Ranston, *The Old Testament Wisdom Books* (London: Epworth Press, 1930), 18.

⁷⁶⁷ Hubbard, 3.

⁷⁶⁸ E. Gerstenberger, “The Woe-Oracles of the Prophets,” [www.http://geb.uni-de/geb/volltexte/2012](http://geb.uni-de/geb/volltexte/2012) Accessed 6th August, 2018, p. 23.

Wisdom in the writings

The theme of wisdom is what dominates this section of Hebrew canon called 'the writings'. To confirm this, Sailhammer goes on to show how Joshua is characterized as a wise man, being told to meditate on the book of the Torah.⁷⁶⁹ Curtis' submission is worthy of note when he opines:

The practical nature of wisdom is reflected in the statement David made to Solomon from his death bed as he pointed out to Solomon the problem Joab would pose for his survival as king. David said, "Act according to your wisdom, and do not let his gray hair go down to Sheol in peace". David was simply acknowledging the fact that as long as Joab remained alive he would cause problems for Solomon; David was advising Solomon to "do whatever was necessary to solve the problem."⁷⁷⁰

Sailhammer still contends that the "practical result" orientation of wisdom is even more clearly illustrated in the story of Solomon at Gibeon in 1 Kings 3. Solomon acknowledged his inability to rule and judge the nation over which he was king and he asked and God gave him "a wise and discerning heart." God to give him "an understanding heart to judge the people, to discern between good and evil," because he asked for discernment to understand justice. The very next incident that is reported in 1 Kings 3 is the story of the two women who came to Solomon each of whom insisted that the other woman's child was suffocated during the night and that the child that remained alive belonged to her. Immediately after Solomon was promised a wise and discerning heart, he was confronted with an extremely complex problem to test whether he had been given wisdom. The means by which Solomon identified the mother of the living child was reported to the people and "when all Israel heard of the judgment which the king had handed down, they feared the king; for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him to administer justice." Thus Solomon's ability to solve this problem convinced the people of his wisdom; the fact that it was such a

⁷⁶⁹ John H. Sailhamer, "A Wisdom Composition of the Pentateuch," *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honour of Bruce K Waltke* (J. I. Packer and S. K. Soderlund eds., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 5.

⁷⁷⁰ Curtis, 215.

complex problem convinced them that the wisdom must, in a special sense, have come from God.⁷⁷¹

In these narratives we have seen that some of the themes of wisdom are present, although perhaps not in the form that they were in the wisdom books. The wisdom narratives is not the same as the didactic wisdom we find in the wisdom books, but the same themes come through, linking Joseph's story with the idea of wisdom schools preparing scribes to work in the civil service of the early monarchy. Gerhard von Rad suggests that the example of the wise and virtuous Joseph was given to show that God would vindicate righteous behavior.⁷⁷² The story of Joseph is unusual in that it does not emphasize the covenant with God, but rather discusses the actions of a righteous and wise man and his elevation to be a supreme ruler,⁷⁷³ which leads von Rad to characterize it as a wisdom narrative.⁷⁷⁴ He also points out that the themes of worship, covenant and God revealing himself are, for the most part, absent from the narrative.⁷⁷⁵

In opposition, Crenshaw points out the failures of Joseph at the beginning and end of his life and the fact that Joseph is never trained or schooled for the ruling position he takes up. Joseph seems almost to be an anti-role-model for an aspiring scribe!⁷⁷⁶ Fox further makes the case that Pharaoh's ascription to Joseph of special revelation from God is alien to the wisdom writings, where wisdom is directed to God, rather than a personal revelation of God.⁷⁷⁷ For Fox, the wisdom of the Joseph narrative is more closely linked with the wisdom of Daniel, which centered on divine intervention and inspiration rather than virtuous

⁷⁷¹ Curtis, 215.

⁷⁷² Gerrard von Rad, "The Joseph Narrative and Ancient Wisdom," *The Problem of the Hexateuch and other Essays* (E W T Dicken trans., London: SCM Press, 1984), 294.

⁷⁷³ Rogers, 5.

⁷⁷⁴ von Rad, 293.

⁷⁷⁵ von Rad, 294.

⁷⁷⁶ J. L. Crenshaw, "Method of Determining Wisdom Influence upon 'Historical' Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88.2 (1969), 129-142.

⁷⁷⁷ M. V. Fox, "Wisdom in the Joseph Story," *Vetus Testamentum* 51:1 (2001), 36.

living and study.⁷⁷⁸ While both Fox and Crenshaw find no possibility of viewing Joseph as a wisdom narrative, this idea should not be dismissed so quickly. While it may not be accurate to simply describe the Joseph narrative as a wisdom story, it clearly shows that the themes of wisdom are not restricted to a small section of society, but are woven deep into the narrative history of Israel. Following von Rad, more narratives have been investigated for wisdom themes underpinning them.⁷⁷⁹ Example of wisdom is demonstrated in the five rolls book of Esther. The book of Esther is famous for not mentioning the name of God at all.⁷⁸⁰ Instead the heroine and her uncle Mordecai use wisdom to save the Jewish people from threatened annihilation. Talmon suggests that the book represents ‘applied wisdom’,⁷⁸¹ where the success of the wise Jews against their profane enemies is due to their application of the wisdom found in the wisdom books.⁷⁸² Talmon finds the characterization of the individuals very typological, with Mordecai the sage, Haman the cunning evil man, and the ‘witless dupe’, king Ahaserus.⁷⁸³ Gordis, in his critique of Talmon, emphasizes the integrated nature of ancient society – there was no such thing as ‘secularism’ and wisdom was thoroughly integrated in God and His worship. The absence of God in Esther is not a case for a wisdom genre but indicative, with other evidences, of a Jew writing ‘his book in the form of the chronicle of the Persian court, written by a Gentile scribe.’⁷⁸⁴

We do recognize the fact that explorations of other passages of Old Testament scripture have uncovered wisdom themes, notably in the Psalms. While there is debate over which Psalms might be designated ‘wisdom psalms’,⁷⁸⁵ ranging from those who say wisdom themes are a

⁷⁷⁸ Fox, 36.

⁷⁷⁹ Von Rad, 129.

⁷⁸⁰ G. M. Tucker, “The Book of Esther,” Bruce M. Metzger and M. D. Coogan eds., New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 200.

⁷⁸¹ Tucker, 427.

⁷⁸² Curtis, 215.

⁷⁸³ S. Talmon, “Wisdom in the Book of Esther,” *Vetus Testamentum* 13 (1963), 437.

⁷⁸⁴ R. Gordis, “Religion Wisdom and History in the Book of Ether: New Solution to an Ancient Crux,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100:3 (1981), 375.

⁷⁸⁵ Murphy, 10.

degrading intrusion⁷⁸⁶ to those who affirm many wisdom psalms originating in the earliest years of Israel.⁷⁸⁷ Walter contends that the wisdom psalms are divided into these categories; 37, 49, and 73 representing higher wisdom, and 1, 112, 127, and 128 belonging to the practical category.⁷⁸⁸ There is broad agreement that the themes of wisdom are found in several of the Psalms, suggesting that wisdom was important in worship.⁷⁸⁹

Wisdom Literature

The three books that are commonly called ‘Wisdom literature’ fall in the *Ketuvim* or Writings. Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are very different to the rest of the Old Testament scriptures and very different from each other, but expressing single truth. Walter adds that a few psalms fall into the wisdom category (Psalms 1, 37, 49, 73, 112, 127, 128). The emphasis of this material subdivides into two rubrics, one emphasizing the theological problems of life, such as the suffering of the innocent (Job) and the meaning of life (Ecclesiastes). Scholars sometimes call this rubric higher or reflective wisdom. The other rubric is much more practical (Proverbs), and deals with the issues that touch the individual's life, such as personal industry, integrity, sexual purity, and family relations. This subcategory is sometimes called lower or practical wisdom. Work in creation is a source of wonder and awe. God has done things far greater than Job can comprehend. God's creation is far above human understanding. Job acknowledges that he has spoken about things that he did not really understand. Job humbles himself in faith before the Lord. One of the great lessons of Job is that one can still have faith, even when life is difficult to understand. Job does not get the answers he sought, but he still maintained his faith in God who was the source of wisdom and understanding.⁷⁹⁰

⁷⁸⁶ Gunkel, 21.

⁷⁸⁷ K. J. Dell, “I will solve my riddle to the music of the lyre” (Psalm XLIX 4): A Cultic Setting for Wisdom Psalms?” *Vetus Testamentum* 54:4 (2004), 458.

⁷⁸⁸ Walter, 2.

⁷⁸⁹ Dell, 458.

⁷⁹⁰ McMillion, 4.

One way to approach wisdom is by way of the canonical divisions between the texts that constitute what scholars loosely refer to as 'wisdom literature.' The Protestant canon, based on the Jewish canon, includes Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes (also known as *Qohelet*). The Roman Catholic canon and others based on the Old Testament also include Sirach (Ben Sira) and the Wisdom of Solomon. In addition to these five books, scholars debate whether other texts should be considered wisdom literature such as certain Psalms (e.g., Psalms 1, 34, 37, 49, and 73) and the Song of Songs. Other important witnesses to Israel's thriving wisdom tradition come from non-canonical texts found at Qumran, such as 4QInstruction. What counts as wisdom literature is determined not only by shared characteristics among these texts but also by genre exemplars from places and peoples outside Israel, from whom Israel inherited the concerns and approaches of the wisdom tradition.⁷⁹¹

The book of Proverbs, especially, seems to focus on a wisdom based in the home and family. Chapter 3 of Proverbs connects those admonitions to the Lord's work with calls to "Trust in the Lord" in verse 5, "Fear the Lord" in verse 7, and "Honor the Lord" in verse 9. The call to fear the Lord in verse 7 is especially significant since that is a key idea in much of the wisdom literature. In Proverbs 1:7, the fear of the Lord forms the basis for the wisdom of the Book of Proverbs. There is much discussion about the meaning of the term "fear of the Lord," but one important element is mentioned in Proverbs 3:7, and that is the idea of turning away from evil. If one truly fears the Lord as the Old Testament suggests, then one will turn away from evil and turn towards God in obedience. This idea of wisdom that leads one to turn from evil is also reflected in Proverb 8:3 and in 16:6. Job 28:28 places the fear of the Lord in a parallel structure with departing from evil. The two concepts are basically equivalent.⁷⁹²

In Proverbs 3:11-12, the writer recommends the Lord's discipline and reproof. The reference in verse 19 to the Lord's wisdom is the last of six uses of the term "Lord" in Proverbs 3:1-20. This high density of references to the Lord suggests a strong connection between the wisdom

⁷⁹¹ Brennan, 1.

⁷⁹² McMillion, 15.

recommended here and the work of the Lord. True wisdom will honor the Lord, trust in him, fear the Lord and turn away from evil.

The Book of Job is a conversation between friends (until God Himself shows up) and *Qohelet* seems profoundly lonely, despite all that it owns and does. Each is a complex book to interpret, but some themes are clear across all of the books. Each of the wisdom books contains proverbs or aphorisms describing life, often by means of contrasts in a couplet design. Each book also contains passages of poetry using vivid metaphor. It is notable that there is little description of the cultic activity of Israel in the wisdom books, despite Ecclesiastes and much of Proverbs being ascribed to Solomon, the builder of the first temple. Wisdom is universal and not linked exclusively to the worship of God in Jerusalem at the temple.

Another theme of wisdom is education - both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are directed to young students, with a teacher calling them 'son'. It has been suggested that the wisdom books were used in schools to teach young men to be effective in the royal court. The book of Proverbs especially encourages learners to avoid moral corruption, giving examples of how to behave and be wise. Wisdom has many aspects and themes; it is not simple to pin down in watertight definitions. The themes we have discussed here have been sought out in many passages of Old Testament scripture. As we look at some of the passages that research has focused on, we will be able to assess whether wisdom themes can be found throughout the Old Testament. The wisdom experience was reflected not only in the limited situations recorded in Job and Ecclesiastes. It was found also in the jejune events of everyday life. These were not unambiguous. Silence, a wisdom ideal, cut both ways (Prov. 17:27-28); it could signal folly as well as understanding. Poverty might be the result of laziness (Prov. 6:9-11), but not always: "Better a little with fear of the Lord..." (Prov. 15:16; cf. 16:8). Kindness to the poor is frequently emphasized (Prov. 14:21, 31; 17:5). The uncertainty of the meaning of riches did not go unnoticed; they could be a temptation (14:28). Although one could conclude from appearances (Prov. 6:13), these were often deceptive; a bitter thing could turn out to be sweet (Prov. 27:7), and a soft tongue could break a bone (Prov. 25:15). The most delicate area is that of personal motivations and

judgments (Prov. 16:2; 21:2): "Sometimes a way seems right to a man, but the end of it leads to death" (Prov. 16:25).

Wisdom Literature and African Reflection

From the explorations of wisdom from ANE society and the world of the Old Testament, we have seen the wide spectrum of views about wisdom, especially its usage and transforming potential in scripture. As we engage this enterprise with contemporary African society, the research may draw fruitful discussion on some general applications of wisdom in the Old Testament particularly the wisdom literature that are culturally applicable to everyday practical life in African society.

This chapter attempts to establish the fact that the African people are inherently lovers of the wisdom tradition in which wisdom of the Old Testament is neither simple nor singular. With the many themes we have examined, wisdom is complex, multi-faceted and at times in tension of seeming contradiction. There is no simple overarching metanarrative spelled out in the wisdom of scripture rather, we can read Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes as a collection of writings that explain how things appear in a set of different contexts. As a postmodern reader finds resonance with different proverbs or narratives in different situations, they may be able to find that the wisdom of Scripture can speak to them in any situation.

It may be helpful to consider that the Scriptures we possess now have been finally shaped by redactors of the wisdom tradition. This implies that the multiplicity of perspectives and narratives were seen by the wisdom school of the early second temple as a helpful way to engage with God. Wisdom itself can become a perspective to view the narratives of the Old Testament. Where we have difficult interpretations, this may throw light on possible resolutions and lessons that might be learned in African culture.

Furthermore, we may go on to say from our readings of the Psalms and Prophets, that wisdom was thoroughly integrated in the Scriptures of the ancient Israelites. As we seek to dialogue with our culture in Africa, we must seek to ensure it is as deeply interwoven in our understanding of the worship of God and his directing of our present reality as it was for the psalmists of the exile and second temple and the prophets from the late first temple onwards. We might do well to have their concern for

knowing God in humility and their deep desire (though with fear) for His action in their present reality.

In the African context, wisdom consists in a careful consideration of what proceeds from one's mouth – words! Thus the birth of a new child or at the demise of a loved one, people gather to make incantations suggesting either negatively what should be avoided in the future world, or positively what the affected soul should embrace in the life to come specific verses or chapters of the book of Psalms, if it is read and recited at the right time, in the right place and a certain number of times will release a secret power that enables one to deal with adverse situations or to affirm admirable conditions as the case might be. The imprecatory Psalms 5, 6, 28, 35, 37, 54, 55, 89, 109 and so on, were embraced by indigenous African adherents of the Christian faith as portent tools for dealing with witches and other subterranean forces of evil, and in promoting the good life.⁷⁹³

Reading the passages of scripture that we have called 'wisdom', we cannot help but touch on the issue of creation. Over and over, we find God described as the creator and as the one who sustained life. We find Him battling against the forces of chaos and toying with things far beyond the comprehension of the ancients. In our modernity, we believed that by understanding those forces and even manipulating them, we might become gods. The wisdom of the Old Testament warns against that, and some of our own contemporary cultures embrace the warning. Calling God 'creator' is not a position of arrogant opposition to scientific progress, or a claim to fill 'gaps' in theories, but a description of unseen realities that are not merely 'yet to be discovered', but are beyond human comprehension. We must, in the spirit of Job and the words of Barth, 'let God be God'. In doing this, we do not halt our quest for answers or knowledge, indeed, as proverbs says 'fear of YHWH' is the start to the quest – or the foundation of – real wisdom. Rather, we are honest that our presuppositions include God far beyond us instead of establishing ourselves or our intellect as the supreme judge of all. We acknowledge our limitations and can sit comfortably with the philosophers who describe our understanding of a situation in terms of a perspective, seeing only part of the bigger reality.

⁷⁹³ Ahiamadu, 231.

In seeking the wisdom of scripture, we have found practical advice on living, centred on God, which appears throughout the Old Testament particularly in all the sections we have examined. It includes the worship of God and study of Scripture, but recognizes the limits in understanding and experience and is comfortable with the issues of God's apparent absence and the abundance of suffering. Wisdom seeks answers, but finds paradoxes. Wisdom has much to speak into the culture of today when we recognize that simple, dismissive answers characterize the fool, and the honest hard work of seeking through an enigma suits the wise woman or man. A third theme that connects wisdom and creation is the praise of the Lord.

Just as in Genesis, God did not only create all the living creatures, but he provides for their needs as well. God created the plants for the animals to eat. He made the habitation of the birds of the air. The trees are watered so that they will grow and the birds can build their nests in them. Even the heavens are set in proper order with the sun and moon to mark the times and the seasons. The point in all this is that God's creation is in proper order with everything in its right place. God cares for all parts of creation, and each creature has what it needs to thrive. Every creature has both food for nourishment and a place to live. God not only creates, but he cares for and provides for His creation.

What does this kind of praise have to say to people in Africa today? Modern descriptions of the universe may be quite different from those of ancient Israel. The poetic symbolism that spoke to their day may not resonate with the modern ear. That does not mean that the sense of awe and wonder should be lost. There is much in the natural world that is still beyond the explanations of modern science. There is still much to learn and to understand. The way that the different systems in nature are connected and related is a mystery. There is also a place for caring and protecting what the Lord has created. Human beings should strive to care for creation and preserve it for generations still to come because God has created such a beautiful and intricate world. There is a role for Christians to play in the conservation ecology. The created order should be protected exactly because it is from God.

Wisdom literature presents to Africans another way to praise God who created all things. It seeks to answer the question: Given God's revelation in his inspired prophetic word, and given specific

observations about the world, what should the person who fears Yahweh do? The wisdom literature attempts to connect empirical reality with ultimate reality. Even if those who originated the folk wisdom did not think about this connection, there came a time when it had to be considered because of the situation of Israel as a nation. Israelites were driven to a unitary view of the world because of God's saving acts, showing that he reigns over the whole earth and was saving Israel into a political kingdom that ruled the physical creation.⁷⁹⁴ It is not that the heathens knew nothing at all, but rather, the heathens lacked any ultimate guiding principle for their knowledge, which only came through the revelation of Yahweh.⁷⁹⁵ Agur, for example, (Prov. 30:1-6) found in Yahwistic faith a universal, foundational, discriminating principle to guide his wisdom; not that he abandoned all of his previous wisdom; but rather, he brought that natural experience into submission to revelation.

However, the wisdom literature also warn us about the limits of our ability to connect empirical reality with revealed theology. In contrast with the non-canonical Sirach (19:20 'All wisdom is the fear of the Lord, and in all wisdom there is the fulfilment of the law'), the connection between revelation and observation is not watertight. As Job and Ecclesiastes show, often we will not be able to put the two together and need to trust God's goodness. Yahweh's revelatory theophany leads to humility for Job, but his sufferings remain unexplained (42:1-3).⁷⁹⁶ 'When with abundance dreams and vapours and words grow, and then fear God!' (Eccl. 5:7,). Similarly, when there is a wearisome increase in making books and study (or even in writing and reading essays), 'Fear God and keep his commandments for God will bring every deed into judgment, because of everything that is hidden, whether good or bad' (Eccl. 12:12-14).

In the view of David T. Adamo, the fact is that African Christians, like the Yoruba, do not face the same problems as Western Christians. They need a different hermeneutic that takes into cognizance their cultural traditions and the place of the Bible in solving their problems. African Indigenous Christians are not passive receivers of Christianity.

⁷⁹⁴ Goldsworthy, 131.

⁷⁹⁵ Blatcher, 15.

⁷⁹⁶ Fyall 70; Murphy 3.

They make use of whatever they find useful from Western missionaries and adapt it to suit their worldview and needs and in so doing they have made a substantial contribution to the interpretation and the use of wisdom literature.⁷⁹⁷ Olojede contends that an African reflection on Proverbs' ethics as communitarian ethics and as a result of its didactic content, the book of Proverbs is regarded as central to sapiential ethics in Africa. Again, the community context of the content is rather strong.⁷⁹⁸ Brown demonstrates that Proverbs is essentially about the journey from home to community and back again, a rite of passage that requires letting go of the parental ties of security to seek one's own security and identity through service to the community.⁷⁹⁹

Similarly, Ansberry has observed the communal virtues inherent in Proverbs 1–9 in particular. He states that the lectures in Proverbs 1-9 seek to promote communal virtues and values in Africa. Their message is clear; do not steal, murder, or commit adultery; rather, pursue wisdom, justice, and marital fidelity. Together, the lectures constitute a cycle of instructions that attempt to provide the addressee with an antidote for seductive speech in Africa.⁸⁰⁰ The use of proverbs and sayings as a medium of instilling moral values in African communities has been widely attested. The instructions and the sayings in the book of Proverbs also confirm the utilitarian function of proverbs in constructing ethical norms and values. The book of Proverbs could, therefore, be employed gainfully in the teaching of biblical ethics in Africa. However, Mugambi rightly urges that, "The teaching of ethics within the context of Christianity should be conducted in such a way that it does not alienate the learners from their own heritage."⁸⁰¹ Given that several scholars have also drawn parallels between many African proverbs and the sayings in the book of Proverbs,⁸⁰² engaging with African ethical values in teaching the ethics of Proverbs or of the Old Testament in Africa would appear to

⁷⁹⁷ David. T. Adamo, "Ancient Israelite and African Proverbs as advice, reproach, warning, encouragement and explanation," *Theological Studies* 71:3 (2015), 349.

⁷⁹⁸ Olojede, 23.

⁷⁹⁹ Brown, 49.

⁸⁰⁰ Ansberry, 47.

⁸⁰¹ Mugambi, 27.

⁸⁰² cf. Golka, 23; Masenya, 12.

be reasonable. The dialogical nature of most of the material – the discourse setting of Proverbs 1–9 in particular – suggests a strong community interaction and network. Secondly, the extensive use of familial terms in the book of Proverbs points to a network of relationships, which is vital to a communitarian ethics. For instance, overt and covert interactions between father and son in Africa (Proverbs 1:8, 10, 15; 2:1; 3:1, 11, 12, 21; 4:10, 20; 5:1, 20; 7:1; 19:27; 23:15, 19, 26; 24:13; 27:11) as well as between mother and son (Proverbs 1:8; 6:20; 31:1-2) point to the value of parental instructions and the importance of family and family cohesion in ancient society. Although some scholars have suggested that father-son discourse could actually refer to a teacher-pupil kind of engagement, the maternal voice and instinct which also seem to be at play, not only in the instructions, but also in the speeches of Woman Wisdom, points to a family discourse.⁸⁰³ Other kinship terms employed in the book of Proverbs and practically used in African culture include sister (7:4), brother (17:17; 18:9, 19, 24; 27:10), kinswoman (7:14) and grandchildren (13:22; 17:6).

The emphasis on the value of friendship and good neighbourliness equally confirms the communitarian character of the moral vision of Proverbs. For example, Proverb 27:10 says, ‘Do not forsake your own friend or your father’s friend, nor go to thy brother’s house in the day of your calamity; better is a neighbour nearby than a brother far away’ (cf. 6:1-3; 17:17; 18:24; 27:6, 9, 14, 17; 3:28, 29; 11:9, 12; 14:21; 16:29; 18:17; 24:28; 25:8, 9, 18; 26:19; 29:5). The principles that govern sexual ethics are based mostly on communitarian concerns, although the individual is also warned to refrain from adultery for his or her own sake (Prov. 2:16-19; 6:24, 32-33). The adulterer is seen as a destroyer of the community, an agent of death (7:24- 27; 9:18; 23:26–28). The moral tension between wisdom and folly or between Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman, especially in Proverbs 7 and 9, also reflects a social ethic that upholds hard work and chaste living, but looks down on laziness and sexual impropriety, amongst other vices. The bipolar division of the characters in the book, such as the righteous versus the sinner, the wise versus the foolish, the poor versus the rich, the diligent versus the lazy, the young versus the old, the ruler versus the subjects,

⁸⁰³ Dell, 24–25, 30; Ansberry, 40–41.

and so on, also points to the inclusive nature of the ethical vision of Proverbs. It is an ethics that addresses every member of the community, irrespective of their status or character. The repeated warning against the use of dishonest scales and diverse weights in business practices, because it is abominable to Yahweh, points to a communal value that is rooted in a theocentric ethic (Prov. 11:1; 16:11; 20:10, 23). Business people are enjoined to refrain from cheating their clients and fellow citizens. Thus, issues of social justice and equity firmly embedded in the ethics of Proverbs also support a communitarian view of ethics. As Brown rightly points out, communal (or ‘community oriented’) values of righteousness, justice, and equity permeate the literature. Hence, the sentence literature also mentions the relationship between the king (or ruler) and his subjects in a way that highlights these ancient Israelite communitarian values (Proverbs 16:10, 14; 20:2, 8, 26, 28; 22:11; 24:21; 25:5, 6; 28:3, 15, 16; 29:4, 12, 14).⁸⁰⁴

Confirming also the communitarian nature of the ethical vision of Proverbs is the reflection on the concern for the vulnerable members of the society expressed in the various warnings against unjust treatment or belittling of the widow (15:25), the orphan (23:10), the needy and the poor (13:23 14:21, 31; 17:5; 19:17; 21:13; 22:2, 9, 16, 22; 28:3, 8, 15, 17; 29:7, 14; 30:14; 31:9, 20). The fact that ethics in Proverbs is primarily related to moral teachings and that in ancient Israel, the primary locus where moral instructions were received was the home, has some telling implications for the depiction of wisdom as woman. Women (alongside men) will continue to play a pivotal role in ethical issues in the society. Virtues presupposed in wisdom’s discourse – self-restraint, (sexual) fidelity, prudence, straightforwardness, humility, discretion, hatred of evil, and fear of Yahweh, as well as moral values of righteousness, justice and equity – are essentially communal.⁸⁰⁵

The speaker in the father’s lectures and in parts of the sentence literature often addresses an individual as ‘my son’. Besides the formation of moral character in the young man, one of the main goals of the admonitions is to make him an upstanding member of the

⁸⁰⁴ Brown, 33.

⁸⁰⁵ Brown, 40.

community⁸⁰⁶ confirms that the lectures in Proverbs 1–9 seek to promote communal virtues and values. For her part, Woman Wisdom addresses a plural audience in her speeches in chapters 1, 8 and 9. Thus, both the familial and communal values are stressed in the book. In her first speech in 1:20-33, Woman Wisdom is portrayed as what can be likened to the contemporary neighbourhood counsellor, social worker on a crusade, perhaps against drug addiction and violence or similar vices that affect the community as known today in Africa. She operates in the open square, in the main concourses, by the city gate. She is a preacher of righteousness who is interested in maintaining order in the community and in promoting responsible citizenship. There is no indication that the addressees are her children or close kin, which suggests that her motive was primarily for the common good of the community. In her second speech in chapter 8, Woman Wisdom boasts of her integrity and she invites the young men of the community to learn from and emulate. Again, she positions herself in a public space – on top of the hill, at the crossroad and by the city gate. Her honesty, prudence and uprightness are demonstrated in her leadership style and point the way to an ethics of governance. Rulers are enjoined to seek her patronage most especially in Africa. Ansberry asserts that “(s)he provided the community with a family-centred social configuration, and functioned as the authoritative mediator who reconciled the chaotic sense of reality with a harmonious cosmos.”

The anthropocentric character of the ethical elements in her speech (Prov. 8:4-21, 32–36) is however balanced by a cosmic and theocentric ethical reflection on her relationship with God and the rest of creation in 8:22–31. In Proverb 9:1–6, Woman Wisdom demonstrates her ability to engage with fellow members of the community. She positions herself in the highest points of the city. Here is an established upper class woman reaching out to ‘street urchins’ and inviting them to her banquet. Wealth in a communitarian ethics is not an end in itself but a means to an end. Woman Wisdom expends her substance for the common good of the community. Here in Proverbs, as in the African ethics, social welfare of disadvantaged community members is not in the hands of the government, but in the hands of the good neighbours and family

⁸⁰⁶ Brown, 47; Ansberry, 47.

members. In African contexts where governments struggle to meet the needs of its deprived citizens, empowering families to cater for the needs of their weak members may be a way forward. The notion of African communitarian ethics is a heuristic concept for the understanding of the social ethical vision of the book of Proverbs as outlined above. Therefore, on account of its heuristic value, the possibility of incorporating communitarian ethics into the teaching curricula on biblical ethics should be considered, especially in Africa where many theological institutions tend to rely on Western model of ethics, which their audience may not readily relate. Being a pedagogical and ethical literature itself, the book of Proverbs could serve as a launching pad for such a venture. I submit that the communitarian elements contained in African ethics could contribute positively to the on-going discourse of wisdom ethics as well as of Old Testament ethics at large, and this usefulness should be unpacked in greater detail. The insight from such ethics can also influence conversations on religious ethics in believing communities in Africa.

Conclusion

We have examined wisdom in wisdom literature of the Old Testament. We saw that wisdom plays an important role in creation. We also saw Israel as God vicegerent in transmitting this wisdom. We have also seen that wisdom is inherently in the human being as part of the image of God, which impacts His ethical and moral behavior. God's wisdom in creation also shows that God is the one true God to be worshiped above any other. No other part of God's creation or work of human hands can rival the Lord. Wisdom calls on all to worship the Lord. Creatively, we have seen the African world view of wisdom in tandem with Old Testament world in conveying instruction about matters in life, warning about the impending catastrophe if wisdom is not adhered to, giving education and checking ethics and behavioural patterns in all human endeavours. Finally, God's wisdom as seen in creation calls on all creatures to praise the Lord. God deserves honor and worship because of all He has done in creation through his wisdom. The wonderful wisdom of the Lord seen in creation should influence our ethics, our worship, and our praise for the Lord.

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