Introduction


The rehabilitation of Israelite wisdom has been one of the more significant developments in Old Testament scholarship in the last third of the twentieth century. For too long wisdom had been a casualty of the long-running quest for a theological centre in the Old Testament which had seen a variety of potential unifying themes proposed and wisdom almost invariably marginalized in the accompanying discussion. Since the wisdom texts paid little attention to cult and even less to covenant it was virtually inevitable that, as long as the quest persisted in this form, wisdom would be on the sidelines. But the Old Testament contains wisdom literature as part of its witness to the religion, not to say the faith, of ancient Israel, and its importance cannot simply be assessed in proportion to its compatibility with some overarching statement of what Old Testament theology is about. Wisdom’s lot is now, in any case, a happier one with the advent of less reductionistic and more pluriform approaches to the description of Old Testament theology. Whatever its special emphases, wisdom as the foremost expression of Israelite intellectual endeavour is, in its more usual manifestations, predicated on a belief in the orderly governance of the world by God. Its character is thus misstated if it is presented merely as a secular alternative to the religious outlook of the rest of the Hebrew scriptures. Current interest in the subject has been deepened by an increased scholarly appreciation of the importance of wisdom thinking and literature among Israel’s neighbours, notably in Egypt and Mesopotamia. The strongly ethical flavour of much of this writing, far from arguing for the downgrading of Old Testament wisdom as representing the lowest common denominator in near eastern religious thought, is recognized as offering a basic repertoire of religious insight and ethical consciousness upon which even the prophets of Israel might construct their call to high moral endeavour and enlightened social conscience. So the importance of Israelite wisdom is not to be measured solely in accordance with wisdom’s place in the Old Testament canon. In the course of this volume it will be suggested that wisdom insights have affected both the shaping of the Hebrew canon and the reading strategy recommended in certain parts of it.

And it will also be a major function of the volume to help determine the extent to which wisdom has been active, now more in the way of a leavening agent, in the narrative, prophetic, psalmic and apocalyptic traditions that are represented in the Old Testament.

This collection of essays, for all that it is entitled Wisdom in ancient Israel, happily begins, for the reason already stated, with an acknowledgement of the common stock of wisdom insights shared by Israel with her neighbours in Egypt, Mesopotamia and Syria. Wisdom literature, as John Ray reminds us, was one of the earliest products of the Egyptian scribal tradition, and one of its prime purposes was instruction in the art of being successful in public affairs. However, this survey of wisdom through the several epochs of ancient Egyptian history shows it to have been much more than utilitarianism in service of the ‘upwardly mobile’. A strong religious interest is sometimes apparent, for Egyptian scribes ‘were trained in an atmosphere of acute religiosity’, and there is also evidence of a Socratic-type seeking after knowledge for its own sake. The golden era of the New Kingdom, with its imperial expansion and consequent influx of wealth, witnessed a burgeoning of wisdom writing, most famously in the Instruction of Amenemope, which considers questions of fate and moral responsibility and comes especially close to the Old Testament wisdom of Proverbs, to which, indeed, it seems to have made literary contribution. But in the end Ray resists the temptation to generalize about the course of Egyptian wisdom as if it were headed towards some spiritual or religious telos – a sort of ‘via crucis along the Nile’ – and this partly because participation in a wisdom tradition means more borrowing from within the tradition and less firsthand experience and observation than we might imagine.

With a single known exception, the main Babylonian words for ‘wisdom’ do not have the particular Hebraic sense of ‘wise conduct before God’, so that at first sight the potential for comparison between Israelite and Babylonian wisdom may appear limited. W. G. Lambert overcomes this slight impediment by focussing on Babylonian writings that exhibit broader characteristics of the Hebrew wisdom literature. The intellectual dimension of wisdom is judged to offer the best basis for comparison, and is represented on the Babylonian side by Ludlul bēl nēmeqi, the Theodicy and the Dialogue of Pessimism, each of which is briefly described and assessed in the course of the essay. Lambert also supplements the textual evidence of his corpus of Babylonian Wisdom Literature, published in 1960, with further information and with translations of Emar and Sumerian editions of a text which shows that the ‘vanity of vanities’ theme bequeathed by Qoheleth to world literature was already present in Mesopotamian wisdom texts prior to 1600 BC. With ‘creative recensions’ this text continued to be
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copied and transmitted until at least the seventh century BC. ‘Thus Ecclesiastes was presenting an old theme in an Israelite garb.’ This newer evidence will obviously have to be taken into account when the case for Qoheleth’s having been influenced by Greek philosophy is being considered.

The figure of Ahiqar does not appear in the Old Testament, though he is found in the apocryphal book of Tobit and is represented in a number of other ancient sources written in a variety of languages, including an Aramaic text from Elephantine. The ‘Words of Ahiqar’ consists of two parts, the framework story and the ‘Sayings of Ahiqar’. Greenfield finds evidence to suggest that both originated during the reign of the seventh-century Assyrian king Esarhaddon whom, as the tradition has it, Ahiqar served as chief counsellor. ‘Ah IQAR’ is a polytheistic work, but it has the high moral tone characteristic of much of the near eastern wisdom literature. Greenfield suggests that the polytheistic element must have been abandoned at an early stage for Ahiqar to figure as he does in Tobit. Later versions of the story are also generally free of polytheistic features. The presentation of Ahiqar in Tobit could be said to be emblematic of the treatment of wisdom generally in Israelite hands, for Ahiqar figures as an Israelite, a member of the tribe of Naphtali who served in the courts of Sennacherib and Esarhaddon.

The affinity of Israelite wisdom with that of ancient Egypt in particular has been apparent since the discovery that the Instruction of Amenemope closely parallels a section in the book of Proverbs. Whilst in no way denying this, John Day is concerned to highlight the Semitic influences that have also helped shape the biblical wisdom traditions. The biblical Job, for example, is an Edomite. It was probably the very internationalism of wisdom that made possible the writing of an Israelite book centred on Job in the period 500–300 BC, when Jewish hatred of the Edomites burned quite intensely. Job, at any rate, leans towards the Semitic side; there is no Egyptian counterpart with which comparison may be made. As a specific instance of foreign Semitic influence on biblical wisdom Day cites the apparent dependence by Qoheleth upon the epic of Gilgamesh at Eccles. ix 7–9. And, whereas it is a commonplace to assume that the Israelite court was modelled on its Egyptian counterpart, and by this means came under the influence of Egyptian wisdom, Day argues that David, the founder of the Judean court, is more likely to have been influenced by Canaanite practice and so also by Canaanite wisdom. A number of features in the book of Proverbs (e.g. the righteous/wicked contrast, graded numerical sayings, and the personification of wisdom) also suggest that some of its sayings have been influenced by Semitic wisdom.

Ernest Nicholson’s study of theodicy in Job is conducted against the background of Israelite belief in a direct relationship between the ‘fear of

God’s and human reward and prosperity. The Satan’s question, ‘Does Job fear God for nought’? (Job i 9), far from casting cynical aspersion on Job, reflects the common Israelite conviction that God ‘rewards the righteous and punishes those who offend his righteousness’. The dialogues of the book of Job, argues Nicholson, respond to Job’s statement at the climax of the prologue, in which he turns his back on the old reward-retribution theodicy (Job ii 10), for, simply by implying that there is no need for a theodicy, Job makes theodicy an issue. Thereafter in the dialogues various theodicies are aired but are rejected by Job because he believes that no defence of God’s ways in the world can make him look just. Then do the divine speeches at the end of the book attempt a theodicy? Nicholson suggests that they do to the extent that God asserts both his mastery over the creation and his continuing commitment to uphold his creation in the face of the chaotic forces that are contained by his power but not destroyed. Such a faith ‘contains at least the seed of a theology of redemption in the sense that if evil is somehow inherent in the creative process, so too is the overcoming of evil’.

Qoheleth also wrestles with troubling contradictions between traditional wisdom teaching and his own observations of life. He is pictured by Otto Kaiser as a scribe who doubled as a teacher, probably working in Jerusalem in the mid-third century BC, in a period of considerable intellectual and religious uncertainty. In Ecclesiastes he has recorded some of his classroom discussions. Only in i 3–iii 15 is there evidence of a carefully planned composition, so it is here, and especially in the concluding section iii 10–15, that Kaiser finds the essential thought of Qoheleth. The message is that humans are committed to unremitting planning and activity, and yet are not in control of their own destiny. They are at the mercy of time and chance, and, as the ultimate perversity, good people may suffer as though they had been wicked, while the ungodly may prosper in their ungodliness. So the book of Ecclesiastes is ‘a ghost at the banquet among the other books of the Bible’. The work of Qoheleth has been supplemented by two epilogists (principally in xii 8–11 and xii 12–14) who are reckoned not to have done justice to his central insights. Qoheleth’s own advice is of the carpe diem variety, to enjoy the present, especially one’s youthful present (xi 9–xii 7), and to consider death to the extent that it may concentrate one’s mind upon present opportunities.

Some scholars have detected the influence of wisdom circles outside the select ‘wisdom canon’ of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and (possibly) Job, perhaps most conspicuously in the Old Testament narrative traditions (e.g. the Joseph story, the ‘Succession Narrative’, Esther). Robert Gordon finds little to commend in any of the arguments for the existence of a sub-genre of wisdom narrative and so gives his attention to the main Old Testament
narratives in which wisdom is prominent as a theme, namely, the account of the tabernacle, the ‘Succession Narrative’ in 2 Sam. ix–1 Kings ii, and the account of Solomon’s reign in 1 Kings ii–xi. The last-named comes in for special treatment as being ideologically less wisdom-orientated than it is commonly assumed to be. A comparison with the account of the tabernacle in Exod. xxy–xl shows how secularized the Solomonic tradition is, and how, in particular, it makes less of the idea of wisdom as divinely-given than does the Exodus narrative. Wisdom, it is suggested, is even treated negatively, or at least very ambiguously, in 1 Kings ii–iii when the subject of political revenge is in question: the same Solomon who was advised by his ailing father to deal out death to his enemies in accordance with his ‘wisdom’ (ii 6, 9) is afterwards commended by God for asking for wisdom and not for the lives of his enemies (iii 11–12).

The role of wisdom in the Solomonic traditions in 1 Kings is also the subject of André Lemaire’s essay. Lemaire’s starting-point is the scant regard paid by some scholars to the biblical depiction of Solomon as the patron of Israelite wisdom, and the surprising omission of 1 Kings iii–xi from some scholarly listings of wisdom-influenced narratives in the Old Testament. His own discussion pursues a strongly historical line of inquiry. Comparisons are made between the biblical account of Solomon’s reign and West Semitic royal inscriptions of the ninth and eighth centuries BC in order to show the extent to which 1 Kings iii–xi is rooted in royal near eastern ideology. In a flanking movement on the biblical side Lemaire argues that the theme of Solomonic wisdom cannot be attributed to Deuteronomistic redaction, since the Deuteronomistic summaries of reigns habitually speak of a king’s strength, not his wisdom. The preferred solution is to date the original account of Solomon (cf. 1 Kings xi 41) to the reign of Rehoboam and a time when the highlighting of Solomon’s political wisdom ‘was intended as an implicit criticism of Rehoboam’s pretentious attitude at the Shechem assembly which, by refusing to follow the advice of his father’s counsellors, was the primary cause of the revolt of Israel against the house of David’.

Johannes Fichtner’s 1949 essay, in which he sought to demonstrate the presence of wisdom elements in the work of Isaiah of Jerusalem, opened up discussion of the relationship generally between prophecy and wisdom. The wisdom matrix envisaged in the case of Amos, who is the subject of J. A. Soggin’s contribution to this volume, is not the courtly wisdom that has mainly featured so far, but a ‘clan wisdom’ that developed away from the court and the cities of Israel and that was fostered, as the term itself implies, in the context of home and family. Amos, from Tekoa, presents himself as a very plausible subject not just because of his rural origins but also because of certain ostensibly wisdom features in his oracles. Soggin
sets out to check the hypothesis of Amos’s wisdom connections which, though it has enjoyed distinguished advocacy, has commanded something less than universal assent. The negative verdict on the wisdom criteria according to which Amos has been included among ‘the wise’ seems conclusive enough, but Soggin avoids generalizing statements about the prophets and wisdom for lack of clinching arguments, and offers instead a series of options, one or more of which may provide the answer to the larger issue.

An undoubtedly wisdom perspective on the book of Hosea is commended to the reader by its closing verse. The question that Andrew Macintosh sagely poses is whether the clear terminological links between the verse and the substance of the book may indicate awareness of, and openness to, the wisdom tradition on the part of Hosea. Indications of such awareness are found: Hosea ‘was greatly interested in the connexion between thought and action and, above all, was convinced that wrong perceptions of reality, of the way things were, would lead inevitably to the demise and ruin of his people and nation’. But his use of wisdom language is free and unfettered by allegiance to any wisdom school or tradition. When Hosea uses words and themes characteristic of the wisdom tradition it is not as if he is representing some authoritative source which, as a member of a wisdom fraternity, he is obliged to reproduce unvaried and unaltered. He is free to yoke the language of wisdom with the metaphors of prophecy, and the realities that they represent, in order to underline the urgency of his message, as is well illustrated by xiii 13, despite its difficulty.

Isaiah, where it all started as regards prophecy and wisdom, looks as if it could also be where it all ends as we read Hugh Williamson’s account of recent Isaiah scholarship and of the trends in wisdom studies that make it ever more difficult to speak of a discrete wisdom tradition within Israelite society. But a redefining of the issue makes further exploration possible and worthwhile, for it is shown that both Isaiah and his audience shared a common epistemological basis in that they assumed natural standards of behaviour the recognition of which was not dependent upon any special revelation. This was a viewpoint particularly congenial to the writers of Israel’s wisdom literature. It was partly on this basis that Isaiah sought to convince the royal advisers – the ‘wise men’ of xxix 14 – who influenced the policy decisions of Hezekiah in his relations with the Assyrians. At the same time, the prophetic element that Isaiah introduced into his analysis of Judah’s situation brought him into conflict with the royal counsellors. For Isaiah personally there was the vision of the Lord ‘high and lifted up’, with its implications of God’s supremacy over, and orderly superintendence of, the created order. ‘It was this towards which the wisdom writers (however defined) in Isaiah’s day were struggling, giving him a strong point of
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contact with them in many respects, but ultimately his prophetic vision outstripped theirs and so also brought him into conflict with them."

As with Isaiah, the wise against whom Jeremiah polemicized included the statesmen who advised the Judaean kings, especially in relation to the threat posed by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar. As William McKane notes, the claim by the wise that the wellbeing of Judah depended upon their intellectual discernment and judgement was strongly opposed by the pre-exilic prophets. At the same time, there are occasions when the statesmen speak in Jeremiah’s favour, as in ch.xxvi, which McKane regards as at least fairly representing the attitude of the statesmen to someone who claimed to speak in the name of the Lord, and again, to a limited extent, in ch.xxxvi, though actual agreement with the prophet’s point of view cannot be assumed in either case. In point of fact, an absolute distinction between ‘word’ and ‘counsel’ is not one that McKane finds helpful. The transmutation required to convey a divinely-given insight in appropriate human language, when the prophet concerned is deeply immersed in current political realities, imparts a counsel-like character to the oracular word. There is even one occasion, recorded in ch.xxix, when the advice of Jeremiah may be assumed to have coincided with official policy vis-à-vis the Babylonians. The prophetic word and the counsel of the wise did proceed from different sources, but, as in Williamson’s discussion of Isaiah, it is noted that the acknowledgement of ‘international customary law’, as expressing a concept of common humanity and commonly agreed standards, at least had the potential to bring prophet and wise man closer together. ‘In our terms’, says McKane, ‘this suggests that counsel is not necessarily inimical to morality or to the prophetic word.’

‘Wisdom psalm’ is a familiar genre term in both psalms and wisdom scholarship, but the entity ‘wisdom psalm’ is not universally recognized nor are those who do acknowledge its existence agreed as to which psalms merit the description. In asking the question, ‘What is a wisdom psalm?’, Norman Whybrey understandably goes back to first principles. Since liturgical texts may be said to have a didactic function, an absolute distinction between wisdom and other psalms is regarded as mistaken. Two factors contribute to the existence in the psalter of psalms that are more in the nature of reflection than of worship and cultic observance: the development of regular private devotions inspiring the composition of new psalms, and the creation of a ‘psalm-book’ arranged so as to be read consecutively by private individuals. Part of the editorial work will have involved the writing of new psalms for inclusion in the new psalter, and these will have included those for instructional or devotional purposes, which are at any rate unlikely to have originated in the context of temple worship. A few are ‘wisdom psalms’ in the sense that certain features in
them have affinity with the wisdom writings, but the use of the term is deemed not to be helpful when it is applied to a wider range of psalms of a more broadly reflective or didactic character.

When the relationship between wisdom and apocalyptic – here represented by Daniel, the primary Old Testament example – comes under scrutiny, the discussion-point for Brian Mastin is necessarily whether apocalyptic had its roots in wisdom thinking, as was first suggested by L. Noack in 1857 and argued more recently by Gerhard von Rad. A conclusion in such broad terms is resisted, but evidence of a link between apocalyptic and mantic wisdom is visible in both the narrative and the visionary halves of the book of Daniel, whose authors shared many of the presuppositions of mantic wisdom. Yet the fundamental beliefs of the learned men responsible for the book of Daniel ‘were not compromised by the fact that the religious synthesis which prevailed in the circles to which they belonged was more favourable to divination than either the Deuteronomists or Second Isaiah had been’. Mastin is careful to leave room for other currents of influence, including the prophetic, in the development of Israelite apocalyptic. This relative late-comer in the history of Jewish religious thought was heir to accumulated biblical traditions as well as to such elements of Canaanite mythology as had been domesticated in Judaism by the time the apocalyptic literature began to be written.

Ben Sira, author of Ecclesiasticus, was one of the last of the traditional wisdom writers. Thanks to information provided by his grandson in the preface that he wrote for his Greek translation of his grandfather’s work, the original version can be dated to the early second century BC, just before the onset of the Hellenistic reforms. The political and social circumstances of Ben Sira’s own time are therefore especially significant for the understanding of what he wrote. Surrounded by a sea of Hellenism he may have been, but John Snaith insists that Ben Sira was no reactionary against every Hellenistic innovation. He shows his awareness of Greek literature and is clearly dependent on Egyptian wisdom writings for some of his ideas and expressions, yet at the same time his basic loyalty to Judaism finds expression in his warnings against philosophical speculation, with its tendency to weaken commitment to Torah. This loyalty is also evident in the way in which true wisdom is equated with Torah and the way of wisdom with the observance of Torah. In his ‘In Praise of the Fathers’ in Ecclus xlv 1–xlix 16 Ben Sira’s purpose was to remind loyal Jews of their spiritual and cultural heritage and to show them how they could remain loyal to God even while integrating Greek ways with their Jewish faith.

Whereas Ecclesiasticus is quite generously supplied with information relating to origin and background, the Wisdom of Solomon is not so forthcoming. Though almost certainly of Jewish origin, its earliest
attestations are in Christian writings. William Horbury therefore concerns himself with the important questions of date, status, authorship and authority. The book was probably compiled in Egypt and had assumed its present Greek form by the early first century BC. As regards status and authority, some knowledge of the development of the Old Testament canon on both the Jewish and Christian sides is helpful, though accessible only after skilfully conducted passage through a number of relevant issues. It is suggested that Wisdom’s place in the church – ‘a leading position in the class of non-canonical but acceptable books’ – may reflect its status among Jews at the end of the Second Temple period. Wisdom makes few concessions either to Greek literary tastes or, on the question of future hope and immortality, to ‘Epicurean’ tendencies such as are found even in Ecclesiastes and Ecclesiasticus. The Solomonic authorship was questioned early in both Jewish and Christian circles, but the book was valued by Jews as containing inspired prophecy and by Christians as including prophecies concerning the sufferings of Christ and as being specially suitable for study by catechumens.

The link between wisdom in its more specialist and intellectual forms and school education is easily forged, but the Old Testament evidence for the existence of schools is slight and easily summarized. Graham Davies seeks to improve the situation with two ‘persuasive indirect arguments’. The first is the existence of scribal training schools in other ancient near eastern countries, with the likelihood of such in Israel in view of Israel’s similar need of trained administrators, and the second builds on the possible analogy between the book of Proverbs and certain non-Israelite writings such as the Egyptian ‘Instructions’ which are known to have functioned as school text-books. The paucity of epigraphic evidence for the existence of scribal schools in Israel compared with the more copious information coming out of Egypt and Mesopotamia may be owing in part to the perishable material used for writing by Palestinian scribes, while the largely accidental nature of archaeological discovery is another possible factor – the more so when there are so few inscriptions of any sort emerging from Jerusalem, where scribal arts must have flourished most of all. But the epigraphic evidence is significant, and growing, and Davies draws attention particularly to some inscriptions, probably the practice exercises of trainee scribes, from a Judaean outpost at Kadesh-barnea. If scribal skills were being sharpened and employed there, the likelihood of formal school training in the main cities and administrative centres is strong.

Some Old Testament literary types at least look as if they should stand in a special relationship to wisdom writing. In particular, fable, parable and allegory, the subject of Kevin Cathcart’s essay, have been seen as ‘wisdom literary types’ (G. Fohrer) or, in the cases of fable, and allegory, as ‘forms in
which knowledge is expressed’ (G. von Rad). As with imagery and metaphor generally, these have not received as much attention from Old Testament scholars as they deserve. Given the determinative role of religion in the formation and preservation of the traditions that make up the Old Testament, it is hardly surprising that fable especially has not been given much prominence in the Old Testament itself. It is, nevertheless, represented. On the other hand, it may be cause for legitimate surprise that the Hebrew wisdom literature, which is to a considerable extent fathered on Solomon who ‘discoursed about animals and birds, and reptiles and fish’ (1 Kings v 13 [v 33]), has no fables and few allegories. And fables, like parables (in and out of the Old Testament), may in any case easily disintegrate into allegory. These and similar issues are discussed by Cathcart in his introduction to a survey of those Old Testament fables, parables and allegories in which trees, animals and birds appear in an acting capacity.

There is no personification in the Old Testament that can compare with that of wisdom, according to Roland Murphy. For though justice and peace may kiss, and alcohol may be a rowdy, ‘only Wisdom is given a voice that resembles the Lord’s (Prov. viii 35, “whoever finds me finds life”)’. Nevertheless, wisdom personified is an enigmatic figure (personification, hypostasis or person?), and a variety of claims are made on her behalf. Murphy elects, therefore, to examine the significance of personified wisdom in the contexts of the books in which she features. In Proverbs she stands for the fulness of life open to those who follow in her way, and, since this is in contrast with the fate of those who go after Dame Folly, the issue becomes one of life and death and of fidelity to God or infidelity. Here wisdom ‘has assumed the burden of the covenant, fidelity to the Lord, in language reflecting the old struggle so mercilessly bared in the book of Hosea and elsewhere’. In Eccles xxiv, on the other hand, we have a theology of presence according to which it was wisdom that came down and became concretized in Torah (and not vice versa), while Wisdom vii–ix presents her as ‘spirit, all-pervasive, an artisan in creation, the divine consort’ and ‘a divine gift who is also a saviour’. Small wonder, then, that Murphy claims that, from a ‘literary-theological’ standpoint, personified wisdom is unequalled in the Old Testament. Personified wisdom, moreover, helped wisdom in general to survive the ‘crisis of wisdom’ reflected in Job and Ecclesiastes and to live on in Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon.

Because ‘Lady Wisdom’ has divine attributes in several Old Testament and apocryphal texts a number of scholars have thought to detect a goddess behind the figure, or have argued that the bestowal of divine characteristics upon wisdom is an attempt to legitimize the worship in Israel and Judah of an ‘established’ goddess such as Asherah. Wisdom personified is approached from another angle by Judith Hadley who argues that it functions as a