

Israel's Wisdom Literature: A Liberation-Critical Reading
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Note: The numbers reflect the locations of the notes I took within a Kindle version of the book.

Introduction:

The integrity of Creation

Interpretive method

The Wisdom Literature of Ancient Israel

131 In his analysis of interpretation itself, Gadamer distinguished between three different worlds: the world behind the text (the world from which the text arose and the subject of historical approaches), the world of the text (the creation of the author and the subject of many literary approaches), and the world in front of the text (the new world of meaning made possible by interpretation) Ricoeur relates them. He sees explanation as the unfolding of the potential range of meanings that the text can yield, and understanding, in one sense of the term, as a grasp of meaning. Actually, the whole process of interpretation begins with a kind of guess, an intuition about the subject matter. It moves through a complex dialectic of explanation and developing understanding and finally rests with a subjective experience of meaning which is really a level of appropriation (Gadamer's "fusion of horizons"). Interpretation is precisely the dialectic between explanation and understanding (Ricoeur, 1976:71-88).

148 Refining Freud's "hermeneutics of suspicion," he went on to develop a way of constructing meaning that is open to the possibilities of the future while aware of the limitations of the past.

149 ...important insights from these theorists inform the way the wisdom literature will be interpreted in this study. They are Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" and Ricoeur's "hermeneutics of suspicion" and "surplus of meaning."

151 Called canonical hermeneutics, the interpretive process of the present, a believing community resignifies (gives new meaning to) a religious message born of another time

154 ...community living in a new context understands a biblical message in a manner different from the way it was originally understood (Ricoeur's "surplus of meaning").

156 Evidence of recontextualization can be found throughout the Bible itself...earlier material was resignified to address new historical situations. This is precisely the interpretive method that canonical critics seek to develop for contemporary use.

158 Canonical critics recognize three components to this interpretive method: (1) the biblical text; (2) the new context within which the text is read; and (3) the process of resignification (Sanders, 1984:77-78).

162 ...analysis is done, however, not merely to determine what the text says and what it meant but to discover its rhetorical function. Canonical critics insist that there is a dimension of ambiguity in the biblical texts that makes them versatile. This versatility is not the same as "surplus of meaning," it is more a kind of rhetorical adaptability.

171 Canonical critics claim that an unrecorded interpretive method exists just beneath the surface of the biblical text and serves as the best approach for resignification. They have uncovered clues to the identity of this hidden method which has been called comparative midrash (Sanders, 1984:46-60). Examining how some passages use earlier biblical material, they have been able to discover evidence of historical analogy, typology, and a form of rabbinic argument similar to *argumentum a fortiori* (a conclusion that follows with greater necessity than a previous conclusion, for instance, "If these things are done when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (Luke 23:311)). Some contemporary interpreters find these particular techniques inadequate for today. Nonetheless, interpretive techniques are always present, consciously or not, and so the interpreter must be aware of which techniques to employ and how to do so critically. Faced with this challenge,

187 This book will use a form of critical correlation similar to a contemporary adaptation of a medieval Jewish rabbinic allegorical approach, which "involves the determination of significance by means of factors independent of, and external to, the textual surface" (Fishbane, 1989:116). The code used to explain the text or translate it into a new context of meaning

211 Observation of nature and reflection on life led the sages of Israel to conclude that there was some kind of order inherent in the world. They believed that if they could discern how this order operated and harmonize their lives with it, they would live peacefully and successfully.

213 Captivated by the wonders of nature, the Israelites believed that their God was the great Creator responsible for the world, its organization, and everything within it. They maintained that the splendor of creation could have come only from one who was both powerful and wise. This creator was not only the primeval architect of the universe and provident sustainer of reality but also the demanding judge who preserved established order. Since Israel believed that social order was but a reflection of the natural order of the universe, creation ideology quite possibly played a more significant role in its worldview than was previously thought.

220 Although the sages maintained that certain natural laws could be perceived and followed, they never taught that life would ever be completely understood or controlled. In fact, they believed that the dimension of wisdom most desired, the wisdom that alone explains the universe and the inner workings of life, is beyond human reach and resides with God alone.

2. Job

Rhetorical function

Unmasking the powers

In the midst of mystery

251 "hermeneutic of suspicion" will be set in motion, in order to see who benefits from the rhetorical intent of the author (advocacy stand). The biblical material will then be reread in an attempt to open the reader to the new liberative revelatory possibilities of the text. Reading the Story The Appearance of God I begin with a look at the characterization of God (Gutierrez, 1988:xi-xix; Habel, 1992:21-38; Mettinger, 1992:39-49). I do this for two reasons: first, what God says and does determines the flow of the narrative (Polzin, 1977:120-21); second, the religious stature of the other characters can be judged only in terms of the nature and quality of their response to God's activity. God first appears in the heavenly council (1:6-12; 2:1-6), a place from which God issues decrees and sends forth messengers (Ps 82:1; Zech 6:5). Here God enters into dialogue with the Satan, and God's first words are questions (vv. 7-8). Does this suggest that God is ignorant of the Satan's activities, or is God asking for an account of the Satan's responsibilities? God presumes that while performing the responsibilities of roaming and patrolling...

272 nothing in this account suggests that the author passes any kind of judgment on a God who acts in this manner. God is silent until the dialogues between job and his visitors have concluded.

275 This encounter between God and Job takes place in the midst of the natural world, the home that women and men share with the rest of creation. Might the chasm that many claim exists between the divine council and the stage of human drama actually be one of a lack of perception and insight? Is God closer than we think, perhaps even the matrix and the marrow of all that is? The divine speeches (38:1-40:2; 40:6-41:34)...

279 The query taunts job as one whose words presume knowledge and status that he does not possess. The questioning of job that follows will point this out. However, clearly God believes that Job can withstand this confrontation, for God bids him gird his loins like a geber, a strong...

284 The God who earlier spoke with pride of Job's moral integrity and steadfastness (1:8; 2:3), and who trusts in Job's strength and endurance, here tests his intellectual acumen and his capacity to rule the universe. The first divine speech directs job's attention to the design of the world and God is teaching Job that humans are not the center of the universe (Perdue, 1994:168-81, 191); it is, however, precisely in the grandeur of the natural world that job will gain the insight he seeks.

303 God has domesticated both Behemoth and Leviathan; what power can job exercise over them? In other words, is Job on a par with God?

309 The question form that God employs in the speeches should not be overlooked. These are not requests for information but ironic questions that serve to correct job's shortsighted perception of his ability to grasp some of the mysteries of life. They are rhetorical questions meant to lead job to a depth greater than the information mere answers would provide. The marvel of this questioning approach is seen in its ability to bring job to wisdom despite, or perhaps because of, its indirectness. God asks questions about nature and Job gains insight into human limitation.

312 God is the medium of the theophany. God is manifested through the natural world. The artistry of God can be seen in the splendor of the universe; God's wisdom in its delicate balance; God's imagination in its diversity; God's providence in its inherent fruitfulness. The natural world was not only born of the creativity of God, it also bears the features of this creativity. Every property of creation mirrors something of the creator. It is not enough to say that creation is the medium through which God is revealed; in a very real sense, the medium is itself the revelation. In his final response, job testifies to having seen something of God, not merely the wonders of creation (42:5; Pellauer, 1981:79-80). The final words of God (42:7-8) are spoken to Eliphaz the Temanite. They are fiery words of reproof, denouncing Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar for misrepresenting God. The second half of this reproach is even more puzzling than the first. God declares that job is the only one who spoke...

320 Or might God be saying that, when all is said and done, job was correct to disregard the counsel he received from others, correct to find fault with God and to argue? It is important to note that here, as in the episodes in the midst of the heavenly council, every time God mentions job's name it is prefaced by the laudatory phrase "my servant." This is a designation reserved for only the most prominent figures of the biblical tradition (Abraham [Gen 26:24]; Moses [Num 12:7]; David [2 Sam 7:5]; Isaiah [Isa 20:3]; the Suffering Servant [Isa 42:1; 49:3; 52:13]; Zerubbabel,

God clearly is understood as both beyond the realm of the natural world and intimately involved in it; as acting through intermediaries and acting directly; as susceptible to the schemes of others as well as beyond another's influence (Alter, 1981:146-47; Miscall, 1983:17-23).

347 Has God changed in response to some of the words and actions of others? What is the final characterization of God

356 The word curse is really a euphemistic use of brak, "to bless." (Barak is used with the sense of cursing God only seven times in the entire Bible; four of these instances

occur in the book of job: 1:5, 11; 2:5, 9; 1 Kgs 21:10, 13; Ps 10:3.) The reason for the use of the opposite meaning is not clear. The thought of cursing God may have been too objectionable actually to use the maledictory language, or the author may be playing with the antithesis between bless and curse.

375 Since the Satan does not have the authority independently to abuse Job but is responsible to God, this character apparently is nothing more than a foil of God used to create a situation wherein Job's righteousness might be demonstrated. The Satan serves a literary function by introducing the wager, the occasion for the drama, and a theological function, for as a foil, the Satan deflects responsibility for this tragedy from God.

390 They are all from lands renowned for wisdom. Eliphaz is the name of the firstborn of Esau also known as Edom, a land with a reputation for wisdom (Gen 36:4, 10, 15; Gen 25:30). Shuah is on one of the major trade routes through the Syrian desert, and Naamah is a Sabean city. Thus, the homelands of job's counselors encircle the entire Arabian peninsula: Eliphaz from northwest Arabia, Bil-dad from the northeast, and Zophar from the south.

407 In three different places (4:17-19; 15:14-16; 25:4-6) a carefully crafted rabbinic argumentation similar to argumentum a fortiori concludes that human beings, precisely because they are human, cannot be righteous before God. The argument claims that if beings that are far superior to mortals lack moral integrity, then inferior humans are surely corrupt. There is no way that job can be innocent and God guilty.

413 ...their worldview is governed by static ideology and not by living faith. In their defense of divine management of the world, they renounce God's sovereign freedom to act as God would choose to act. Restricting themselves to the theory of retribution, they deny themselves the experience of mystery. Theirs may be a theocentric worldview, but it is narrow and restrictive and inadequate to deal with some of life's most pressing issues, to say nothing of the mystery of God. The exchange between job and his three visitors no sooner ends than a fourth voice is heard. Elihu is the only person with an Israelite name (1 Sam 1:1),

421 Elihu takes great pains to relate the incomprehensibility of God's ways to the wonders of creation, particularly the force displayed in the thunderstorm (36:26-37:13; Habel, 1985:502-14). Much of his teaching is based on empirical evidence, which gives his words more credibility than the hollow pronouncements of the others. Furthermore, he seems less concerned with human frailty and its consequences than with divine majesty and its manifestations. For these reasons, one might rightly say that Elihu espouses a theocentric worldview. Elihu's last words to Job are ironic questions designed to force job to acknowledge his own limitations before the wisdom and power

of the creator. They are the same kind of questions that God will soon pose, questions meant to lead Job to the same conclusions. Earlier Job

428 While the others rebuked Job's demand that God appear in court, Elihu sets the stage for the appearance of God in nature. He does not condemn Job of sin but of misunderstanding. This defender of divine majesty challenges both the rigid articulations of traditional teaching and the shortsighted claims of personal experience. He goes on to maintain that even a dynamic wisdom, one born of the dialogue between tradition and experience, cannot explain the mysteries of life. Elihu prepares Job, the visitors, and the reader alike for the theophany of God. A

431 The opening lines of the book identify Job as a man from Uz, a land linked with Edom, the famed center of wisdom. He is described as a righteous man par excellence

433 ...his uprightness. He not only has great wealth, but his resources are in perfect balance, that is, they are counted in multiples of the mystical numbers of three, five, seven, and ten, numbers that symbolize fullness, entirety, perfection. He even has a balanced number of children, seven sons who will generate seven dowries and three daughters whose dowry disbursements will not result in financial hardship. This testimony of praise is rounded off with a second assertion of his preeminence. This man is "the greatest of the people of the east" (1:3), the region renowned for its wisdom. An

445 Job is definitely not an egocentric man. From a religious point of view, he is not anthropocentric either, although this is precisely what Satan alleges. Even in his distress, Job espouses a theocentric attitude.

447 Job first declares that we are devoid of possessions at birth and again at death. He then states that during life, God gives, and at death, God takes away. These two statements may be related, but they are not the same.

448 Finally, Job asserts that God not only takes away our possessions but actually afflicts us with adversity. This seems to depict a progression of vulnerability: nakedness, dispossession, affliction. This is the fate of human creatures, and there is nothing to do but to accept it graciously. It should be noted that God decides this state of affairs, and there seems to be no causal correlation here with the moral character of human behavior. The counsel that Job's wife offers may not be as illogical as sometimes alleged. From her point of view, this progression of vulnerability seems to be: nakedness, dispossession, death.

461 Job would have creation re-create itself in order to put an end to his adversity. This is anthropocentric self-interest in its most rudimentary form: he has no authority to call for the reversal of creation. His words are condemnatory, not performative. The

word used here for curse is galal, meaning "to diminish," which is precisely what a curse is meant to do.

465 After censuring the cosmic order and the role that it played in his birth, job bemoans the fact that he was not stillborn.

467 He denounces the granting of life to those destined to an existence of misery. He seems to suggest that for some, suffering is the very basis of reality rather than an intermittent occurrence. In

471 Now he seems to argue that it is an unbearable ordeal from start to finish...

482 He sees no pattern in God's manner of dealing with either the righteous or the wicked (10:3; 21:23-26).

490 incomprehensible that his creator has become his destroyer (10:8- 11). Confident that God knows that he, job, is righteous, Job suspects that his adversity is a test, he sees it as a purification of imperfection,

497 Only God knows the way to wisdom, because only God "saw it and declared it; established it, and searched it out" (v. 27). The only course open to women and men is to fear the LORD and avoid evil (v. 28).

498 Job's declaration that wisdom is beyond his reach does not suggest that he has given up his struggle. On the contrary, he insists that he has in fact feared the LORD and avoided evil. In the past, this was recognized by all, and he delighted in the peace and satisfaction that came from this recognition (29:1-25). Now, for some reason he cannot apprehend, his world has been turned upside down. Respect has turned to disdain (30:1-11), and peace has given way to assault and anguish (vv. 12-19). Job has feared God, and God in turn has terrorized Job (w. 20-31). Job concludes his defense with a formal declaration of innocence (Habel, 1985:427-31). He lists the rules of conduct that have governed his behavior, and he insists that God either punish him if he is found guilty or vindicate him if he is innocent, as job has claimed to be (31:1-34). If God would provide him with a comparable list of charges, job would gladly carry it openly for all to see (vv. 35-37).

Job's very last words acknowledge the relationship between social justice and ecoharmony. Job declares that any exploitation by him of either the land or its owners would earn him the same penalty: the land would produce thorns and weeds instead of wheat and barley.

518 ...neither the wisdom of traditional teaching as promoted by the visitors nor the insights that Job has recently gained through his own disturbing experience is sufficient

to explain the mystery of innocent suffering. If Job's dilemma is to be resolved, he must look elsewhere for an explanation. At the end of his speech Job brings his doubts and questions, his frustrations and protests to the bar of God's justice and waits there to be heard (31:35). When God finally speaks, it is to question Job about creation, not to assuage his search for understanding (38:3; 40:7). Job's responses show that God's interrogation has accomplished its goal: Job has reached a new depth of comprehension. God

523 Job acknowledges how insignificant he is in the face of the magnificence of creation. Not only does he admit his inability to respond to God's questioning but he realizes how ineffectual his own questioning has been.

525 ...posed questions cannot provide answers. On the other hand, Job's real heroism is found in his humble admission of human limitation; his questioning is satisfied by mystery.

526 This is a man who is in error, not in sin. He does admit is that he spoke "without knowledge" (42:3).

529 He has been wrong, however, to think that his religious tradition, as venerable and as sacred as it might be, can thoroughly resolve all of the critical issues that women and men must face in a lifetime. Job is wrong to expect this, and those who would uphold the tradition as absolute are wrong to presume it.

God is guilty of injustice... Although incorrect, this presumption is understandable. Job seems to have mistaken the synergy operative among the various dimensions of reality (the physical and the social) for univocity of operation. (In a synergy, individual agents follow their own respective laws even as they are cooperating. In a univocity, everything follows the same laws.) Job has labored under the assumption that human society, the physical world, and the mystery of God itself are all subject to the moral laws that Job knows (Fretheim, 1991:362). He expects God to enforce the causal relationship between human behavior and life circumstances that retribution, as he understands it, demands. In this he has been wrong. He has been victimized precisely because he was so faithful. Therefore, he is correct to persist in his own defense. But he has an inflated notion of the reach of human comprehension. He may possess some limited understanding of human motivation and the consequences of human behavior, but he cannot fathom God's management of the world. Job has indeed spoken "without understanding," but he has not done so with malice.

542 The narrowness of his former anthropocentrism has given way to a chastened theocentrism.

547 How had the visitors been wrong about God, but Job right? Their rigid interpretation of retribution convinced them that God would never afflict an innocent person as Job claimed had happened to him. Because they had not been present at the exchange between God and the Satan that took place in the heavenly court, they had no tangible way of knowing that their defense of God was false. Job, on the other hand, had no tangible way of proving that he had done nothing to warrant the kind of misfortune that had overwhelmed him.

562 If God holds in balance the mysteries of creation with all their diversity and complexity, surely God would be attentive to the needs of human existence. Reassured by this conviction, Job sat calmly with his unanswered questions. The Divine care for Job is shown in the magnanimous way in which God leads Job to new insight. It would be incorrect to maintain that God withheld knowledge from Job; rather, Job's human limitation prevented him from understanding mystery and, rather than allow this to crush him, God painstakingly brought him to realize this fact. The prologue, the dialogues, and the epilogue all expose the limitations of the theory of retribution, which is really an example of religious yet human wisdom.

573 To admit that something about the religious tradition is inadequate is not to dismiss it as irrelevant but merely to acknowledge its limitations as well as its strengths. Retribution may be the grounding for justice, a requirement for the stability of any social group, but the harmony within the physical universe depends on other laws. If this is true about the natural world, how much more is it true of supernatural reality? If God is omnipotent, as in this narrative, then no law can circumscribe God's activity. If the acts of God are inexplicable, then no theological testimony can capture God's reality. Theological assertions are testimonies to the experience of God, they are not exhaustive definitions of God's essence.

579 Job had an inflated notion of the capacity and quality of human comprehension.

581 Human beings are part of the vast mystery of the universe, and only one who can grasp the totality of this mystery will be able to understand the secrets of life. Job admits his inability to measure up to such a challenge, and he willingly acquiesces to his human condition.

604 ...tradition often supports the status quo; that those who do not know tragedy can be quite self-righteous

607 Job's reputation for wisdom and righteousness. Despite this, his claims did not conform to their framework of thought and so they refused to believe him. This obduracy on their part shows that empirical wisdom, which is actually a dynamic reflection of the genuine experience of life, can turn into rigid dogmatism, closed to whatever does not fit the theory. When this happens, the religious teaching, which both

rests on and legitimates the sapiential tradition, ceases to be real wisdom. It did not appeal to Job's heart; sometimes convention must give way to uncommon experience. God's defense of Job and rebuke of the others shows the preference for genuine experience over unyielding dogma, whether that dogma is found in a cultural or in a religious sapiential tradition. This divine preference probably made the standard-bearers of orthodoxy, whoever they might have been, feel very uneasy. Job is portrayed as a model of personal integrity.

630 The principles of retribution both reinforce and legitimate the stereotyping of class distinction.

631 ...quite prejudicial when it becomes an explanation of life circumstance-prosperity is a sign of goodness and deprivation a sign of sin.

641 ...Job believes that he had and continues to have a right to privilege. He is offended by the disdain of his former servants (19:15-16) and the loss of his prestige (29:7-10, 12, 25). He expects people to reverence his integrity, despite the loss of his prosperity. But without prosperity, his integrity is not recognized.

653... perspective is to relegate the experience of women to a position of insignificance. A second indication of the gender preference is seen in the male characterization of God. Although the linguistic origin and subsequent meaning of the divine name YHWH are disputed, the Hebrew pronouns referring to YHWH are all masculine, signifying the intended gender of this representation of God. Yet any uncompromising insistence on God's masculine identity is challenged by the female imagery found in the first divine speech (38:28f.). When questioning Job about the origins of the cosmic marvels God uses different birth allusions, two of which are clearly female. One of the Hebrew verbs involved. (yalad) is used twice and can be translated either "to beget" or "to give birth." Since the verse (v. 28) contains internal parallel construction, and since the reference in the first line is to father, it seems fitting to translate the verb with the male connotation: "Has the rain a father? or who has begotten the drops of dew?" The second verse, (v. 29) however, contains clearly female allusions. "From whose womb did the ice come forth (ydsd)?" The use of parallel construction recommends that here yalad be translated "give birth": "From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of the heaven?" Even though the verb forms in all cases are masculine, the imagery that alludes to God's activity is both male and female.

689 Unlike the daughters mentioned in the prologue, these women are named, so that they have a specific identity. Their names all signify beauty and delicacy, features highly praised in both the ancient and the contemporary worlds (42:14-15). More significant is the report about their inheritance. This is quite an unusual gesture on Job's part, since normally a woman only inherited in the absence of a male heir (Num 27:1-8). Even then the property would revert to the clan of her origin at her death, thus ensuring the

integrity of its heritage. Neither of these factors is reported for the sake of the daughters. They are both examples of job's good fortune. The beauty of his daughters, a traditional chauvinist concern, redounds to his own reputation. The fact that they have an inheritance, even one that cannot be transferred to their husbands, makes them even more desirable.

693 ...inheritance, even one that cannot be transferred to their husbands, makes them even more desirable. These are women who are not only beautiful but rich. They would certainly be welcome adornment in the households of their father and, later, of their husbands. The portrayal of women in this book is consistent with a patriarchal androcentric worldview. Women are perceived and valued from a male perspective, and they serve to enhance the male ego and reputation. To say that despite this blatant bias job is more sensitive to the women in his life than is customary is to beg the question. He is still a product of a worldview with a male preference. Something other than job's own high ideals will have to intervene in order to redeem this story from its androcentric rule. Into the Looking Glass The advocacy stand that is sensitive to issues of race or ethnic origin, class, and gender not only critiques the Bible, as has been done above, but also sets the parameters for the challenge that the biblical...theophany, a divine self-revelation, through which God is revealed to job as the source of mind-boggling creativity, not as an arbiter preoccupied only with human affairs. God shows that divine artistry and protection have been lavished on all creation, not merely on human beings. Furthermore, the value of this extravagant creation does not rest in its instrumental usefulness for humans. It is intrinsic to creation itself as having come from God. Furthermore, the imagery used to describe God's creative activity is female as well as male. The wonders of creation that are paraded before job were not unknown to him before this revelation. By and large, they constituted the world that he knew, but granted.

710 Job's breathtaking experience of creation has catapulted him out of his narrow confines of anthropocentrism into the vast expanses of mystery. His encounter with the ineffable Creator-God has led him to the new and transformative insight that human history unfolds within the broader context of the natural world and not vice versa;

719 cosmocentric worldview requires not only a new cosmology (Berry, 1988) but also a reexamination of many, if not most, of the tenets of the faith (Berry and Clark, 1991; Nash, 1991). Notions such as frugality and sufficiency, viability and sustainability play an indispensable role in theological discourse. The impertinence of human autonomous rule is replaced by a sense of responsible stewardship,

726 While wisdom is faithful to traditional teaching, it is nonetheless attentive to new and different human experience.

727 Job knew by experience, namely, that these men taught unyielding doctrine rather than dynamic wisdom. God's rebuke of their unsympathetic counsel confirms this.

733 ...one can recognize the importance of human experience in the shaping of theology. Job's experience was judged theologically unsuitable because it was unconventional. This raises the question of power: Who determines what is conventional and what is not; what is theologically suitable and what is not? Whose experience shapes theology? The lines of power and credibility on this controversial question are well defined. Job's antagonists have both religious tradition and social convention on their side. They envision themselves and are perceived as being defenders of the faith and guardians of the sapiential legacy. There is no evidence that these men preach one thing and live another. They appear to be fundamentally good men who, according to Job's accusation, have been spared the ambiguities of life and mistake the tranquillity of their situations for virtue. At first glance, Job is less credible. He is at odds with everything and everyone, bemoaning the fact of having been stripped of family, friends, and reputation for no apparent reason. He rejects his visitors' assessment of his condition and the pious instruction that they offer him, railing

740 Regardless of the vehemence of his outbursts, Job's rebellion is not considered a revolt against God.

741 He renounces traditional teaching because it denies the validity of his own assertion of innocence.

743 ...throughout the book experience takes precedence over custom, the renegade over the establishment. In the end, this inverted point of view enjoys God's endorsement as well. A theological insight that is experiential at base always has to prove its validity, since experience in itself can be quite unreliable. Genuine theology is never divorced from experience, however; it develops as a way of understanding it, of dealing with it, of shaping it. The more original the experience, the more distinctive the theology. The book of Job shows how the singular experience of one individual can challenge a theological tenet of a group. A comparable challenge arises when a communal experience of one segment of society contests the controlling theology of the dominant group. The breakthrough in perception realized by this segment follows the same path trod by Job. In the beginning they accept without question the interpretation of life supplied when people are unwilling or unable to admit the limitations of theology. They might not only misunderstand and alienate honest believers, they might sometimes even abuse them. Furthermore, they can misrepresent God with theology that is inconsequential at best, prejudicial at worst. Inflexible adherence to ideological preference should not be confused with fidelity to the religious tradition and the judicious caution that must be exercised in the matter of theological development. Theology is always somewhat conservative, for it has the responsibility of preserving

the tradition as well as transforming it. Nor can the political dimension of theological development be denied.

767 God's approval is given to the one who claims that theology is limited and not to those who insist that it is adequate as it stands.

771 ...conventional systems of understanding sometimes erroneously treat dissent and nonconformity as moral deviance. Third, God's concluding words to the guardians of the tradition charge them and us always to assess experience regardless of how distinctive or unconventional it may appear to be. Such assessment does not presume that experience is always adequately understood or always must generate theological reinterpretation. Job's ordeal of innocent suffering was authentic, but the theological conclusions that he drew from it were false. Presumptions and stereotypes must be assiduously scrutinized if the search for meaning is to be fruitful for all. Even then we may discover, as did job, that the meaning for which we search is beyond our grasp, and the stand that we will take is in the midst of mystery.

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3. Psalms

The law is the Way of Wisdom Teach me Your Law

816 PSALTER... is really a collection of five books: Psalms 1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 90-106; 107-150. Each "book" ends with a short doxology or hymn of praise:

845 ...poems identified as wisdom or Torah psalms are clearly different in both style and content from the prayers that probably originated in and were used during liturgical celebrations. They employ language and imagery characteristic of the wisdom tradition

847 Their manner of address suggests instruction rather than worship, calling people to listen and to learn, not to pray. Literary characteristics associated with the wisdom tradition can be detected in these psalms: "better ... than" sayings (Pss 37:16; 119:72); numerical sayings (Ps 1:6); advice (Pss 37:2, 9, 17, 22); admonition to listen (Pss 49:1; 78:1); the macarism (Pss 1:1; 112:1; 119:1, 2; 127:5; 128:1, 2); rhetorical questions (49:6); the simile (Pss 1:3, 4; 37:2, 20; 49:12, 14, 20; 127:4; cf. Kuntz, 1974:191-99). Scholars do not agree about which psalms belong to this category, but most interpreters include didactic poems (Psalms 1, 37, 49, 73, 78, 111, 112, 127, 128) and Torah

863 Although the word "law" invokes the idea of Israel's specific and extensive legal tradition, the Hebrew word *Ord* means "instruction," the tradition passed on by teachers. The first five books of the Bible are also called *Ord*, instruction.

866 In the wisdom tradition, "way" is understood in a figurative sense. It refers to the course of life that one chooses as well as the destiny that such a choice effects. A causal relationship, explained as divine retribution, was believed to exist between conduct and its aftermath.

884 The canonical approach to interpretation supports the belief that the law was built right into creation itself. This position is also in accord with the fundamental conviction of the integrity of all creation. Within the psalm, first the order made manifest through the heavens is praised and then the order brought about through adherence to the law. All three themes, that is, order, creation, and law, are prominent in the wisdom tradition.

983 Psalm 119 This acrostic poem is the longest psalm in the Psalter. Each of its twenty-two stanzas is made up of eight lines, all of which begin with the same letter of the alphabet. It is a paean to the *Ord* (instruction), every line but one (v. 20) containing the word or one of seven synonyms for it (cf. Soll, 1991:35-56). Although the message of the psalm seems to enjoy a high degree of affinity with the theology of both

Deuteronomy and Jeremiah, it lacks reference to specific laws. Rather, both its vocabulary and its general character suggest instruction of the sage rather than juridical or cultic regulation. The orderly structure of the psalm reflects trust to God. This has led some to classify the psalm as a lament (Soil, 1991:59-86). In Psalm 119, however, all of the other psalmic features function pedagogically to encourage devotion to the instruction of the LORD (contra Soil, 1991:123-25). The psalm opens with a pair of macarisms (cf. Psalms 1 and 112) that commend those who observe the decrees of the LORD. Although they fit into the acrostic pattern, the first three verses are descriptive, not direct address as is the case with the remainder of the psalm. The beatitude that they identify is held up as motivation for those who will hear or study the instruction on Torah piety that follows. Those who would aspire to happiness will have to follow the way of blamelessness (v. 1), the way of the LORD (v. 3). The parallel between Psalms I and 119 has led some to suggest that, at one point in the development of the Psalter, Psalm 119 concluded the collection (Westermann, 1965:252f.).

995 The psalmist frequently speaks of meditating on the law (vv. 15, 23, 27, 48, 78, 97, 99, 148). The Hebrew word Bah means "to talk" or "to babble," suggesting that this was not merely a silent interior activity. It might refer to the practice of reading or reciting in a kind of whisper or muttering fashion, a very common way of learning in many cultures.

997 Personal reflection notwithstanding, the psalmist repeatedly prays for discernment or for some kind of divine illumination (cf. 1 Kgs 3:9; Job 32:7; Prov 2:6). Torah piety, like wisdom, is both acquired through one's own reflective living and bestowed by God. In fact, the psalmist recognizes three sources of Torah: the tradition that has been passed on through teachers (vv. 99-100); the natural law revealed in the order of the universe (vv. 89-91); and unmediated divine illumination (vv. 26-29; Levenson, 1987:570). In this, the psalmist has much in common with another great wisdom teacher, the author of Job (cf. Job 8:8-10; 12:7-10; 22:21-23).

1053 The theological intentionality of the Psalter remains the same today. Those who place their trust in human institutions, even institutions with divine legitimation, would do well to heed the instruction of the final editors. The same unwitting persons must remind themselves or be reminded that, remarkable as they may be, human institutions are limited. They are as effective as historical circumstances allow, and they are as trustworthy as the people who comprise them. The institutions themselves cannot save, and neither principle nor integrity should be sacrificed to save them.

1056 Despite the promises that accompany the admonition to Torah piety, the collection of psalms taken in its entirety shows that a simplistic understanding of act-consequence does not always explain adequately the realities of life. Many of the laments issue from situations of anxiety or grief that are difficult to explain. They depict

the righteous deprived of the joys of life, suffering at the hands of the wicked. They cry out to God for release or for comfort. Many of them express confidence that God will indeed hear and come to the aid of the sufferer. The hope set forth by these psalms is not a false hope but a trust in God's faithfulness in the face of life's ambiguity. This is the fundamental message of the Psalter: we must place our trust in God alone, not in human institutions or even in human explanations.

1129 The canonical structure of the Psalter is itself a theological instruction. It traces a movement from confidence in Davidic privilege, through an acknowledgment of disloyalty, to the realization of divine constancy and forgiveness, ending in commitment to and praise of God. The message it proclaims is: human beings and human institutions are finite and frequently ineffective; God and God alone is worthy of our trust and our unconditional devotion. The horizon that opens up in front of this pronouncement is unmapped, unprogrammed, unpredictable, and replete with eschatological possibilities.

1140 ...commitment to the concept of "the integrity of creation" leads us to an examination of the metaphorical use of nature imagery. Since this use is a characteristic of poetry generally, its presence in the poetry of the Bible is not exceptional. The fecundity of the natural world lends itself as a vehicle of meaning to the characterization of the righteous person, and the fleeting nature of life and the stark reality of decay and death to a comparable characterization of the sinner (for example, 1:3f.; 37:2, 35;128:3).

1144 In a more substantial discussion of natural creation, the psalms link nature imagery not only with the law (Psalm 19) but also with adherence to the covenant (Psalm 37) and with the mighty acts of God in the history of Israel (Psalm 78). As stated earlier, the canonical order of Psalm 19 suggests that the psalmist intended to depict the law as built right into natural creation itself. Such an assertion not only grants extraordinary legitimation to the law, it also provides some insight into the concept of causal relationship between reward/punishment and occurrences in nature. If the social and religious orders that the law intends to reflect and preserve are indeed a part of the very structure of creation, then the natural world will play a part in realizing the consequences of adherence to or disregard of that law (cf. 37:3, 9, 11, 20, 22, 29, 34). The interface of the orders of nature, society, and law suggests that the structures and functions of one order both support and influence the others. Although the psalms presume that human beings are subject to these orders, they show that God is not so bound to them.

1153 God alone controls the forces of nature and does so even in those lands that ascribe sovereign power to different deities. These three psalms use nature imagery (19, 37, 78) to underscore the excellence of the law, the interrelatedness of the orders of law and nature, and the universal and exclusive sovereignty of YHWH. Nowhere do

they reckon creation's significance from an anthropocentric point of view. It is perceived as God's handiwork, a divine blessing that flows from fidelity to the covenant, and it becomes the avenue through which God's miraculous power is manifested. God may use creation for the instruction and discipline of human beings, but as such it is at the disposal of God and not of the human beings that it serves. This fact is wonderfully demonstrated in the opening words of Psalm 19: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork."

4. Proverbs The teaching of the Wise

1198 BOOK OF PROVERBS IS THE BASIC SOURCE of the study of biblical wisdom. Unlike Job, which has a certain literary cohesion, Proverbs is more a collection of collections.

1203 ...probably originated at various times and out of diverse circumstances, there appears to be a definite structural framework that bespeaks editorial intentionality. Both chapters 1-9 and 31:10-31 declare the importance of fear of the Lord (1:7; 31:30), and each provides a description of what this means (1:2-6; 31:10-28). In both sections, the prominent figures are assertive women, not the docile women normally associated with patriarchal societies. The final poem is an acrostic, an alphabetic form that denotes completeness. Some interpreters believe that the final editor intended that this poem, both in form and content, echo the figure of Woman Wisdom found in chapters 1-9. The reason for the order of the other collections is not clear. The present examination of the book of Proverbs will follow the divisions determined by the superscriptions. The book gets its name from the *maṯal* (proverb or saying). The word means both "to be similar to" and "to rule over." The proverb is a concise statement providing insight drawn from something that has been observed about life.

1212 The import of the proverb lies not merely in its observational and descriptive character but also in its rhetorical function. It serves to persuade, describing how things work ("similar to") in order to give direction for living in accord with the order observed ("rule over").

1219 The proverb itself is found in two basic forms: one-lined traditional sayings and two-lined artistic expressions. In the latter form, the second line somehow restates the thought of the first, either through agreement (synonymous parallelism) or through contrast (antithetic parallelism). It might also develop the thought in some way (synthetic parallelism). Parallelism is more than a repetition of thought. It is a technique wherein the interaction of the two lines creates new meaning.

1224 Unfortunately, since Hebrew poetry follows rules of rhythm rather than those of rhyme, the vitality of the proverb is often lost in translation. The reworking in another language is seldom able to preserve the proverb's original accentual pattern and meaning.

1231 The introductory section ends with a proverb that establishes "the fear of the LORD" as the *rehit* (beginning, foundational or necessary condition) of knowledge. The position of this proverb at the beginning of the book (1:7) and its repetition at the end (31:30) creates a kind of *inclusio* that suggests that all of the learning and instruction contained within the book emanate from this religious attitude.

1238 In two passages in this first section, wisdom is said to originate from somewhere other than with "the fear of the LORD." In one place, it begins with the very experiential process of becoming wise (4:7). In another, the cosmic Woman Wisdom claims to be the first fruit of primordial creation (8:22). The character of wisdom is noticeably different in these two references than it is in the earlier one, where wisdom refers to the sagacity handed down from the wise to the simple. From this we can conclude that wisdom can be perceived in various ways. The first and most accessible wisdom is that insight which is gained through reflection on experience itself (4:7). The second comes through the teaching, in this case the religious teaching, of the wise elders (1:7). The third is at the very heart of reality, intimately associated both with God and with the rest of creation, but beyond the grasp of human beings (8:22; cf. 3:19f.). This kind of wisdom is not gained empirically but is given by God (2:6). The instructions themselves usually speak very generally about choosing the way of wisdom over that of folly. The first instruction (1:8-19) is typical of the teaching of the book.

1252 The counsel found within these instructions suggests that the choice set forth is unambiguous: one selects either the way of wisdom or that of folly (1:15; 2:7-9, 12-15, 20; 3:6, 17, 23, 31; 4:11-19, 26; 5:8, 21; 6:23; 7:25). The most commonly used word for "way" is *derek*, which is derived from the Hebrew for "to tread" or "to trample." It suggests a path worn by constant use (Habel, 1972). This is an apt metaphor, because both wisdom and folly describe patterns of behavior rather than isolated individual acts. Despite the concrete features of the metaphor, the purpose of this "way" is the formation of an interior disposition (2:1f, 10; 3:1, 3, 5; 4:4, 21, 23; 6:21; 7:3).

1258 The oral character of the teaching is unmistakable. The son is exhorted to listen (1:8; 4:1, 10; 5:1, 7; 7:24)

1267 Many of the traits that characterize Woman Wisdom are found throughout the book of Proverbs, describing either the wise teacher or the wisdom teaching itself (Perdue, 1994:77-122). This wise woman offers both counsel and reproof, which unfortunately are often ignored (1:24, 25, 30). She warns that, in the end, the consequences of rejecting her ministrations will be distress and anguish

1275 The second poem (8:1-36) finds Wisdom again at the crossroads, at the gate of the city. From this vantage point she cries out to all who would hear her, assuring them that her words are righteous and her instruction is as valuable as silver or gold or precious jewels (w. 1-21; in 3:14f and 8:10f. they are more valuable).

1279 Wisdom recounts her beginnings. From the pathways of human society, she transports her hearers to the primordial arena of creation (vv. 22-31). The exact relationship between this mysterious figure and the creator is not clear. Wisdom admits that she herself was created (v. 22). She also claims to have had some part in other

acts of creation (v. 30). Is this mysterious figure a personification of some divine attribute, in other words, merely a stylistic feature employed by the author? Such an explanation does not take into account the fact that Wisdom is identified as an entity separate from the creator (v. 22). It is apparent that once Wisdom is created, she has a life of her own. Clearly, too, she is a creature with cosmic dimensions. She existed before the rest of creation, and she appears to have been active beyond the confines of space and time.

1296 The third wisdom poem (9:1-18) consists of invitations to two different banquets and an assortment of miscellaneous proverbs. The first banquet is held in the house of Woman Wisdom (Skehan, 1971:27-46), the second in that of the foolish woman. These two figures vie with each other for the attention of the simple. This passage reveals the same unambiguous distinction between the way of wisdom and the way of folly mentioned above, but here the female characters assume the aggressive role (Camp, 1985:125- 33). The unit appears to end on a negative note.

1304 The most significant discussion of nature occurs in the references to wisdom's role in creation. Although there is no personification in the first reference (3:19f.), wisdom's instrumental role is explicitly acknowledged. In the more lengthy description of the primordial events (8:22-31), personified Wisdom maintains her place of distinction as the first fruit of God's creative venture. First came Wisdom and then followed the material universe. In order to understand exactly her role in creation, one would have to determine the meaning of 'am6n (v.30). Is she a participant in the events as a "craftsman" (NAB and NJB), "master worker" (NRSV)? Or is she merely a spectator, a "darling" (NEB)? The Hebrew is not clear (for a summary of positions see McKane, 1970:356-58).

1308 As noted above, the placement of this description of the creation of the universe provides cosmic legitimation for experiential wisdom. In other words, from the point of view of literary content, the description of cosmic events is bracketed between two references to the marketplace. The meaning intended by this literary arrangement calls for an interesting reversal, however. In reality, the wisdom of the marketplace is authenticated by its presentation here within the context of the unquestionable wisdom displayed in the marvels of the cosmos. The Proverbs of Solomon The second section of the book of Proverbs (10:1-22:16) is an assortment of discrete two-lined sayings. There appears to be neither internal structure nor thematic organization here. This does not mean, however, that the proverbs have been collected haphazardly. Careful scrutiny shows that occasionally proverbs are grouped according to some catchword. This may have been a mnemonic device meant to facilitate rapid...

1318 It seems that an editor brought these collections together in order to bring the total number of proverbs in this section to 375. This number corresponds to the

numerical value of the Hebrew for Solomon, the great wisdom figure to whom the superscription (10:1) attributes authorship. This is a very creative way of according the section the highest sapiential authority (Skehan, 1971:17-20). All of this bespeaks careful literary design. The use of antithetic parallelism produces some unambiguous comparisons.

1340 ...search for wisdom would be perceived as a search for these patterns for the purpose of living in accord with them. When one believes in a God who creates and maintains all of creation, this search can become a search for God's plan or will. Such a faith is implicit in these references to YHWH's involvement in human events.

1392 The meaning of the Hebrew of the first verse of chapter 30 is uncertain. Both the forms and the message of the ensuing teaching are clear, however, though unusual in three ways. First, unlike the other collections of the book that describe order or counsel a pattern of behavior, this section begins with a very pessimistic disclaimer. The sapiential tradition consistently maintains that wisdom is attainable through reflective living, through the process of socialization, and through the religious tradition. Agur disputes these claims. He declares that he has neither empirical wisdom, nor traditional wisdom, nor knowledge of God. The questions that he then poses (v. 4), questions similar to YHWH's initial inquiry in the book of Job (ch. 38), suggest that only one who has traversed the cosmos and has held sway over it can possibly attain wisdom. Where does this leave the human searcher? The teaching that follows may provide an answer. The three proverbial statements of Agur (the expression of cynicism [vv. 2f.], the questions [v. 4], and the saying [vv. 5f.]) originally may have been independent of each other. Juxtaposed as they are here, however, they create a kind of progression of thought. People lack understanding because what they want to know is really beyond their limited human capacity. Real knowledge comes from God. In the end, we must accept the "sayings of 'elaah" and not augment them, for they are the words of God. The second unusual feature of this section is the inclusion of a prayer (vv. 7-9). Wisdom teaching normally appears in descriptive maxims or imperative exhortations. Although hymnic prayers do appear elsewhere (for example, 8:22-31; Job 28), they are usually part of another proverbial form. Prayers of petition are rare (Whybray, 1990:78-81). Following the progression of thought found here, it appears that what began in skepticism (w. 2f.) ends in piety.

1512 Several explanations for the female personification of wisdom have been advanced. Some believe that this is a remnant of ancient Near Eastern worship of a goddess of wisdom (Lang, 1986; for a summary of theories see Camp, 1985:23-36). They contend that its survival within an indisputable patriarchal religion indicates either a deeply rooted popular devotion to a female deity or respect for the characteristics of YHWH that correspond to what was considered female. Others understand the characterization as hypostatization, taking what is normally a personal trait and transforming it into a person with its own existence (Whybray, 1965:92-104). Still

others see it as merely a development from the feminine form of the Hebrew *hokmah* (wisdom).

1586 Wisdom sets the direction. In a certain sense, wisdom is the direction. Wisdom is the way. But the way to what? Wisdom is the way to life. This is very clearly stated by Woman Wisdom herself: "Whoever finds me, finds life" (8:35; cf. 4:13; it is also the "tree of life" [3:18] and the "fountain of life" (16:22]

1604 While the description of human women is very disparaging, the depiction of Woman Wisdom is just the opposite. She is strong and independent, discerning and self-sacrificing. Her integrity is beyond question and her dignity unshakable. The features of her portrait may have been engendered by a patriarchal perspective, but she does not conform to the patriarchal stereotype of woman. Although she figures only in chapters 1-9, she becomes the characterization of wisdom as found throughout the book (Camp, 1987). More to our point, her metaphorical characterization can reflexively delineate the profile of the human woman (Camp, 1985:71-77), who might also be strong and independent, discerning and self-sacrificing, with integrity beyond question and dignity that is unshakable. The women pictured in this book may have been circumscribed by the stereotypes of the culture of the writer, but the metaphor of Woman Wisdom allows contemporary women to move beyond such restriction (McFague, 1982). The final issue to be considered is the cosmological character of wisdom. The substance of much of the gnomic teaching presumes a knowledge of the working of the natural world. In fact, much of the comparison found in the proverbs actually requires such knowledge. Since the intention of this knowledge is practical (success in human endeavor), might we conclude that the similarities described in the comparisons are more than figurative? The ants, the badgers, the locusts, and the lizard all display a certain kind of wisdom (30:24-28), a wisdom that would benefit humans as well. Amidst the incalculable diversity of natural phenomena, might their common origin from God through the agency of wisdom (3:19f.) and their similarity of behavior suggest that on some level there lies a type of commonality or affinity? Some have referred to this affinity as "the order of reality" (Perdue, 1994:46-48).

5. Ecclesiastes

The gift of God

1656 about this book's [Ecclesiastes] authorship, dating and provenance, structure and composition.

1656 ...book recounts the author's struggle with the limitations of the theory of retribution, the inevitability and universality of death, and the sense of futility that this often accords life. Death is not the only reality that challenges the purposefulness of life. Since the direction taken by life is often completely out of human hands and the search for wisdom is endless, the acquisition of goods can be experienced as pointless. Qoheleth looks at human striving in general and asks an encompassing and profound question: "What is the meaning of life?"

1668 Hebrew title of the book and the name of the protagonist is Qoheleth, the one who presides over the qahal or assembly. The Greek rendition of the word is Ekklesiastes, an official of the ekklesia or assembly. The speaker is further identified as the son of David, king of Israel. No doubt the reference is to Solomon

1676 The Hebrew word Qoheleth is itself a feminine participial form of the verb. This has led some interpreters to wonder further about the identity of this teacher. Given this feminine form, the indication that this is clearly not the historical Solomon

1687 "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity!" is well known throughout the world. Qoheleth's teaching begins (1:2) and ends (12:8) on this note. The basic meaning of the Hebrew word hebel (vanity) is "wind" or "breath," and it denotes something that is ephemeral, fleeting, quickly fading. The wind is, by its nature, ephemeral or fleeting, but when the word is used to describe something that should be enduring, constant, or firm, it signifies disparity between what is expected and what really is. The word then takes on the connotation of futility (Hubbard, 1976) or absurdity (Fox, 1989:29-51). It seems that in his probing of "all that is done under heaven" (1:13), what Qoheleth presumed would be enduring, constant, or firm turned out to be ephemeral, fleeting, quickly fading. His expectations proved to be absurd, like "a chasing after wind" (1:14). "What profit can be gained from all the toil done under the sun?" (1:3). This disconcerting question is really a challenge to the experiences of life, indeed, to life itself. The very first reported words of Qoheleth have already declared that "all things are vanity."

1701 It is all vanity (v.23). All one can do is enjoy the simple pleasures that life has to offer as they come along (vv. 24-26). These observations end with the sobering assessment: "This also is vanity and a chasing after wind" (v. 26).

1702 Qoheleth declares that there is a definite order in nature (1:4-7) as well as in the events of human life (3:1-15). This order, which appears to be fixed (1:14; 3:15), is the object of the human search for fulfillment yet beyond human comprehension (3:11).

1718 Qoheleth declares that all of life unfolds "under the sun." The phrase, which is found nowhere else in the Bible, appears thirty-five times in this short book (a variant, "under heaven," is found in 1:13; 2:3; 3:1). This phrase is generally taken to mean "everywhere on earth," emphasizing the universal sweep of what is being discussed. It also has a cosmological dimension, attesting that this universal sweep is not determined by the earth but by the sun.

1740 In six different places throughout the book, Qoheleth exhorts his hearers (or readers) to savor the simple pleasures of eating and drinking and to take whatever enjoyment they can in their toil (2:24-26; 3:12f., 22; 5:17; 8:15; 9:7- 9). This is not encouragement to launch into a hedonistic life but sage teaching that maintains that people should find satisfaction in living life itself and not merely in the profit that one might derive from certain life activities (Collins, 1980:73f.).

1775 The musings, opinions, and advice of Qoheleth issue from a worldview firmly grounded in the theory of divine retribution, that is, God will reward righteousness and punish wickedness. This theory is based on two fundamental assumptions: (1) that the world and its functions are grounded in and directed by moral not merely physical laws; (2) that these laws are contingent on human behavior. Though considered divine retribution, this is essentially an anthropocentric perspective, since the character of human behavior governs the character of God's involvement in human affairs. Although Qoheleth does subscribe to this theory, his experience of life prompts him to question its applicability. He clearly maintains that, just as God fashioned an orderly universe, directing its movements according to established rhythms and patterns (1:5-7), so God designed human life, appointing a time for everything under heaven (3:1-8). His observations of the way life actually unfolds suggest, however, that human beings are bound by an order that they cannot fathom and over which they have no control (3:11). The disparity between the theory of retribution and the realities of life is the source of his frustration and resulting skepticism. It may be true that people generally want to know, to understand, even to control...

1791 Like Qoheleth, they must be brought to acknowledge the limitations of human comprehension and the extent of human dependence on structures and systems beyond their control.

1825 Interestingly, the very skepticism that has caused some to question the religious merit of this book may in fact be the best key for opening it to contemporary interpretations. First and fundamentally, Qoheleth questions the legitimacy and value of an anthropocentric understanding of the theory of retribution.

1828 He never really doubts the existence of order. On the contrary, he perceives order in the patterns and regularity of nature (1:5-7) and maintains that there is also a

proper time for everything pertaining to the events that constitute human life (3:1-8). He does not believe that human beings will ever be able to comprehend, much less exploit, this order. He argues that the meaning and control of all things are found in God and in God alone (v. 11).

1831 Appropriating this pivotal insight would oblige us to reevaluate how we perceive the relationships between the cosmic order, the social order, and the moral order. It should deter us from forcing the meaning of our lives into inadequate systems of interpretation and from employing these systems to pass precipitous judgment on the circumstances of the lives of others. We cannot be certain about the appointed times for ourselves, and we are certainly less equipped to assess someone else's life. Skepticism about the presence of a reliable and discernible order

1847 It is fitting that Qoheleth be associated with the phrase that begins and ends his teaching: "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!" (1:2; 12:8). However, the significance of his message will only be grasped satisfactorily if we understand exactly what it is that he considers vain. He does not maintain that it is vanity to toil, for he exhorts his hearers (readers) to take pleasure in their toil. He does argue that it is vain to toil for the sake of some kind of profit, for there is nothing to be gained beyond the toil itself except the immediate pleasure that it engenders (1:3; 2:11; 3:9; 5:15).

1851 Qoheleth declares that there is nothing better to do than eat, drink, and enjoy what is within one's reach (2:24; 3:13; 5:18; 8:15; 9:9). He is not promoting forbidden pleasure for, in each instance, he declares that this enjoyment comes from God. Such admonition should not be confused with the hedonistic saying that bids us to "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die."

1866 All toil, all progress, all organization have merit to the extent that they promote and enhance living. This is a religious message for Qoheleth, who maintains that the creator has implanted the capacity for happiness in each and every human heart, has made living an exciting venture, and wills that every person be afforded the opportunity to find pleasure in living (Bergant, 1982:291-94). Anything else would be "a chase after the wind"!

6. Song of Songs

Love as Strong as Death

883 ...the world is not worth the day that the Song of Songs was given to Israel; all the Kdtllbfm [writings] are holy but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies. (Mishna Yadaim, 3:5)

1890 ...erotic poetry is to be understood. The Song has been interpreted in basically four ways: allegorically (Robert, 1963); as a cultic reenactment (Pope, 1977); as a dramatic performance (Pouget and Guitton, 1948); and as a collection of love poems (Murphy, 1990). Each of these interpretive approaches reveals different facets of Your highlight at location 1893the marriage metaphor used to characterize first the love relationship between YHWH and Israel (Isa 54:5; Hos 2:14-20) and later Christ and the church (2 Cor 11:2; Rev 19:6b- 8) provided a precedent for an allegorical interpretation of the Song.

1901 much of the sexual imagery has been either so explicit or so suggestive as to offend the sensitivities of many of the faithful. This point and the fact that there is no mention of God in the entire book have brought some to believe that the poems originally were secular love songs.

1911 The Hebrew form of fir hagftrim ("Song of Songs") suggests that the phrase is less the title of the book than it is a superlative construct intended to set this song apart from all other songs.

1912 ...unlikely that the superlative character of the book stems from its erotic content.

1915 ...the love poems now enjoy not only canonical status but also Solomonic legitimation. This means that their message is considered authoritative. The Your highlight at location 1958This is a man who has been smitten by love. His interest in the woman is certainly erotic, but there is no indication that he desires her merely for his own pleasure. The desire described in these poems is mutual, seeking mutual fulfillment. The woman is not being used; she is being loved.

1965 ...the Song is a celebration of heterosexual love, principally from a woman's point of view.

1966 The Song moves from the experience of intense longing to that of blissful enjoyment, and then to longing once more. The woman seeks her absent lover and finds him, only to lose him and seek him again. The lovers are separated from each other, are joined in an ecstatic embrace, and are then apart once again. This alternation between presence and absence, possession and loss, exhilaration and

dejection accurately characterizes the ebb and flow of human love with its various combinations of desire, anticipation, and consummation. Everything about this love is mutual (Fox, 1985:305-10).

1997 They are fiercely committed to each other and to no one else. The two use much of the same colorful and provocative imagery to describe each other and the love they share.

2000 The titles of endearment employed in this book are telling. The Shulammitte uses straightforward language, consistently calling him "my love." Once she uses "friend" in a parallel construction with that term of affection, thus signifying the connotation of intimacy carried by the word friend. He calls her "friend" (1:9, 15; 2:2, 10b, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4), "bride" (4:8, 9, 10, 11, 12; 5:1), "sister" (4:9, 10, 12; 5:1, 2), and "dove" (2:14; 5:2; 6:9). He further refers to her as "perfect one" (5:2; 6:9), "beautiful one" (2:10b,13), and "noble daughter" (7:2 [1 J). Clearly, these are all pet names that express his affection for her.

2008 While the book certainly applauds the glories of lovemaking, more importantly, it celebrates the depth of the commitment shared by the woman and man. Chapter 8:6-7 has been described as the high point of the entire Song. The seals mentioned there may refer to apotropaic charms that were often worn around the neck or arm. The Shulammitte asks that her lover allow her to be for him just such an amulet, a prominent sign of the love that they share. She maintains that their love possesses a force that can easily rival the power of death and Sheol, the place of death. It can even withstand the chaotic primal waters. Neither death nor chaos is a match for the love that joins these two. No power from the netherworld and no treasure from this world can compare with the strength and the value of love.

2015 Nothing in this portrayal suggests impropriety or overindulgence. If anything, it characterizes heterosexual passion as noble and mutually self-transcending.

2048 ...the poems suggest that human love itself possesses a dignity and splendor that are nothing less than royal.

2108 ...the affinity that exists between human beings and the rest of natural creation. In the Song of Songs, the natural world is not merely the stage upon which the drama of heterosexual love is played, the props of which can be set up and dismantled once a scene is completed. Rather, human love is an expression of the natural world. It is born because of it and as a part of it.

2111 ...allurement that is at the heart of the macrocosmic universe (Swimme, 1984:41-52). Lovers look into each other's eyes and there glimpse the passion of creation. As

they applaud each other's body (the tenor of the metaphor) employing figures of speech, the lovers are also enhancing their appreciation of the world (the vehicle of the metaphor) with the eyes of love. That is the way metaphors function (Richards, 1971:96). As they describe their experience of each other's body, they are investing their experience of creation with the love that has left them spellbound. The Song of Songs refutes the gender-identification of certain roles and behaviors. It declares that the assertiveness of love can be found in the heart of a woman as well reaffirms the nobility and mutuality of passion. It also exemplifies the self-forgetfulness that love engenders and the creative potential that it offers. The style of the depiction of this love leads one to conclude that it is as natural and resplendent as the world of creation. In the wisdom tradition, the experience of life is the great teacher. In the Song of Songs, fearless and undivided love is

7. Wisdom of Solomon

2149 WISDOM OF SOLOMON, ALSO KNOWN AS the book of Wisdom, does not appear in the Protestant Bible because it was not included in the Jewish canon upon which the decision of inclusion was based. Considered apocryphal by Protestants, it is regarded as deuterocanonical by Catholics and included in their canon.

2153 The pseudonymity of the author can be demonstrated in several ways. First, in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Bible), the book's linguistic form is natural and free-flowing, suggesting that it originated in Greek rather than Hebrew. Then, the ample vocabulary from Hellenistic anthropology, philosophy, psychology, medicine, and the popular Isis cult reveals an author who enjoyed an exceptional grasp of the learning of this culture, a culture that did not exist at the time of the Israelite king. In addition, several rhetorical devices found within the book resemble those developed by various Greek Cynic or Stoic philosophers (see below). These observations have led many commentators to suggest a Hellenistic origin of the book and to refer to its author as Pseudo-Solomon.

2161 Despite these Greek characteristics, this is nonetheless a Jewish book. The influence of Hebrew parallelism can be detected throughout (for example, 1: 10- 12), as can certain Hebraic figures of speech (for example, "integrity of heart" (1:11). The description of God's care during the exodus is a kind of homiletic midrash, Your highlight at location 2168 In its final form, the book presents a coherent theology. God is encountered in the cosmos through Wisdom; eschatology is built into the cosmic structure and history illustrates that same structure (Collins, 1977:128). From the perspective of Pseudo-Solomon, creation is the matrix within which history and salvation are to be understood. The book appears to belong to a form of Greek philosophical didactic exhortation known as protreptic, a method of argumentation that frequently included preoccupation with control of the universe, a critical attitude toward opposing philosophies of life, and a deliberate display of comprehensive knowledge (Reese, 1970:117-21).

2173 ...arguments put forth by the author seek to encourage the Jews to cherish their religious tradition, illustrate the superiority of Jewish morality over that of the Greeks, justify the actions of God throughout the history of the Israelites, and impress the readers with the author's encyclopedic knowledge, thus legitimating his religious claims. Within the book, the exhortation takes various Hellenistic rhetorical forms: the diatribe, a form of argumentation (1:1-6:11; 11); the sorites, a chain of syllogisms (6:7-21); the aporia, a statement of a philosophical problem to be solved (6:22-11:1); the aretology, a litany of virtues (7:22); the syncrisis, a Hellenistic form of comparison (chaps. 9-11). All of these forms facilitate the author's fundamental purpose, namely, to offer an authoritative polemic against the accomplishments of Hellenism

2178 The very first verse of this first section (1:1-6:21) sets the agenda of the entire-book: "Love righteousness" (1:1).

2180 ...consequences that flow from such a choice (vv. 2f.), chief among them being an intimate relationship with God and the inestimable gift of wisdom.

2180 This teaching clearly demonstrates the theory of retribution

2182 ... death, understood as separation from God (cf. Reese, 1983:31-35; Kolarcik, 1991), is invited onto the scene by sinners, who court it and draw it to themselves. God, on the other hand, made things that they might have being and thrive (vv. 10-14).

2183 The teaching about immortality (athanasfa) found here is remarkable. Although he is influenced by both the Jewish tradition of covenantal retribution and the Greek psychology of the immortal soul, Pseudo-Solomon's view of immortality is unique. Inheriting the Jewish belief in the relationship between righteousness and life and borrowing the Greek notion of immortality, he claims that "Righteousness is immortal" (v. 15). His argument develops in the following way: Israel believes that righteousness characterizes the relationship of human beings with the immortal God; therefore, righteousness too is immortal. Pseudo-Solomon's teaching about immortality can be simply stated: "Love righteousness" (v. 1), for "Righteousness is immortal" (v. 15). This is the first biblical mention of the soul (v. 4), a concept from Hellenistic psychology that has become so much a part of both Western and Eastern thought. The reference introduces a feature of wisdom that is unconventional, namely, Wisdom's ability to enter into the souls of the righteous. (The special properties of wisdom are treated later in the book.) The text states that God does not delight in the destruction of life but made...

2196 ...very similar to the teaching found in Qoheleth. Qoheleth acknowledged, however, that the pleasures come from the hand of God and were given out of divine munificence (cf. Eccl 2:24-25a; 3:12f., 22; 5:17f.; 8:15; 9:7-9). They are not to be seized at any cost, either to oneself or to others, as the hedonists described here suggest. These self-indulgent allies of death even advocate disregard of others in the pursuit of gratification. Their attention turns first to those who are just and also needy, but it is not limited to them. They believe that no one should stand in their way, neither those in economic need, nor those devoid of legal rights, nor those lacking the strength to defend themselves. In fact, weakness of any kind is considered reason enough to be abused by others. This point of view has spawned the appalling adage: "Might makes right."

2201 ...conflict described here is an internal one between those faithful to a religious tradition and those who have disowned it.

2204 ...Pseudo-Solomon maintains that the wicked disdain morality or social responsibility, championing lives of expediency that seek only enjoyment in the present. In his denunciation of them, he appropriates a concept from Hellenistic philosophy and interprets it from the perspective of Jewish tradition. The Epicureans believed that incorruption (aphtharsia) was a divine quality, that rendered the gods invulnerable to disintegration. Jewish tradition holds that humankind was made in the "image of God." Thus, the author argues, though mortal by nature, as images of God human beings were meant to be incorruptible. Having already asserted that death entered the scene through human sinfulness (cf. 1:12), he elaborates on the Genesis account of human sin (Gen 3) and concludes that all of this was caused by the envy of the devil. The anthropology/eschatology of Pseudo-Solomon, demonstrating his reinterpretation of elements from both Hellenistic philosophy and the biblical tradition. Appropriating the Hellenistic concepts of soul, immortality, and incorruption, he has reread the Genesis accounts of creation and sin. It is important to understand the view presented here, in order to grasp the instruction that follows.

2211 Having selected three aspects of the Jewish teaching on retribution, namely, innocent suffering (3:1-12), childlessness (3:13-4:6), and early death (4:7-19), the author contrasts the fates of the upright with that of the sinners and in these contrasts reinterprets Jewish eschatology.

2226 Pseudo-Solomon dismisses this traditional understanding, claiming that genuine fruitfulness is a matter of virtue, not of procreation. If she is blameless, the barren woman will enjoy a kind of spiritual fecundity (cf. Isa 54:1).

2230 ...it is better to be childless and upright than to have many descendants and lack virtue (4:1a). Once again, moral integrity is the governing value, it is goodness and not length of years that determines the quality of a life. In fact, goodness can be achieved in a short period of time. The author maintains that it may be precisely because of their virtue that the good die young (an allusion to Enoch? cf. Gen 5:21-24).

2243 ...the death of the just, even though it be an untimely death, should not in any way be deemed a form of retribution. It may actually be a condemnation of the wicked, who do not understand the ways of God but judge everything according to a bankrupt theory of retribution.

2247 The vindication of God is described in apocalyptic terms (5:16b-23). Apparently, all of creation serves as the battle array of the mighty Creator-God, who wars against and overturns the perverse in the name of justice. This description is more than vivid figurative expression. It is a characterization based on the cosmological conviction that history, human destiny, and eschatology are all bound up in the structure of the universe (Collins, 1977:128,134,142). Whatever happens in one sphere has repercussions in the others.

2261 Just as the world exists through Wisdom, so she is embedded in the world. Her cosmic nature is described most elaborately with twenty-one characteristics akin to those attributed to the Greek goddess Isis (7:22b-23) and with activities associated with the Hellenistic concept of the world soul (v. 24). Pseudo-Solomon would have her resemble, even surpass, any deity, demiurge, or supernatural force found in Stoic philosophy. She is an emanation of divine power, glory, light, and goodness, and she possesses powers that are ascribed to the God of Israel. It is Wisdom that enters holy souls (cf. 1:4), making them friends of God (cf. 7:14) and rightly disposing them for a loving relationship with God (w. 27b-28). God's love referred to here is more than *philia*, the love of friendship; it is the pure love of *agape*. Once again the author shows his ability to integrate concepts from two very different worlds of thought.

2267 ...as a consequence of her own intimacy with God, who loved her with the love of *agape* and allowed her to manage divine works, she has been favored in ways that both enhance her nobility and benefit those who embrace her.

2271 ...appropriates elements from Greek philosophy, specifically Plato's cardinal virtues of temperance, prudence, justice, and fortitude, and assigns them to Wisdom (8:7). The Greeks believed that these virtues could only be achieved through heroic human effort. Pseudo-Solomon maintains that they are actually the fruits of Wisdom's labor, probably the labor associated with childbirth. Wisdom brings forth these virtues in the hearts of those who love righteousness.

2276 ...his concept of immortality is closer to the thought of ancient Israel than to that of the Greek philosophers. Any possible immortality for human beings flows from their relationship with the righteousness of God rather than as a property of the human soul

2278 ...The reference to the soul (8:19f.) is perhaps the most controversial passage in the book (Reese, 1970:80-86). It should not be presumed that Pseudo-Solomon believed in the preexistence of souls, for nowhere does he describe the soul as immortal or at any time enjoying an existence separate from the human body. Rather than detach body and soul and understand them as separate and independent entities, the author conceives of them as a unity (cf. 1:4, where soul and body are found in parallel construction; 9:15, where they appear to be interdependent). He apparently perceives the soul as the origin of personal moral decision. Thus, Pseudo-Solomon's prayer for Wisdom (9:1-18; cf. 1 Kgs 3:6-9) consists of three strophes chiastically arranged (Winston, 1979:200f.). The first two (9:1-6; 7-12) are identically structured appeals that include an address, a petition, a motive for the prayer, and a general observation. The last strophe (vv. 13-18) is a concluding reflection. Creation is the focus of the first petition, which addresses God as the creator who made all things and who placed humankind over the rest of creation. Fully aware of his own natural human limitations as a finite creature, Pseudo-Solomon pleads for Wisdom. Since she was with

God at creation, she would understand the workings of that creation and would be able to assist him in the accomplishment of the responsibilities given to him by God. He fully admits that regardless of how successful one appears to be, everything is meaningless without the wisdom that comes from God. The second petition concerns another God-given commission, the divine appointment of kingship. The author acknowledges that the people under his jurisdiction are the people of God, a people with whom God is in covenant and who, for that reason, are not to be mistreated. He also admits the obligation that he has to build a temple patterned after God's majestic cosmic sanctuary.

2291 The concluding reflection treats the human condition generally. Mortal human beings are incapable of understanding the counsel of God. They can hardly comprehend the things of this world, much less the things of God.

2295 Pseudo-Solomon briefly traces the early history of seven heroes of Israel (chapter 10). He shows how it was Wisdom who came to their aid in their great need and who saved them from their distress.

2305 ...recital of Wisdom's feats is not history; it is theology. It interprets events from Israel's sacred memory from a very particular point of view.

2307 ...midrashic reflection on some of the exodus events shows how Wisdom actually directed the course of history. The section consists of five syntheses, contrasts that compare the plight of the Israelites with that of the Egyptians (cf. Wright, 1967:177; Murphy, 1990:90f; Perdue, 1994:294; for seven contrasts see Reese, 1970:98-102; Winston, 1979:227). The contrasts themselves function in several different ways. Most obviously, they demonstrate how God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. A closer look shows a reflection on God's preference of Israel over Egypt, a lesson not to be lost on the author's own contemporaries (Alexandrian Jews who are being seduced by the Hellenistic culture?).

2354 Nature protected and provided for God's people according to its own law (19:6-13), as if reward of the righteous is built right into the structures of the universe. The distinctiveness of Pseudo-Solomon's creation theology should not be overlooked. Clearly, he follows the creation narrative of the priestly tradition (Gen 1:1-2:4a) in his teaching about creation. In a bold move, however, he has used this same tradition here to describe salvation (Vogels, 1991). The exodus event is not viewed as a military feat but as a refashioning of nature (19:6).

2357 ...sequence of this description follows the pattern of the creation narrative rather than the book of Exodus. The book of Wisdom makes a unique contribution to creation theology. Instead of moving from salvation to creation, it begins with creation and

moves to salvation. In fact, the book itself begins and ends with affirmations of God's creative purpose: "He created all things that they might endure" (1:14); "The whole creation was fashioned anew, so that your children might be preserved unharmed" (19:6).

2368 ...goes to great lengths to show that he himself excels in all of the philosophical and scientific disciplines cherished by the rival culture. Moreover, he possesses such excellence not through any human accomplishment of his own, as his antagonists might suggest, but as a gift bestowed on him in view of his fidelity to the religious traditions of his ancestors. He first argues that the love of righteousness brings wisdom and demonstrates the truth of this tenet in his own life.

2395 The Solomonic authority given to the teaching of this author legitimates cross-cultural recontextualization.

2448 ...culture will have to deal with what it perceives as a danger to its integrity. If it is not to be absorbed by a commanding alien worldview, it will have to reinterpret its identity and way of life in new yet faithful ways. Pseudo-Solomon found himself in just such a situation. He was not a rigid traditionalist but a revisionist who found ways of reinterpreting his religion within the context of the new Hellenistic cultural setting. He called for fidelity, not merely by clinging to former ways but by accommodating to the dominant society while condemning whatever within it was incompatible with the precepts of his faith. Although he directed the specifics of his message toward his own compatriots, the character of the instruction exemplifies the twofold process of theological reinterpretation and development. His own ethnocentric bias was not so rigid as to prevent this from happening. Pseudo-Solomon describes his humble origins and identifies himself with all other human beings (7:1-6). Like everyone else, he is mortal, a child of the earth. He was born into the world like the rest

2455 God's mercy extends to all, because God loves everything that God has created (11:23-12:1).

2463 Pseudo-Solomon is here democratizing the possession of wisdom. It was not his royal status that gained him this matchless treasure, it was his prayer and devotion. By implication, anyone with the same religious devotion can receive from God the same incomparable blessing. In fact, this is the very point of the argument of the entire book: Wisdom, the most cherished treasure of all, is available to anyone who is faithful to the religious traditions of the ancestors, regardless of social or economic status. Finally, despite the apparent class bias, the privilege described in the book is qualified in another way. Those in position of authority

2495 The Wisdom of Solomon demonstrates two of the central features of a living tradition, namely, continuity and discontinuity. Rooted in the past, it struggles in the present to be open to the future. It rearticulates key religious concepts through the employment of current ideas and techniques of expression. It retells its founding story in a style contemporary to the new generation of believers. Most strikingly, it shows how the new culture can actually open the tradition to development in ways its initial worldview could not. The Wisdom of Solomon is a guide for intercultural experience and life within a pluralistic society. It may not provide specific direction for such living, but it is testimony to its possibility. It is a summons to both loyalty and adaptability, two traits so necessary for life in a multicultural situation. It calls for and gives evidence of a loyalty that is adaptable and an adaptability that is loyal.

8. Sirach

To the Godly, God has given Wisdom

2507 Sirach belongs to the Deutero-canonical/Apocryphal listing of biblical books. It is one of the few biblical books actually written by the ascribed author, "Jesus son of Eleazar son of Sirach of Jerusalem" (50:27).

2514 The book itself is known under several titles: Sirach, the Greek version of the author's name; The Wisdom of Ben Sira, from the Hebrew spelling; Ecclesiasticus or "church book" from the Latin Vulgate. The latter title dates back to Saint Cyprian and may derive from the book's extensive use as a resource for early Christian catechesis (Murphy, 1990:67).

2517 Sirach's own canonical status is disputed. Although it was originally written in Hebrew and in Jerusalem, the Pharisees who determined the list of sacred writings omitted it from their collection. They may have done so because Ben Sira challenged some of the theology that these Pharisees espoused, such as retribution in an afterlife. Despite this fact, many subsequent rabbis quoted passages from the book as Scripture. Protestants who adopted the Jewish listing consider it apocryphal, while Roman Catholics regard it as Deutero-canonical.

2532 The grandson's preface provides historical information about his own translation, insight into the character of his grandfather's instructions, and a description of the canonical organization of the biblical material that was current at the time. He states that he translated the work during the "thirty-eighth year of the reign of King Euergetes," or 132 B.C.E. Three times he refers to a tripartite Bible, "the law, the prophets, and later authors/the rest of the books." This suggests two very important points: (1) that as early as the second half of the second century B.C.E., the First Testament had basically the tripartite form it has today; and (2) that this Bible was revered as both formative and normative sacred teaching, despite the limitations of the Septuagint (Greek) version.

2539 he identifies his audience as those who are living abroad, presumably beyond the confines of the land of Israel. His concern for members of the diaspora community and his translation into the Greek language highlight two very important theological issues: (1) the enduring significance of the Jewish tradition; and (2) the inherent merit of another culture as the matrix within which the revelation of the God of Israel can take root and flourish.

2551 Woman Wisdom as coming from God, being with God, and fully comprehended only by God. Then it states that God bestowed Wisdom first on all of God's works, then on all human beings, finally lavishing her on those who love God. In other words, all of creation is somehow permeated with Wisdom. The hymn borrows from earlier Israelite

characterizations of wisdom, combining Proverbs' testimony to Woman Wisdom's cosmic origin (Prov 8:22-31) with Job's account of the inaccessibility of wisdom to humans (Job 28). The image of Wisdom sketched here is clearly of Israelite origin, although it enjoys its own unique contours. A second poem describes Woman Wisdom as actively involved in the lives

2607 The Wisdom that comes from God is, in reality, the law that is the basis of the teaching of Ben Sira. This is a very bold statement. Wisdom states that she came forth from God (cf. 1:1-10). In the beginning, she acted in the way a deity would act, enthroned on a pillar of clouds (24:4), exercising some form of dominion over heaven, earth, the sea, and all nations (vv. 5-7; cf. Camp, 1985; Lang, 1986). Then she sought a dwelling place.

2611 Creator-God who decided where she would abide, and God decided in favor of Israel (vv. 8-12). Establishing the proper place for each marvel of creation was not a divine afterthought, it was actually part of primordial creation itself (cf. Pss 74:13-17; 89:9-14). One can conclude from this that the establishment of cosmic Wisdom in the midst of Israel, decided as it was in the primordial realm, is here seen as part of the very structure of the created cosmos. Wisdom was there from the beginning, ministering to God, waiting to be revealed to the children of Israel. After her dwelling place was chosen, Wisdom pitched her tent (v. 8) in the same city where the tent of God had been set up, and in this divine tent she ministered before God.

2627 Ben Sira speaks. Quoting Deuteronomy (33:4), he identifies Wisdom with "the book of the covenant," the Deuteronomic term for the law (cf. 2 Kgs 22:8). He then turns to images reflective of the myth of the garden in Eden out of which flowed rivers watered the entire world (cf. Gen 2:10-14). With these images he implies that as these rivers were the source of primordial life and fertility, so wisdom is the source of continued life for the faithful. To the paradisiacal Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates, Ben Sira adds the Jordan and the Nile, rivers that represent the nations of Israel and Egypt respectively. Every good thing for which these rivers came to be known is here applied to the law, which he has identified with Wisdom. His mention of the primal man's inability to fully comprehend wisdom does not refer to the sinful attempt to snatch or claim the wisdom that belongs to God (Gen 3:5; Ezek 28:6); rather, it acknowledges human limitation. Only God can fully comprehend wisdom.

2670 ...the wonders of creation are so magnificent that not even heavenly beings can adequately recount them. Only God can reveal them or proclaim them, for only the God who created them can comprehend them (w. 18-21). Nonetheless, certain aspects of creation can be grasped by human beings (w. 22-25), specifically, its beauty, its purposefulness, and the fact that it appears to be perfectly balanced in opposing pairs (cf. 33:15). Ben Sira praises the splendor and order of the heavens and the moisture that falls from it, as well as the roles that these natural phenomena play in the

arrangement of the universe (43:1-22; cf. Gen 1:14-19; Job 38:4-38). The sun burns with such force that it both illumines the sky and, at times, parches the earth. The moon marks the seasons and festivals, waxing and waning in a regular pattern. In addition to these major celestial bodies, the sky is further adorned with myriads of stars and, on occasion, a glorious rainbow. This tribute to the rainbow leads into praise of the various forms of moisture that the heavens bestow upon the earth. These include frost and snow and hailstones, wind and thunder and lightning, clouds and dew. The imagery used in this testimonial is some of the most vibrant in the book. This theophanic hymn depicts elements in nature as instruments of God's blessing and judgment. Nature is not passive when it comes to God's justice. Just as God created and rules over the heavens and the earth, so the realm of...

2688 Ben Sira is the first wisdom writer to celebrate figures in Israel's saving history. Still, it is important to note that this is not like any other historical recounting. Ben Sira begins with the cosmic origin of Wisdom and then turns to the effects of her dwelling in Israel.

2734 This document is a fine example of teaching that has been recontextualized. First, traditions originate out of the experience of a particular believing community during a time in its history considered formative by a later generation. These traditions are then handed down and refashioned at another time for the descendants of these believers. Finally, they are translated for the sake of still another community within a very different culture at a much later time. The prologue states that they are handed down from one context to another because of the enduring importance of the original message. The uniqueness of each new context accounts for any possible variations in the teaching itself.

2752 ...both Ben Sira and his grandson recontextualized and reinterpreted their religious traditions in the face of new social or cultural realities should speak to traditionalists who might resist any change in teaching or practice. Accommodation to change does not necessarily mean that the traditions forfeit their religious relevance; quite the contrary. It is based on the conviction that the significance of the religious traditions far exceeds their specific cultural expression. Religion may transform the culture, but culture also reshapes religion. This is a lesson that strict traditionalists can learn from Ben Sira.

2755 Finally, these we those within the believing community who share the perspective of Ben Sira and his grandson. Although they are open to cross-cultural enrichment, they are nonetheless convinced of the preeminence of their own religious heritage. Their ethnocentricity may not be contentious, but it still exists and it influences the way they judge the religious integrity of others. Those who have strayed are encouraged to return, because their defection has made them foolish and wicked.

There is both concern for the "outsiders" and hope that they might embrace the religion of the author/translator. The possibility that the perspective of the "outsider" might have merit is never considered. Only Israel enjoys the truth; only Israel can boast of wisdom. Unmasking the Powers The ethnocentricity of this teaching may be noncontentious, but it is biased nonetheless. Its chauvinism is first evident in the prologue's concern to "help the outsider."

2825 God pours Wisdom out upon all of God's works, upon all the living, upon all who love God (1:10). At the beginning she held sway over every people and nation (24:6). There is a fundamental universality in this picture. Wisdom encompasses all, and all have equal access to her influence. Even when wisdom is ensconced in Israel, her blessings flow out of it to all corners of the world as did the life-giving rivers in Eden.

2828 openness to the "other" is evident in Ben Sira's concise version of the creation of human beings (17:1-17).

2829 Made in the image of God, all people have the same origin, are granted the same abilities, and struggle with the same human limitations. The poem recalls that God established a covenant with all flesh (cf. Gen 9:9-17)

2849 The importance of the characterization of Woman Wisdom cannot be underestimated. Whether Ben Sira inherited this figure from his Israelite tradition (Prov 8) or from the Greek representation of Isis (Wis 7), he portrays her in language and imagery normally reserved for God.

2868 The first poem (1:1-10) praises Wisdom's primordial origin. There she is described as having been created before the rest of the universe, and her incomprehensibility is compared to the unimaginable scope and wonder of the cosmos. This metaphorical comparison celebrates both Wisdom and the created world, for the splendor of one serves to describe the marvels of the other. The first part of the second poem (24:1-7) recounts anew Wisdom's beginnings and then depicts her as holding sway over the heights, the depths, and all the earth. Once again, the author has employed the wonders of creation in order to sketch the glories of Wisdom.

2874 ...no doubt about Ben Sira's desire to demonstrate the superiority of Israelite religious tradition. His identification of Wisdom with the book of the covenant, the law (24:23), offers evidence of this. What makes this such a special privilege for Israel, however, is the cosmic character of this Wisdom. She is not merely the Sophia of Greek philosophy but the mist that emanated from the mouth of the Most High, the one who dwelt in the highest heavens, whose throne was in a pillar of cloud, who compassed the vault of heaven and traversed the depths of the abyss (24:3-5). This is cosmic Wisdom. Were she not the foundation of all of creation, her lodging in Israel would not be as momentous as it is. The grandeur of Wisdom and the privilege accorded Israel that

flows from this grandeur are rooted in Wisdom's primordial cosmic origin. To the Godly God Has Given Wisdom This phrase contains. If you want Wisdom, act in a godly manner. For Ben Sira and for his grandson, this godly manner was none other than faithful observance of the laws and customs of Israel.

2890 Following the example of both Ben Sira and his grandson, believers of every generation have had to look anew at what they consider faithfulness to be. This entailed a knowledge and appreciation of the religious tradition received and insight into their own contemporary situations. Only then were they in a position to recontextualize in a manner faithful to the past as well as to the present.