

Wisdom Is Better Than Weapons of War

I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me. There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siegeworks against it. Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man. So I said, 'Wisdom is better than strength.' But the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded. The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war. Ecclesiastes 9:13-18

As this reflection from the wisdom literature implies, skill in wisdom is vital to diplomacy, negotiations, and similar other efforts that seek peaceable resolutions to adversarial relations, approaching hostilities, conflict, or war. Here, the value of wisdom as greater than royal authority and its military might is evident. A military agenda is stopped by a skilled negotiator who, although poor in this world's goods, is rich in wisdom and thereby able to prevent his city and its inhabitants from being destroyed. Afterward, however, this negotiator's wisdom which saved the city became despised, scorned, and was no longer heeded. One can't help but wonder if the next generation in that city picked up the implements and machinery of war and, professing themselves wise, destroyed the much good.

The historic wisdom tradition and its political actors played a vital role in the Ancient Near East (ANE) in the nations efforts to seek peaceable resolutions to adversarial relations, approaching hostilities, conflict, or war. Today, this takes us into the fields of diplomacy, negotiations, mediation, and relevant other areas. Unfortunately, the wisdom tradition's connection to diplomacy has pretty much been lost to us today. It is a missing dimension in our contemporary understanding of the resources the tradition provides. Instead, world leaders and their foreign policy advisers often rely on rigid adherence to political ideologies for analyzing international events and responding to them.

Wisdom, however, is a vital agency for peaceableness in local, regional, national, and international contexts, where human diversity is normative, cooperation is essential, and flourishing is desired. One way to get at this is to consider the ancient sages way of reasoning about life. It was the sages who gave us the wisdom tradition and its literature, and their way of reasoning provides us with a fresh take on decision making among people who are different.

That is, the sages offer us more than books of wisdom, such as Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. And they call us to more than simply memorizing some interesting proverbs so we can have them at the ready to apply when situations call for it. As good as that can be, the sages call us to a particular way of reasoning about life. A close reading of the biblical wisdom literature can reveal some key aspects of the sages way of reasoning.

Look at it this way. The biblical books of wisdom, like all books, emerged from a particular way of reasoning about life. For instance, Leo Tolstoy, grounded his novels in a way of reasoning that he called 'nonresistance to violence.' Charles Dickens, whose many writings are hard to classify, seems to have reasoned from a moral outrage at the many and widespread injustices of urban, nineteenth century England. The same holds true for nonfiction books, whose authors have their ways of reasoning about life. In the realm of [international relations](#), for instance, one often encounters ideological analysis and policy prescribing. And that large way of reasoning has its subfields. So, for instance, books by political neoconservatives will give you a different ideological way of reasoning about international relations than books by liberal internationalists.

The sages also had a way of reasoning about life, a non-ideological way, out of which, first, an oral wisdom tradition emerged and then, later, writings such as we have in the wisdom books of the Bible. We of course must be careful here. We cannot know the mind of these ancients with certainty. But from many years of study into this, some aspects of their reasoning now seem clear to me. Here are some salient ideas about this that I have discovered, which has helped me get a feel for the sages way of reasoning about life:

- foundationally about a peace that the Hebrew Bible calls shalom;
- not partisan, nonsectarian, and not nationalistic but intercultural (for all peoples everywhere);
- not about religious instruction but our activities outside of church, synagogue, and mosque;

- ? not ideological or abstract in the manner of Greek forms but personal and relational;
- ? present as a highly respected legal arbiter in places of authority in the old-world Middle East;
- ? central to the teaching of Jesus in Roman-occupied Palestine.

If applied diplomatically in international relations and foreign policy today, I believe these ideas can help us defuse international conflict and adversarial relations and build and sustain cooperation and peace.

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