Wisdom Tradition ? See with New Eyes

This summary review of the wisdom tradition and literature of the old-world Middle East provides a fresh look at a way of reasoning about life and decision-making that has largely been lost to us today. It needs to be recovered and practiced, particularly in a world like ours, in which people of different races, cultures, faiths, and political persuasions, as well as those claiming no faith (the so-called "nones"), try to figure out how to live cooperatively and peaceable together.

Mutual cooperation in pluralist domestic and international life has never been more urgent than it is in our time, and the agency of wisdom can help us to find reasonable and responsible outcomes, if not human flourishing. But, mind you, we may find ourselves being challenged to lose some dearly-held assumptions and cookie-cutter solutions to make this possible.

Because this summary review looks with fresh eyes at the wisdom tradition, the ground it explores may surprise you, so I would love to hear from you (just use the "Comment" link). This article is meant to be used with two others, Wisdom Actors Part 1 and Wisdom Actors Part 2, both of which look deeply into the narratives of several prominent wisdom actors in the Old Testament. This article also pulls duty as background for Seeing International Relations and Foreign Policy through Different Eyes, which mulls over some ideas about wisdom-based decision making in the context of U.S. ? Muslim Middle East relations. (Complete information for sources quoted below can be found in the bibliography.)

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An Alternative Way of Reasoning

The Historic Wisdom Tradition and Its Literature

A Summary Review in Two Parts
by Charles Strohmer

Introductory note

When our thoughts turn to wisdom, many of us have been taught to think: proverbs. As important as proverbs are to the wisdom literature, this summary review delves into much more than that. It gets under the skin, so to speak, of the tradition, so that we may be able to see and then participate in a wisdom-based way of reasoning about life and decision-making. Even after decades of work in this field, what never ceases to inspire me is wisdom's deep commitment to human mutuality, to the basic and shared interests and concerns of all peoples everywhere. What never ceases to challenge me are the ways in which wisdom provides peoples from different backgrounds with an agency for cooperation, peace, and even flourishing in their domestic and international relations with one another. What never ceases to fascinate me is that, while inviting us in to this project, wisdom is not naive about ultimate religious differences or about the rough secular/religious intersection that so deeply troubles our world today. What never ceases to irk me is my lack of wisdom and the struggle to embody wisdom's way of reasoning, for it often entails abandoning as unpromising an ideological or theological way of thinking about life, relations, and decision-making that has been second nature to me for a long time. One that I thought was wise. What never ceases to motivate me is that wisdom is a reasonable and responsible agency for handling all this.

the agency of wisdom is deeply committed to and specially suited for human mutuality Wisdom has a vital interest in all peoples everywhere working together for more cooperatively peaceable arrangements. Understanding the agency of wisdom in the old-world Middle East (Ancient Near East) provides clues for this, even for today's cosmopolitan situations. Although this has become a lost way of engagement today, the sages lived, breathed, and taught it, and its recovery may be prophetic for a time such as ours ? as a

much needed alternative to sectarian political, social, and religious programs and the vested interests behind the shrill rants of the blogosphere and talk radio. Learning wisdom together (with others) is essential for advancing cooperative and peaceable approaches to issues and initiatives where human diversity is normative, cooperation essential, and human flourishing desired.

I want to dedicate this summary review to several groups of people. One includes the many diverse activists, academics, and other specialists who have carved out of their busy schedules time to offer valuable insights about various aspects of my work on wisdom-based domestic and international relations. Another group includes those who have asked for some discussion about the basic thinking behind this alternative approach. Another includes the generous people whose gifts support The Wisdom Project. And the last were first: those brave souls who brought me to their neck of the woods, often in the UK, to experiment with them to develop wisdom-based approaches in their fields. You know who you are. Some of you have run with this, tweaked it, and are still bearing some not inconsequential fruit today. Well done. And to all other readers, I hope this article inspires you. If it leaves you with more questions than answers, that may be a good thing. As Abraham Joshua Heschel said, ?An answer without a question is devoid of life.?

(As supplements, interested readers will find an extensive bibliography, covering, in part, a variety of scholarship about the wisdom tradition, a crib sheet of wisdom words in their original languages, and two articles that explore narratives of prominent wisdom actors of the historic tradition.)

Part One

Moving Beyond a Minimalist View

Wisdom has been poured into us like blood, but we did not guess its essence, until after a long time. Emerson

From the beginning

Like love, faith, truth, and other rooted human concerns, the search for wisdom has been an exceptional feature of human endeavor throughout history. As far back as the Eden narrative, as described in the Hebrew Scriptures, wisdom is a vital interest of human purpose and activity in daily life, although the primary human family didn't fair too well in the test over competing wisdoms. Both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles carry several books called wisdom literature, which focus chiefly on the concerns, issues, and interests of everyday life and work in the world. ?Wisdom,? we are told, ?is supreme, therefore get wisdom.... Wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her ? (Proverbs 4:7; 8:11). This is the literature in which the figure of a wise King Solomon looms large, and where we have the famous dictum: the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Other traditions also place a handsome emphasis on the agency of wisdom. To briefly note a few, in conversations with his disciples Buddha taught about wisdom in his story of the Ten Perfections. Confucius stressed that some are born wise and that others grow wise through learning, and he spoke of wisdom as fostering right among people. The Qur'an, like the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, explains that God grants wisdom, and its Muslim readers are exhorted to pray for wisdom, as are Christians and Jews in their Scriptures.

Also, the more or less ?secular? thinkers of the classical Greek period show us their passion for wisdom through philosophy (philo = love; sophia = wisdom), although marked dissimilarities between the two traditions exist. Whereas the Greek philosophers, for instance, and to be simplistically brief about it, were more preoccupied with the relationships of ideas, the sages of the old-world Middle East focused on relationships between people.Wisdom has deeply essential roots in our race and seems to be the purview of no one time or culture

A good deal of the Christian New Testament recognizes wisdom as a central divine and human concern, and it explains that Jesus himself grew in wisdom (Gospel of Luke: 2:52). Also, the New Testament engages its readers from a wisdom-based way of reasoning much more than is commonly thought. To cite some examples, the four Gospels include narratives which reflect that much of Jesus' teaching was steeped in how the Hebraic wisdom tradition reasons about God, nature, daily human relationships, and our world in the world. Jesus' parables immediately come to mind, but more is going on than that. Jesus was living the tradition. So much so that New Testament scholar Ben Witherington, in Jesus the Sage, calls Matthew and John ?The Gospels of Wisdom,? ?

narratives suggesting that Jesus' ?own story [is] the story of Wisdom in person ..., like and yet even greater than Solomon? (p. 335). The Epistles, too, emphasize the centrality of wisdom, such as in the contrast between divine wisdom and the world's wisdom in 1 Corinthians 1-4. Much of the Epistle of James is steeped in the wisdom tradition, and Jesus in the First Epistle to the Corinthians is portrayed as becoming the wisdom of God for believers in him (1 Cor. 1:24, 30).

So, wisdom has deeply essential roots in our race and seems to be the purview of no one time or culture. But what, then, is wisdom?
Defining wisdom
It is one thing to recognize wisdom as essential to our race, but quite another thing to know what wisdom is, where it is found, how it might be applied. Typical understandings abound. ?Is not wisdom found among the aged?? the suffering Job asks his friend Zophar, in a book of wisdom literature (Job 12:12). Perhaps. But age itself is no guarantor. Many of us with gray hair still can act pretty foolishly! Wisdom, very generally, is also understood as common sense or good judgment about the issues and interests of daily life or, more narrowly, as a special kind of discernment for judging what is a true or right decision to make, or action to take, in a given situation.

Wisdom, then, includes a heightened sense of insight to denote someone who is especially clever at sorting out complicated situations that the rest of us would make a complete hash of. Solomon's cliffhanger encounter with the two prostitutes who claim to be the mother of the same vulnerable baby comes to mind. The two women presented Solomon with quite a conundrum, but after hearing how he unraveled it to make his ruling, people ?held the king in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice? (1 Kings 3:28). 1

Beyond these usual understandings, an impressive scholarly literature has arisen in recent decades to explore the question, what is wisdom? For this task, the historical roots and social expressions of wisdom in ancient cultures have been researched, such as in the literature of Egypt, Assyria, Israel, Babylon, and Persia. Christian scholarship, for one, has produced a wealth of commentary on the Hebrew-Israelite wisdom tradition, including its influence on the New Testament. Despite all the good scholarship, however, you're not going find a universal definition of wisdom to hang round your neck or stick up on the fridge.always there seems to be something more going with wisdom than any one or two meanings can denote

David Ford, for example, shies away from providing definitions in his Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love, which may be the most significant recent major work on a theology of wisdom for contemporary life. As John Peck and I suggested in Uncommon Sense: God's Wisdom for Our Complex and Changing World, Ford, who is Britain's leading wisdom theologian, also notes that a Christian wisdom for life in this world must be continually learned. Thus the task before us is something quite different than relying on a sound bite, or even reading a book on the subject ? or this article! Over the years, I have come to believe that wisdom cannot be neatly pinned down. To be quite honest with you, I don't think we should expect that of wisdom, and I'll suggest a couple of reasons why.

Like love, faith, and other ultimate human concerns, always there seems to be something more going with wisdom than any one or two meanings can denote. This seems clear from the literature, where words for ?wisdom? are in many passages intertwine with the words for ?insight,? ?knowledge,? ?understanding,? and ?skill.? Evidently, it takes a family. As anyone who has played around with the meanings and uses of those words in the Hebrew knows, there is a many-sidedness to wisdom, a multi-dimensionality, the precludes arriving at a neat definition.

The other reason is the ?personalness? of wisdom, which is especially prominent in the Book of Proverbs, where wisdom is presented as a morally upright woman who invites the young disciple into a godly relationship with her, using, no less, ?the language of love and courtship that is found also in the Song of Songs (seeking and finding amid danger, waiting for the beloved).? 2 I would go so far as to call it the relational moral intimacy that is normatively possible with wisdom. (Interestingly, in Proverbs wisdom is contrasted to another woman, who tempts men to sin.) The personal agency of wisdom also comes through verses 22-31 of Proverbs 8, which reveals both the playful childlike revelry and sophisticated adult artistry of wisdom in the founding of the world. It's paradoxical, I know, and you will have to do more than give these verses a once-over to get your mind round what's really going on. (The bibliography may be useful.)

I may be wrong, but wisdom seems to have a lithe and active nature which she is not going to let be patly defined by anyone. In other words, for all of her form that is revealed in the literature, the irony is that access is veiled to anyone seeking an ultimate ?Aha!? moment with her. By personifying wisdom as someone I like to call ?God's favorite woman,? Proverbs, for instance, employs a literary device that is about as far as one dare go toward a comprehensive meaning. 3 Well, any man who has ever, ahem, tried to define a woman too closely has certainly met with surprise.

The island approach

If wisdom has been in the world and with our race since the beginning yet remains beyond human grasp, what then? Are we lost? If we cannot rely on a formula, we will have to find what we are looking for another way. That is, as the literature makes clear, wisdom must be sought. Still, where is it to be found, and just what is it we are hoping to find?

I can't search or make your discoveries for you, but I can suggest a way of seeking I find valuable. I call it ?the island approach.? It's a method I find helpful for understanding large, complex phenomena that make simplistic explanations look foolish. Perhaps you will find it helpful for seeking wisdom, as I have.

If we think of a large island as having many and varied areas ? e.g., a beach in the south, a city in the north, a desert in the east, and a jungle in the west ? we could embark on a long-term commitment to approach the island from each of those directions and then explore the varied features of each area, as well as others we might find on the journey, such in the border areas or far inland. As we went, we would be continually experiencing the island, gaining insight, knowledge, and understanding.

And let us add this. If we had been sent there on assignment, let us say by an institution seeking to further its educational initiatives, we would be continually adding up what we saw and learned as we went, in order to provide the institution back home with a comprehensive answer about the island. You may imagine with me the opportunities missed afterward if the report had been filed by a person who said that the island was ?only a beach? or ?only a city.? But that, in large part, has been our contemporary view of wisdom as ?only proverbs.?

What follows, then, in this article, are some of the main compass headings that should help in getting more acquainted with wisdom. Try exploring these headings further and add up what you find along the way toward a fuller understanding. I've already noted some: wisdom's universality, its connections with insight, knowledge, understanding, skill, etc., and the personalness of wisdom.

Wisdom as intercultural and transnational

Let's begin by exploring what I call the cross-cultural borrowing or sharing of wisdom that took place in the old-world Middle East (sometimes called the Ancient Near East), which will help in understanding more about wisdom's universality. The Hebrew wisdom literature, for example, which carries over into the Christian Bible, occasionally borrowed from outside of Israel, though disagreement exists as its extent. 4 Raymond Van Leeuwen, a professor of religion and theology, writes that in early chapters of Proverbs a series of speeches by parents to a young son is ?especially akin to the Egyptian ?instructions' in which a royal father left a testament of wisdom to his heir.? 5 McKane, who made an extensive study of Egyptian, Babylonian, and Assyrian wisdom ?instruction? for his book Proverbs: A New Approach, writes that there was ?an international genre with definable characteristics which can be described in syntactical terms,? and that sentences and sections of the book of Proverbs show ?formal characteristics [of] this international genre? (p. 6).Although disagreements remain as to the extent that different peoples borrowed wisdom from each other, such sharing might be expected

More specifically, and significantly, an entire passage from the Egyptian wisdom book of Amenemope, written long before the Book of Proverbs, appears almost verbatim in Proverbs 22:17?23-11. Also, a Babylonian text called The Counsels of Wisdom includes a section of about 150 lines that is typical of advice given in the Hebrew and Egyptian wisdom literatures: avoid bad companions, be gracious in speech, do good to the needy, live in harmony with your neighbors, respect the king, and so on. Although disagreements remain as to the extent that different peoples borrowed wisdom from each other, such sharing might be expected if only due to the close intercultural living that was normative during many periods.

The last twelve chapters of Book of Genesis, for instance, have an Egyptian setting and most of the Book of Daniel takes place in

Babylon. The Book of Ruth is closely connected with Moab and its traditions, and the Book of Esther, like Daniel, is set in exile, in Persia. The Book of Job describes its protagonist as the richest man ?in the East,? apparently in the Arabian desert somewhere. And the Books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs are associated with Solomon, whose empire during his forty-year reign included many neighboring nations. Non-Israelite political and commercial representatives from foreign lands frequently visited at Solomon's court, including the famous Queen of Sheba, who by all accounts traveled long and arduously to Jerusalem just to see if the rumors about Solomon's wisdom were true. 6

Biblical scholars, then, are not surprised that the Israelites picked up what wisdom they could from other cultures. ?Israel,? writes Witherington, ?was willing to draw on the wisdom of other Ancient Near East cultures to help them understand and cope with life's vicissitudes.? This is understandable, he concludes, because ?Wisdom literature in general is less ethnic or culture specific than much of the rest of the Old Testament material. It has much more of an international flavor and application? (Jesus the Sage, pp. 11, 14, 16). Noted Old Testament scholar Gerhard Von Rad writes in Wisdom In Israel that when ancient Israel ?participated in the business of cultivating her experiential knowledge..., she stumbled upon perceptions largely similar to those of other ancient peoples? (p. 5). (?Experiential knowledge? is a phrase von Rad uses synonymously at times for ?wisdom.?)

Paulist priest Lawrence Boadt writes: ?The close links of biblical wisdom to that of other nations stems from the need for a common ground of discourse and cultural understanding between people.? 7 It is also not surprising to Roland Murphy, professor of Old Testament, who reminds us that ?Israel knew that she was a latecomer to the wisdom movement and that its origins were to be found among the eastern Arabs and the Egyptians.? 8 And part one of William McKane's intricate book Proverbs (see bibliogaphy) deals extensively with what he calls ?international wisdom.?

Forbearance toward religion and secularization

In our complex, changing, and globalizing world, it has become a brute necessity to work and play alongside people who are not like us ? religiously, ethnically, socially, politically, economically. So unless we are trying to blow things up, we must find ways to work cooperatively together amidst our human diversity. What deeply appeals to me about the wisdom tradition is that it seems to have no historical equal to providing our race with a morally responsible way of reasoning for working cooperatively together toward human flourishing amidst our diversity. Put from the negative side, wisdom gives us a way of practicing our life and work in this world that is not qualified by and organized around sectarian reasoning, interests, or practice. The wisdom way is not about dividing and conquering. It is much more unitary. It opens our race up to fresh possibilities of cooperation and peaceableness, and perhaps in some situations, even human flourishing.What deeply appeals to me about the wisdom tradition is that it seems to have no historical equal to providing our race with a morally responsible way of reasoning for working cooperatively together toward human flourishing amidst our diversity

From the wisdom literature of the old-world Middle East, we know that wisdom was a trusted and relied upon way of reasoning that people from different cultures could employ when conducting their daily activities with each other. Those who practiced wisdom may not always have been able to embrace the other but, for wisdom, exclusion of the other was out (unless the other constantly wanted to remain out).

The agency of wisdom still offers our race a normative approach to life that makes it possible for individuals and communities who are different to build more cooperative, peaceable, and productive arrangements. Today, however, one of the most bewildering aspects of our culturally pluralist situations is the competing religious beliefs. When these turn militant and are not peaceably sorted without use of force, if they are not complicating a situation they may be contributing to violence. But it was no different in the old-world Middle East, whose cultures were no less religious than are many today. What our religiously activist world, however, has forgotten about the wisdom tradition, and what needs shouting, to come straight to the point, is: the wisdom tradition's forbearance toward religion.

Further, today we are faced not only with issues and interests from competing, sectarian, or militant religious practice but with dilemmas posed by the secular/sacred split view of life, due to the ongoing secularization of life for hundred of years in the West and elsewhere. What also needs shouting today, it seems to me, in this: wisdom concentrates on the basic interests and concerns that are shared by the human family as a whole before any distinction is made between who is religious and who is not.

Because these two normative features of the wisdom tradition may at first blush seem unimaginable or controversial, bear with me in some discussion on this.

Religious roots

For one thing, for peoples of the old-world Middle East, quite unlike in the West today, there was no sacred/secular dilemma. That would have seemed unimaginable to them. As might be expected, the wisdom traditions of those cultures included some basic notion of God or the gods. Ancient Egyptians, for instance, believed that God ?implanted order (ma'at) in the world.? Ma'at can be variously understood as the truth and order found in nature and the justice found in the human world, such as in ?civic and social order, laws, right relationship within families and professions, and in relation to the king? (Clifford, p. 5). It's not surprising, then, to find ma'at occasionally referenced in Egyptian wisdom instruction about everyday life, and sometimes it was treated as a divine, but impersonal, ordering principle (Witherington, p. 12.).

A religious root was equally true of the Hebraic wisdom tradition, but quite unlike any impersonal divine ordering principle, the Hebrew God Yahweh was an ordering Person. There is, then, this marked distinction: whereas Egyptian wisdom instruction sought to help Egyptians fulfill ma'at in everyday life, the Hebrew wisdom tradition had Yahweh as its starting point. After all, this is the literature that gives us the intensely religious statement: ?The fear of the Lord [Yahweh] is the beginning of wisdom? (Prov. 9:10). It also includes instances where Israel's covenant word for God, Yahweh, appears. In many English translations of the Christian Old Testament, Yahweh (yhwh, in the Hebrew) is set in small caps as ?the Lord? to mark its use for ?God? off from elohim and el, which were two other common words for ?God? or ?god? (in Hebrew) but which usually refer to a general or vague understanding of who God is. Elohim and el are typically translated as ?God? or ?god.?

As an aside, broadly speaking there are two kinds of God-language in the Hebrew Scriptures. One sort (yhwh) typically was used by the believing community, the others (elohim and el) were common property, so to speak. It is similar, today. Christians, for instance, speak of ?our Father,? or ?the Lord,? or ?Jesus,? and so on, while people who do not claim any particular religious allegiance may speak of ?the Almighty,? or ?the Creator,? or ?the Man Upstairs,? or, perhaps rather nervously, ?God.? The former words ?carry a special notion of God's salvation, loving care, and personal commitment, and they imply a profession of one's loyalty to God. They refer more to God's character as God comes to be known in personal spiritual experience. The other terms ... concentrate of the ideas of power, authority, and creatorhood in God ? attributes held in common by all people? who talk about God, whether they believe in God or not. 9

But back to our topic. It is therefore a mistake, as Witherington points out, to impose on ancient wisdom literatures ?modern notions which sharply distinguish the sacred from the secular? (p. 12.). It is easy to understand, then, why wisdom even today is considered a divine gift and why religions admonish their followers to pray for it. Nevertheless, wisdom traditions were not about religious instruction per se, at least not in any systematic way or in the sense that we today understand religion as distinct from secular. Instruction in religious life was not their purpose. Other literatures fulfilled that function, such as the comprehensive instruction for priests, ceremonial law, and congregational worship that fills the Book of Leviticus. Thus, even in the Hebrew wisdom literature, where we might expect to find it, there is ?little interest in the history of Israel and its specific tradition of revelation: the torah as a body of laws, the covenant, the possession of the land, and the temple or cult? (Boadt, p. 1381).

It is not that religious influences, or overt religious words, or explicit religious ideas do not appear in the literature. They do. Yahweh (?the Lord?) does appear in the Hebrew wisdom literature in overtly religious statements, especially in Proverbs, but when the word appears it is used by far in the context of practical instruction for ?secular? life and work.

The secular and the religious: two troublesome ideas

Because wisdom literature focuses on matters of everyday life ? on the shared concerns and interests people have outside their temple, synagogue, church, and mosque, I should say a few words about my use of the words ?secular? and ?religion? (or ?religious?). I use them frequently in my work, and the way I use the word ?secular,? in particular, has raised eyebrows among some of my Christian colleagues. I hope my explanation, here, will spare unnecessary objections. I tend to use the word ?secular? merely as a shorthand to denote everyday life and work in the world, and I use the words ?religion? and ?religious? for what goes on in temples, synagogues, churches, and mosques. That is, I use the words descriptively as they are commonly understood today and not to endorse a secular/sacred split to life.I tend to use the word ?secular? merely as a shorthand to denote everyday life and work in the world

In common usage today, religion typically means the commitment people have to God symbolically through ritual. It is used to indicate what goes on in their churches, mosques, or synagogues. It is about their sacred books, explicit witness, or devotional activities such as prayer and worship. In common usage, secular denotes the everyday activities people (believers, too) participate in that they do not consider religious, such as in the arts, science, law, business, work, finance, politics, legal processes, and social relationships. It is a way to differentiate these areas from ?religious? life. That is how I am using the two words, merely descriptively in their normally understood sense today.

I don't press the word ?religion? into service, however, as if it were the guarantor of a healthy soul, as some do, but neither do I deploy it as if it were a dirty word, as others do (even some Christians). On the other hand, some colleagues have cautioned that by employing ?secular? at all I am playing into the hands of the ubiquitous and powerfully influential worldview of secularism. You don't want to be contributing to the secularization of life, they would say. So they suggest using another word, or dropping the word altogether, or using it only critically. Well, I'm sympathetic, but I have yet to find an equally connotative but less ?offensive? synonym, and until such time I'm unwilling to drop the word or to use it as if it were only indicating some sort of bad disease.

Anyway, enough about that. End of apology. And end of the quote marks I've been putting around the word, because now, like it or not, at least you know what I mean by it! 10

Common ground and human mutuality

Since time immemorial every person on the planet has participated in the same world, shared the common bond of being human, shared the same basic concerns and interests, and desired and worked toward their fulfilment. Even beyond our most essential needs ? water, food, shelter ? and regardless of whether we are religious or secular in orientation, all peoples everywhere, in any time, have desired that their children are raised safely and educated, that their societies are ordered and lawful, that poverty and hunger should be overcome, that the suffering of others should be eased, that justice prevail, and so on. Shared basic concerns and interests are the stuff of human mutuality, what we all hold in common. They inspire all of us to agree that there is common good to work toward achieving.Shared basic concerns and interests are the stuff of human mutuality, what we all hold in common

Call it common ground, or common good, or human mutuality: the shared concerns of everyday life and the decisions people will make in them as they live and work together is a central interest of the wisdom tradition. Work and wealth, family and neighbors, relationships and communication, politics and government, diplomacy and negotiations, rulers and the administration of justice, business and finance, prosperity and suffering, sickness and health, happiness and grief, social life and the law, the rich and the poor, the single person and the married, parents and children, earning a living ? such are subjects the Hebrew wisdom literature finds as its objects. The Book of Proverbs, in particular, focuses extensively on our common humanity. Today, such interests are typically bracketed as secular life, and according to the Hebrew literature the choices people make about them make them wise or foolish.

More will be said about this under the subhead ?Education.? Here I just want to stress the little word all. Near the end of that lovely passage in Proverbs 8, which discloses the agency of wisdom in the founding of the world (see the subhead ?The world?), wisdom reveals that she was ?rejoicing? in the world and ?delighting in mankind.? The Hebrew for ?mankind? in this context means the entire human race. All of us. In the New Testament, Jesus put it this way: ?Wisdom is made right [vindicated] by all her children.? It's a poignant remark that plays off of a riddle Jesus has just made about himself, and his point seems to be that all sorts of ?sinners? may respond wisely to wisdom, act wisely (Luke 7:35; Matthew 11:19). And in the Epistle of James (1:5), which relies on wisdom themes, ?any? who lack wisdom should pray for it, because ?God ... gives generously to all.?

Conceptual or situational?

Although it is a given in religious traditions that wisdom is a divine gift that can be prayed for, wisdom is also a human task. As the literature explains (e.g., Proverbs 2:3-4), wisdom is to be searched out by us. It can be found in nature, which will be discussed in part two (see the subhead ?The world?). Here, I want us to think more fully about searching out wisdom in the give-and-take of human beings who are interacting, experiencing life together. For a key subtext running throughout the literature is the primacy that wisdom gives to human relationships and behavior, whether its subject is the individual, a group, an institution, or a collective as big as a nation. This is a huge topic, but like all the other compass points in this review I'm just trying to supply a heading that can be

explored later.

For this effort I want to indicate an area often left unexplored: seeking and finding wisdom in and through relationships with those who are not like us. This means of searching out wisdom may seem foreign to us today, if it does not make us bristle. However disrespected as a way of learning wisdom it may be today, it seems to have been respected by the peoples of the old-world Middle East as indispensable for knowing how to plan and act more wisely together toward common goods.the agency of wisdom stresses the importance of situations over abstract ideas

In its approach to human relations, the agency of wisdom stresses the importance of situations over abstract ideas. This is the way I came to understand how wisdom makes a vital contribution to mutual cooperation. In other words, wisdom gives our race a way of reasoning to help the people who are, say, in a troubled situation to find among themselves wisdom for an equitable resolution, rather than have an answer to the situation imposed on them from an abstract set of ideas.

This is quite a different way of reaching collective agreements among people who are different than we in the West are typically used to. Today we tend to rely, often intuitively, on powerfully influential ideological schools of thought for analyzing collective situations and deciding ways ahead. In international relations, for example, a political ideology can be deployed by a national leader to impose a ?solution? from the outside, as it were, and the parties whose situation it is, although they would have some say, can take it or leave it, like it or lump it. This can be just as true for smaller situations, such as family counseling, as it is for bilateral or multilateral international relations.

Conceptual thinking, of course, is certainly so necessary to human integrity and activity that we would never want to be without it. The agency of wisdom, however, is concerned not so much with concepts as with situations. It emphasizes what we might call situational thinking. Perhaps this is because the sages of the old-world Middle East who gave us the tradition tended to be more practical than speculative thinkers, compared to their later Greek counterparts. I don't know. Whatever the reasons, the wisdom way does not seek to resolve a collective human problem by imposing an answer from an abstract source. Rather, it intends that wisdom would be found within the relationships as the parties themselves engage together in dealing non-martially with a troubled situation, such as through direct talks or negotiations. In this way, wisdom for a more cooperative way ahead comes to light in moments of understanding between the parties.

Perhaps another brief illustration from international relations might be helpful. In constructing a nation's international relations will look like, it is not uncommon for a Western political leader to submit to some variation of one of two primary political philosophies, realism or idealism. Either one offers sophisticated forms of well-thought-out abstract categories to rely on for analysis and decision-making when thinking about other nations, and either one can be determinative of what foreign policies the nation will enact in its relations with other nations. This approach to international relations may work well enough when it is Western nations around the table.wisdom asks the parties to rely less on their ideologies for an answer and more on human mutuality

But what about when it is Washington and Tehran. The former may say to the latter, ?We can improve our bilateral relations if you will sign off on at least seven of these ideological ten points.? The latter, however, pushes back by advancing its own ten point checklist of interests. Such a relationship tends to slide further toward the precipice, in part, because the political ideology of Nation A doesn't square with Nation B. Each one wants the other to conform to its abstract template. In this way the leadership of each nation can justify limiting its cooperative international relations to those states that agree to participate in a given number of terms and conditions set by a prevailing ideology.

With its alternative way of reasoning for trouble situations, the agency of wisdom asks the parties to rely less on their ideologies for an answer and more on human mutuality, that wisdom might be found for an equitable solution among the parties themselves. I believe the implications are huge for resolving international tensions and conflicts.

The public square

The agency of wisdom in human mutuality sheds light on why the wisdom traditions of the old-world Middle East met, so to speak, at ?the gates of the city,? which were places of authority where all sorts of people came to discuss or debate issues and situations between them and hammer out agreements amidst their competing interests. The gates were somewhat equivalent to today's public

square. In times of peace, at or near city gates merchants conducted commerce, business agreements were negotiated, elders heard and settled disputes, judges administered justice, and kings sometimes met with their subjects there. Of course, it would take people with wisdom to oversee such areas, and we can see the premium that was placed on that in the proverb: ?Wisdom is too high for a fool; in the assembly at the gate he has nothing to say? (24:7)

It must be remembered that much of the activity at the gates took place among people from diverse cultures. Even at the gates of Jerusalem, pluralist public engagement in daily life was normal and wisdom was present (Prov. 8:1-3). At the gates, a wisdom-based way of reasoning provided a morally responsible means for peoples who were religiously different to reach and sustain more cooperative agreements across all sorts of otherwise unnegotiable boundaries. This salient feature of wisdom, it seems to me, resonates with making external internal human equity.

This is not the place to discuss how this might be a boon to today's world in working toward common goods, but I would like us to visit how wisdom helped one mixed multitude in the old-world Middle East work toward establishing common good.

Impartiality

Wisdom's focus on advancing cooperative arrangements among people who are different, entails, as would be expected, impartiality concerning the settling of disputes and issues of justice. We see this focus very early on in the formation of Israelite society and jurisprudence, as described in Exodus 18:13-26 and clarified in Deuteronomy 1:9-18. It's a funny story in some respects, at least in the more descriptive Exodus account.

So here's good old Moses and, you know, he's completely burnt out. He's just finished waging a terribly exhausting war against Pharaoh and organizing getting a million ornery slaves and their families out of Egypt and across the Red Sea into the desert, where everyone's now stuck in the hot sun amidst a host of problems. They're grumbling and complaining about each other, and there's no social structures or courts in place yet for resolving domestic strife. So Moses has decided he will adjudicate all the disputes himself.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of disgruntled Israelites, disaffected Egyptians, and other peoples who had hit the road with Moses are now queuing at his tent day after day waiting their turns, expecting Moses to settle their feuds. But the guy hasn't had a day off God since spoke to him at the burning bush, and this heavy case load is killing him. And the people have had it with queuing in the desert sun all day, while nearby is the person they are taking to court. Days pass. Still no justice. Tempers worsen. More quarrels and fights keep breaking out. What little social order there was has broken down. Anarchy is on the horizon.

Justice between the different peoples was to be impartial. Moses required it

Then the father-in-law shows up! But Jethro is a wise man. He susses the situation and can't believe what he's seeing. ?Moses. What in the world do you think you're doing? You can't handle this heavy case load yourself. Look what's happening. You've lost control. People are taking the law into their own hands. You need some qualified help. Here's what you need to do. Save the hardest cases for yourself, but delegate all the other ones to trustworthy people who fear God.?

Moses got the point. He formed a huge organizational structure and appointed many dozens of officials to run it, to serve in various capacities to hear and settle most of the disputes. In the Deuteronomy rendering, as part of a long speech years later, Moses reminds the multitude just how well-constituted and organized this early governing structure was, with its ?wise, understanding, and respected men from each of your tribes,? who were appointed ?to have authority over you ? as commanders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens and as tribal officials? (Deut. 1:13, 15).

In the Deuteronomy speech, Moses clarifies part of Jethro's original advice. Whereas Jethro had suggested that the officials' chief qualification should be that they ?fear God,? Moses, evidently, understood this to mean that the they should be persons of wisdom. As he explains, he appointed ?wise? men to judge their disputes. The word for ?wise,? here, in the Deuteronomy text, is the prominent Hebrew word for wisdom, hkm (variously rendered as h?k?m, hokmâ, hak?m?m, and suchlike; see wisdom words). But it is just here that we can miss some gems, one of which is hidden behind the unfortunate English translation of the Hebrew word

s?r?m as ?commanders,? or, as in some translations, ?captains.?

To our contemporary ears, both words convey military associations. A s?r, however, was often a public official, such as a prince or other royal functionary, appointed by a king to govern some area of the realm (s?r?m is the plural, to represent the class). Some s?r?m held military rank, but many were civil officials working in various levels of authority, tasked with keeping the cities, towns, and countryside running smoothly. The word is used frequently in this non-martial way in the Hebrew Scriptures, such as when it indicates the kind of Egyptian ?princes? (officials) that Abraham had to negotiate with when he was trembling with fear over his wife's future (Gen. 12:15). Since it is not military adventures but the forming of social and political governance that is the context of Exodus 18:13-26, it seems reasonable to conclude that governing officials meant by the word s?r?m held non-military appointments.

The other gem is this. Although Israelites were the largest people group in this desert society, it was nevertheless a culturally diverse lot, so it would make sense that the wise governors appointed by Moses would be need to exercise fairness in justice. And so it was. Justice between the different peoples was to be impartial. Moses required it as a qualification for those who would govern the diverse multitude. They were commissioned as judges to hear disputes and to decide the cases fairly and impartially, whether between two Israelites or between an Israelite and a non-Israelite (Deut. 1:16-17). ?To show partiality in judging is not good,? we read elsewhere in the wisdom literature (Prov. 24:23; 28:21; see also Prov. 1:3; 2:9). Human nature being what it is, of course, this does not mean that everyone was always treated equitably. It is only to point out the standard, which, incidentally, Jesus took to great heights in his wisdom-based Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10). But that is a story for another time.

The implications of the Exodus situation are remarkable. For one thing, inspiration for the nascent organizing of Israelite social governance came from a Midianite priest (Jethro), and it was taken heartily onboard by a people who, although desperate for a way of arranging cooperative relations with ?foreigners,? were in a covenant relationship with Yahweh. So they had to watch what they were doing. But Yahweh makes not a peep of protest about it.

Further, Moses includes impartiality in justice as a requirement in his job description for ?wise? officials ? a stipulation consistent with the imperative in Israel's law regarding fair and even-handed treatment of foreigners (Exod. 22:21; 23:9; Leviticus 19:33-34). Also, there is no indication that this form of social and political governance begun by Moses (and Jethro) was eliminated in principle during the time of the Book of Judges and, following that period, the time of the kings.

From his extensive research into Egyptian wisdom instruction, McKane discovered that impartiality in justice, which, he notes, cannot be separated from an official's attitude to power and ethics, was a basic requirement of the political wisdom held by Egyptian officials, who were not to wield power nakedly or arbitrarily. An Egyptian statesman, McKane writes, ?cannot exercise power in the context of the Egyptian state unless he respects at all times the demands of equity, and endeavors scrupulously to act fairly without respect of persons... [Thus] a passion for justice was an important ingredient of power and ... whoever did not have this capacity for probity and fair dealing in public affairs was disqualified from holding office by a self-regulating process of selection? (Proverbs, p. 63).

As an aside, it was during the centuries of the kings, when ancient Israel was formally a nation among nations, that the kings needed high-level officials who could conduct diplomacy and negotiate foreign policy with surrounding nations (kingdoms). Several classes of these high-level government officials are identified in the Hebrew wisdom literature. Prominent among them were the hak?m?m, who were indispensable to Israel's international relations and foreign policy (hak?m?m describes the class; h?k?m, the individual within the class; Joseph, for example, is called h?k?m in Genesis 41:33). The hak?m?m, as their name implies, were highly skilled in the wisdom tradition during the time of the kings, as were their counterparts in foreign nations, who had been trained in their culture's wisdom traditions to serve in high-level political offices they held. (The s?r?m seem to have continued to function chiefly in domestic civil capacities, although some hak?m?m also functioned chiefly domestically.)

Briefly noted, the hak?m?m (chiefly men but occasionally some women) served in positions that today we would call cabinet ministers, policymakers, statesmen, foreign ministers, ambassadors, secretaries of state, diplomats, and political advisors in other capacities, including as writers. Occasionally, generals and even some ecclesiastical figures were included. This brings us to what I

call the ?lost? dimension of the historic tradition, the way of wisdom in international relations and foreign policy of the old-world Middle East. It was through their wisdom traditions that these nations conducted their cooperative foreign affairs, which required classes of officials skilled in wisdom. (Elsewhere on this site ? Wisdom Actors, part 1 and Wisdom Actors, part 2 ? I have included much more about this "lost dimension" of the tradition, which has inspired the book I am writing on wisdom-based approaches to U.S. ? Middle East relations.)

A realist or idealist tradition?

A cautionary tale. Over the years much of my writing and teaching has focused on working with individuals and groups to understand how the ideas, principles, and norms of the wisdom tradition can assist in developing areas today where human diversity is normative, such as in education, social life, relationships, the business community, environmental responsibility, the arts, communication, and interfaith activity. As time has passed, it has been remarkable to see various ways in which wisdom-based approaches have helped practitioners in such fields to overcome limitations, expand creative horizons, and further the dreams they hold for what their work in the world with others can accomplish.

Heart on sleeve, however, I get too jazzed when thinking about what it is creatively possible to produce through the agency of wisdom. For in this world, as I must continually remind myself, only so much is possible in creating more cooperative relations among people who are different. This seems to be an especially poignant fact of life in my work on wisdom-based international relations, with its special interest in the United States and the Muslim Middle East. My problem is that I tend to get so excited about the potential of the wisdom way, as over against, let us say, the politics of division, that I can sound idealistic, as if wisdom were an agency in this world to end every conflict and prevent all wars.the wisdom tradition is realistic about human nature. The literature is quite blunt about this

However, the wisdom tradition is realistic about human nature. The literature is quite blunt about this, being replete with frank commentary, for instance, that contrasts the quarrelsome and the peace-loving, the deceitful and the faithful, the wicked and the righteous, the wise and the foolish, and so on. Evidently, wisdom understands the limits of its agency to change our race in any fundamental sense or produce any sort of ideal society. That is, human mutuality also includes the fact that in our nature we all hold in common degrees of selfish ambition, prejudice, envy, and many other base features. As everyone knows, these can influence behavior, and when they hold sway over leaders at odds in a troubled situation, they can make it difficult if not impossible to see any rhyme or reason for transforming the situation toward furthering common good, which may otherwise be doable.

The tradition, then, is realistic about the horizons that can be hopefully achieved. It does not preach utopian possibilities. Having said that, however, I quickly want to add that the wisdom way can seem idealistic because it is not, in my view, cynical about human nature. That is, although wisdom agrees that people can be motivated by base or selfish concerns and interests, it does not see that as the end of the story, as political realism instructs its followers to do. Rather, the agency of wisdom empowers us to hold motivations of our ?lower nature? in check by helping us to actualize the better angels of our nature (to pinch a phrase from Abraham Lincoln) to work toward common goods.

When issues holding up more cooperative relations are not rooted in base or selfish interests, other obstacles may be identified, such as sectarian ideological thinking, which, briefly noted in the foregoing, limits the cooperation that is possible to what can be organized around a non-negotiable checklist of interests. Alternatively, the agency of wisdom would say, ?Hang on a minute. Let's focus on the better angels of human mutuality. Let me help you perform a rescue operation.? Even in this, however, wisdom brings not the promise of an ideal pluralist situation but more modest goals in which, for instance, there will be not perfect justice but enough justice (to satisfy the parties hammering out agreements).

Great patience, humility, and prudence will be required when seeking to be empowered by wisdom to explore and develop ways of seeing and doing that are more pluralistically cooperative. Efforts will be challenging and often experimental, and they may take a long time and carefully orchestrated effort even to realize modest progress, especially amidst storms. And the journey will entail cultivating an attitude that does not fall prey to cynicism while devoting its energies to empowering the better angels of our nature in a way that is not utopian.

The agency of wisdom is an empoweringly alternative way of reasoning that can help us gain fuller rein over our more base and

selfish desires as well as reach and sustain common ground agreements in ways that reliance on abstractions cannot. It is, I believe, a kind of saving grace that can help all peoples prevent all sorts of social, economic, and political disasters.

Summary & Conclusion of Part One

The search for wisdom has been an exceptional feature of human endeavor throughout history, and it knows no cultural and national boundaries. Its literature speaks chiefly to the interests and concerns of everyday life and work in the world as these are shared by everyone, in any time and any place. Being at home with the impartiality required for settling disputes and reaching justice between peoples of different cultures, the wisdom way seems suited to help us build morally responsible cooperative arrangements together in ways that reliance on abstractions cannot.wisdom has been an exceptional feature of human endeavor throughout history

This way of reasoning carries this potential also due to: 1) a forbearance toward each culture's religion that does not demand religious conversion before a cooperative way ahead can be found, and 2) a focus on basic interests and concerns that are shared before any distinction is made between who is religious and who is secular. It stresses situations over concepts, and while being realistic seeks to empower the better angels of our nature toward reaching goals of common good.

This article has not tried to define ?wisdom.? Instead, it has tried to approximate the empowering way of reasoning about life and work in the world that wisdom offers our race, and it has shown that wisdom must be sought and learned continually, not just found once for all in an ?Aha!? moment. I am still very much a learner at this, and much of what I have learned has been from conversations and relationships with others. I'm a big fan of the exceptional twentieth century rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and one of my favorite insights from him is that ?An answer without an question is devoid of life.? It's likely that this summary review has led us into a large field where more questions have arisen to be explored than answers to be pocketed. I have a few new ones, myself, now. We're all in this together, learning from each other. So I want to keep practicing what this article preaches by inviting others' insights (use the blog).

I'll leave you with this question of my own. Trespassing one of the principles I have argued for in this article, the philosopher in me has over the years tried to pin down just why it is that wisdom can empower us toward the collective peaceable potential that it does. Simply put: what's behind its way of reasoning in and for this world and our work in it? I've never gotten far, here.

I can see, however, why it may seem unusual or unfamiliar. For instance, when commenting on Jeremiah 18:18, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann points out in The Creative Word that wisdom is one of three ways of reasoning for ancient Israel. Wisdom, he writes, was a third way of knowledge, distinct from the teaching of the law and the word from the prophets. It made available ?resources and perspectives on faith and knowledge that [were] not characteristic of the Torah and the prophets? (pp. 67-68). Fair enough. Many of us are familiar with how the law and the prophets thought. Further, as discussed in the foregoing, wisdom is also an alternative to sectarian ideological thinking, as well as to the dogmatism of some forms of theology and apologetics. Still, although these reason help explain why wisdom's way of reasoning may seem unusual or unfamiliar, they do not answer what's behind it? Why does it have the potential that it does?

So in closing part one I've taken a deep breath and decided to take a shot at an answer. It seems evident, at least from its biblical literature, that wisdom is guided by both an ontic temper and an epistemic way of reasoning in and about this world that offers a sort of divine common grace in which people, and peoples, who are different can be morally responsibly free in their interactions and dealings with each other to construct cooperatively peaceable arrangements and practices amidst their religious and secular diversity (provided their interests are not based on violence).

Part Two

Where Is Wisdom to be Found?

by Charles Strohmer

Wisdom is sweet to your soul; if you find it, there is a future hope for you. Proverbs 24:14

We noted in part one that wisdom is both a divine gift and a human task. In this world, however, where work is, well, work, it is easy to shoulder off on to others responsibilities for tasks we have been given. So in this short part two, I thought it might be good

simply to note from the literature some aspects of life in the old-world Middle East where the agency of wisdom was recognized as prominent. Perhaps by seeing where others have applied wisdom we may be inspired to shoulder more of our own responsibilities to seek wisdom in the world and for our own fields.

Truth be told, the task is terribly paradoxical, for, as the literature explains, wisdom is not a ?thing? that can be found even by excavating deeply hidden places (Job 28:12-14). Neither can wisdom be bought, even with the finest gold (Job 28:15-19). Nor is it an abstract quality or idea, or an ideology (see part one, Proverbs 8). Wisdom, then, seems unobtainable, at least through the means whereby we ordinarily obtain things. And yet the literature claims that wisdom can be sought, known, and practiced.

The world

Let's begin with ?the seen world? as its own category. Throughout history, philosophers and theologians alike have attempted to explain, each according to their own lights, the agency through which the material world exists. This is not the place to review that complicated field or the contradictory answers that have been posited. What I want to highlight is an answer usually overlooked by religious communities, including Christian ones.

To a question such as ?How did the world get here??, Christians would reply ?God created it.? If you pressed them for more information and asked how God did it, they would most likely say ?God spoke it into existence by his word,? or ?God made it through Jesus Christ.? Or Christian philosophers, employing specialized language from their field, might say ?Christ is the Logos of creation.?

And so on. In the Hebrew Bible and Christian Old Testament, however, wisdom itself is seen as an essential agency to the founding the world (Jeremiah 10:12; 51:15; see also Psalm 104:24; Prov. 3:19).

This cardinal point is expanded in numerous places, especially in the wisdom Book of Job (28:12-29), in the entire chapter of Proverbs 8 (see part one), and in the book of Isaiah the prophet (28:23-29). These long passages carry far too many salient ideas to unpack in this review, but three are key: a) that wisdom was present as an agent in what God created, b) that God sustains the created order by wisdom, and c) that human collaboration with wisdom helps sustain the world.the agency of wisdom in the founding of the world has been a neglected conversation among religious communities

Although the agency of wisdom in the founding of the world has been a neglected conversation among religious communities, it is one of the most thoroughly debated topics of wisdom scholarship, and a subject that can get quite complicated. For all of that, I see a really simple thought, profound in its implications, flourishing in the idea of wisdom's role in nature: God was thinking and acting like any good artist.

To create a masterpiece an artist must first imagine, have a vision of, what it is that he or she wants to produce. I realize that all analogies break down at some point, but it seems to me that the world ? a masterpiece of creative genius ? must first have originated in the divine imagination. (Anyone looked recently at that iconic photograph of the earth from space, often called The Blue Marble?) Like Michelangelo before he put that first brush stroke on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, or Bach before he played a note of his first Brandenburg Concerto, God, to put it crudely, first worked out in his mind what he wanted to produce and how it would be produced and sustained. This a priori visioning of end results by an artist seems inescapably part of the activity of wisdom when it is described in the literature as being with God before the world was (Prov. 8:22-30).

Wisdom, then, has not been left to gather dust on blueprints in heaven, any more than Michelangelo's art or Bach's music was left in their heads. Their art is in the world. As their gift to us, we can see it and hear it. And those who are skilled enough can paint it or play it. Similarly, wisdom is imminent in nature ? which ?speaks? to all peoples everywhere (Psalm 19) about itself ? as part of the gift from the Artist who gave us the world. As John Peck and I wrote in Uncommon Sense, ?When you look out on the world and touch it and use it, you are touching God's own heart and mind. All the way through it you are touching a product of God's character? (p. 48).

Science

Wisdom, we may say, is essential to the stability and order of the natural world, which doesn't exist like a cat and dog fighting or a jar of nitroglycerin. Rather, there is a consistency to it, so that the same rules and laws govern this earth as govern the farther

reaches of the galaxy. It might surprise some people who work in the natural sciences today to learn that wisdom is essential to the way the physical world, with all its multifarious facets and complex intricacies, works. Nevertheless, one source of wisdom comes from studying the physical world and its phenomena, a field of seeking to understand the created order of things that used to be known as natural philosophy. Of course, when the topic of wisdom in the created world appears in the literature, the science described is rudimentary, as in 1 Kings 4:29-34. But to say it is rudimentary it not to say that it was wrong or even that is has become out-dated. After all, even Einstein had to begin with basic math and Bach with five-finger piano drills.

The passage in First Kings celebrates Solomon's international reputation for wisdom. Solomon is said to have had more wisdom and insight than the sages of the East and of Egypt. His prodigious output of proverbs and songs are noted, as is his practical wisdom and his keen judicial wisdom for deciding courses of action. The language, however, also emphasizes Solomon's wide breadth of understanding in natural philosophy. He ?described? the plant life of the region, from the largest trees (cedars of Lebanon) to the smallest shrubs (hyssop), and he ?taught about? beasts, birds, reptiles, and fish, the four principle classes whereby the Israelites understood the animal kingdom. It may be difficult to appreciate the international, Nobel-like acclaim that Solomon received until we recognize that he lived in a time when the sages of Egypt and of the East were renowned for their wisdom in the areas in which Solomon, evidently, stood head and shoulders above, and even above the sages of his homeland (Eccl. 1:16). His fame for wisdom was indeed celebrated, as the Hebrew language of 1 Kings 4:31 indicates.Wisdom is imminent in the world and may be sought and found there

As an aside, I have often wondered what might be found if we approached Francis Bacon (1561-1626) from this direction. His method of induction, for which he was celebrated, might make a fascinating research project for some enterprising souls in the context of wisdom in the natural sciences. We have a few clues. We know that Bacon, who entered Trinity College at age 12(!), strongly objected to the highly abstract forms of knowledge (Aristotelianism and Scholasticism) that influenced the Medieval period, and that his method of induction was meant to help Europeans produce an alternative to that. He sought a more personal and comprehensive relation to nature via a systematic hands-on approach in which knowledge would be derived and built up from the multitude of people's practical studied experiences of the natural world. And from these experiences general laws of nature would be developed and employed. ?Nature can only be commanded by being obeyed,? was Bacon's lovely way of putting it.

Evidently this was not, in his mind, meant to be an exercise in selfish ambition or mercenary exploitation. Significantly, when one was discovered, a law of nature was to be employed in a holy manner as we develop our science. This was Bacon's own language, by which he meant that the natural world must be approached with humility; that is, we begin by not knowing and proceed by studying from the creation what God has actually wrought in it. Further, our science should produce works motivated by charity. Knowledge gained, he said, ought to be used to serve others, to alleviate human suffering, increase human well-being. Such an attitude aptly describes, albeit in rudimentary fashion, the way of investigation and cultivation of the earth that the Book of Genesis (2:15) insists on as the organizing principle of and for human work in the world ? good stewardship (management).

I don't mean to romanticize Francis Bacon. The man wasn't a saint. But this is the man who, in his essay ?Of wisdom for a man's self,? wrote that wisdom used for selfish interests ?is a depraved thing.? And in The New Atlantis, his work of fiction, he named his ideal college ?Solomon's House,? which was ?the noblest foundation (as we think) that ever was upon the face of the earth..., dedicated to the study of the works and creatures of God.?

So, Wisdom is imminent in the world and may be sought and found there, reminding us by its discoveries of the responsibilities we have been given to search for wisdom in the world and apply it, as Christians would say, to the glory of God.

Education

Moving from the world of nature to the human world, the wisdom literature of the old-world Middle East reveals wisdom as significant to education. There seem to have been at least three ways in which this took place, through temple schools, the royal courts, and via fathers to sons.

Research into the temple schools of the old-world Middle East has shed some light about the wisdom-based education of the time.

The temple schools, as the name indicates, were attached to temples, and therefore had a particular religious identity. From his research, however, McKane has concluded that we should not think that temple schools dealt only in instruction related to the religious cultus of the nation. In the Egyptian temple schools, for instance, there seems to have been a amalgam of learning. Comparing them to schools founded by cathedrals in the Middle Ages, which were grammar schools and not seminaries, McKane writes that there ?is no reason to suspect that the temple schools of the ancient Near East were less devoted to the basic elements of academic discipline...? (Prophets and Wise Men, p. 37).

Evidently, both religious and secular education took place. But it seems not to have been a universal education. Recruits came from the top layers of society, such as children from the royal courts, from courtiers' families, from the homes of royal officials or temple personnel, from the wealthier families, and suchlike. The elite only need apply.

Of Egyptian, Babylonian, and Sumerian temple schools, McKane has concluded that, although they educated priests for the temple and scholars for sacred learning, ?they provided recruits for the learned professions in general and notably for the higher offices of state? (p. 39). Egyptian and Sumerian schools trained ?scribes? in such wisdom as the schools offered for entry into administrative, economic, and other positions vital to running a country.

In Babylon, two types of schools seem to have existed, one was called ?the table house,? where reading and writing were taught. The other was ?the house of wisdom,? a school of higher education, where, presumably, sons of the elite were ?seated on benches of stone without backs, studied mathematics and astronomy, medicine, magic arts, and theology and all the varied branches of ?the learning and tongues of the Chaldeans' (Dan. 1:4)? (Ibid). In Prophets and Wise Men, McKane spends some time showing how this ?throws some light on the problem of the relationship between s?per and h?k?m in the setting of the Old Testament? (Ibid, p. 40). (See also: Wisdom Words.)the wisdom tradition itself had deep roots in the royal courts and for purposes of domestic and international governance

The royal courts, of course, had their pick of young men from elite families who showed aptitude and potential to serve as public officials, and it seems to have been normative for the chosen ones, those who would enter service in a royal court, to learn wisdom through tutoring or apprenticeships.

In a long section on Egyptian wisdom ?Instruction? that details the normative apprenticeship of that state's public officials, McKane writes in his very detailed book Proverbs that this Instruction is ?an educational manual for one who is to hold high public office...? ?I would suggest that the least tendentious way of describing this corpus of teaching is to say that it establishes the conditions of effective and successful statesmanship in Egypt. If an official is to succeed in affairs and become a weighty statesman, these are the conditions to which he must attend and give respect? (pp. 52, 56).

Other scholars concur. In Wisdom in Israel, in a section that compares similarities of what he calls the ?didactic traditions? of various old-world cultures of the Ancient Near East, von Rad writes that many of the proverbs and sections in the Book of Proverbs concern kings and qualities requisite in officials serving in the royal court. In fact, these particular proverbs ?actually presuppose conditions at court.? Further, they indicate ?the royal court as a place where wisdom was traditionally nurtured. This would correspond exactly to what we know of the courts of Egypt and Mesopotamia? (Wisdom in Israel, p. 15).

This is just the tip of a vast mountain of scholarship dedicated to this important cross-cultural area of ?wisdom literature? ? a designation used to represent certain literary genres of old-world Middle East cultures. Within these genres there arose ? as planned editorial processes carried out by professional scribes under the auspices of royal courts ? texts that comprise some of the most ancient literature. Such texts quite likely indicate that the wisdom tradition itself had deep roots in the royal courts and for purposes of domestic and international governance It is this ?lost? dimension of the tradition that The Wisdom Project focuses on.

Evidently, education in wisdom moved from elite settings into the broader culture, although I do not want to assume a top-down movement, as if instruction in wisdom was at some point in time strictly the purview of the elite. Apart from temple schools and royal courts, we know that wisdom was originally orally transmitted down the generations usually from father to son (occasionally from mothers), as instruction about life in the world, such as we see in later written form in the Book of Proverbs.

In this broader context, and to be brief, education in wisdom was designed to encourage the kind of responsible living that would put the young in harmonious agreement with the divine order that was assumed by old-world cultures to exist in the world. It usually contained proverbs and exhortations and emphasized concrete, practical instruction rather than hold up abstract ideals to follow. The instruction was meant to free one's life of unnecessary difficulty and costly errors of judgment. As such, it emphasized right decision-making in everyday life based on insights that sages had gained from their investigations into the orderly processes of nature and through years of studied observation and experience of human behavior and interaction.sages were vital to a culture's developing wisdom tradition and its role in education

In fact, sages were vital to a culture's developing wisdom tradition and its role in education. By ?using their powers of observation and the ability to think rationally,? writes Hebrew scholar Leo Perdue, ?the sages sought to understand God, social institutions, and the moral life through their reflections on creation and human experience, including their own.? 11 Perdue also makes this helpful distinction. ?Unlike prophets who received the knowledge of God in revelatory states (e.g., standing in the council of Yahweh) or priests whose religious experiences included theophanies..., sages came to their understanding of God and the moral life through ways of knowing that included memory, sense perception, reason, experience, and reflection.? 12

Witherington, writing about wisdom and experiences that are common to humanity, puts it this way. ?The sages dealt with and drew deductions from the repeatable patterns and moral order of ordinary life, both human life and the life of the broader natural world. For the most part they were trying to explain how God's people should live when God is not presently intervening and when there is no late and particular oracle from God to draw on? (pp. 9-10).

Much that is found in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes arose from studied observation over time, as sages derived learned lessons from both the created order of the world and human behavior in the world, to gain understanding of what has been called the ?act-consequence connection.? 13 Simply put, people reap, what they sow. A few examples? For lack of guidance, a nation falls; do not love sleep or you will grow poor; do not speak to a fool, for he will scorn the wisdom your words (Proverbs 11:14; 20:13; 23:9).

Gerhard von Rad calls this kind of learned wisdom ?experiential knowledge,? noting that every old-world nation with a culture ?devoted itself to care and literary cultivation of this experiential knowledge? (Wisdom in Israel, p. 4). ?No one,? he reminds us, ?would be able to live even for a single day without incurring appreciable harm if he could not be guided by wide practical experience,? which teaches us to understand events in our surroundings, to foresee the reactions of others, to apply our own unique resources at the right point, ?to distinguish the normal from the unique and much more besides? (Ibid, p. 3). This is the stuff of wisdom education, and, over time, sages' insights were collected and organized into forms of written instruction and used to educate the young about wise, practical decision-making in virtually every area of life in the old-world, which of course have their counterparts today.

As David Ford points out, wisdom was taken for granted as ?the crown of education,? as what was ?most desired in a parent, a leader, a counselor, a teacher? (Christian Wisdom, p. 1). Much of the instruction is artfully crafted in pithy sayings, as in the form of proverbs, maxims, or adages intentionally brief in length, compact in meaning, easily intelligible to their audience, and often carrying a graphic kick ? ?Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise (Prov. 6:6). Practicing moral conduct, cultivating virtue and prudent behavior, learning principles for living well, understanding the consequences of one's choices, and recognizing contrasts, such as between the wise and the foolish, the just and the unjust, the good and the bad, are frequent topics of instruction.

I noted a few examples in part one. Here are several more for your felicitation, all from the Book of Proverbs: Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth (10:4). The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out (10:9). There is deceit in the hearts of those who plot evil, but joy for those who promote peace (12:20). A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones (14:30). Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city (16:32). He who answers before listening ? that is his folly and his shame (18:13). The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him (18:17). ?It's no good, it's no good!? says the buyer; then off he goes and

boasts about his purchase (20:14). Like a bad tooth or a lame foot is reliance on the unfaithful in times of trouble (25:19). As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed (26:14).

The arts

The silhouette of wisdom is seen also in the work of men and women whom the Bible calls ?skilled? in artistic practice, where ?skilled? is often the prominent Hebrew word for wisdom, hkm (see part one). And a high degree of skill (wisdom) is meant. Such men and women are typically identified as artisans, builders, craftspeople, gold or silver smiths, jewelers, seamstresses, and suchlike, and they were often hired by kings and princes as designers and architects for palaces, large residences, and religious edifices such as temples.

As a brief example of just how significantly influential these artists could be, Exodus chapters 35 and 36 acknowledges that aesthetic skill (wisdom, hkm) was basic to the founding of Israel as a formal nation among nations. As with the founding of any nation, it was a huge undertaking and required top-notch artistic skills of all sorts. Several times in the narrative, aestheticians in various fields ?who are skilled? are duly appointed to construct the religious edifices and create the symbols necessary to the forging of Israel's emerging national identity.a people start behaving as a nation when this aesthetic process formally gets under way

As an aside, there is a very real sense in which a people start behaving as a nation when this aesthetic process formally gets under way. The principle holds true even for nations that do not constitutionally claim any particular religion religious belief for their founding identity. The United States is a case in point. Its bald eagle, the Declaration of Independence, the language of its constitution, the Liberty Bell, the design of its flag, its national anthem (The Star Spangled Banner), and the Great Seal of the United States (E Pluribus Unum; ?one from many?) do not promote allegiance to any religion but nevertheless all symbolically betray ultimate values that helped to forge and establish ?American? national identity.

America, then, has a fundamentally different relationship to politics and religion than does, for instance, a state like Iran, which, as a result of its 1979 Islamic revolution became constitutionally an Islamic Republic, as its national symbols since then clearly reveal. It would make an interesting thesis for some enterprising soul to step back in time and research the symbolic construction of the more secular American national identity, or that of other modern Western states, from the point of view of the wisdom of the designers who were commissioned for these various projects. And then perhaps compare or contrast that process and its implication with some constitutionally religious modern states. 14

Proverbs and other wisdom literature

This summary review of the wisdom literature has not discussed the Book of Proverbs on its own, as it often is, extracted from the fuller literature as if it were an independent category of ideas. Instead, the article has been considering the book in its relationship to the fuller tradition, yet only as that has been necessary for the purposes of this particular review. Nevertheless, I mention the book, here, as its own compass heading because the few features of proverbs noted in this review barely begin to unpack what can be gained by exploring that book of wisdom literature. There is wisdom to be found for the aesthetics of communication, courtroom testimony, business psychology, social justice, diplomacy, a work ethic, and much, much more. Understanding the literary styles and forms of proverbs, their imagery or poetic character, their sentence structures, their imperative or indicative mood, and much more ? friends, this isn't meant to be left only to the scholars to gain from. Thankfully, they have done a ton of homework for us and we can enjoy the fruit of their labors by visiting their books.

Proverbs are both timeless and timely. As Raymond van Leeuwen writes, they ?are addressed to particular people in particular situations, and yet, they embody common human truths, recurring patterns in ordinary life.? 15 Proverbs deals extensively with wisdom in the world of nature and in the world of human life, work, and interaction. (I recommend perusing the bibliography to anyone interested exploring proverbs (m???lim) in depth within the fuller tradition.)Proverbs deals extensively with wisdom in the world of nature and in the world of human life, work, and interaction

Other books of the Bible also occupy prominent roles as wisdom literature. The books of Job and Ecclesiastes have only been briefly noted, and those who explore these fascinating books will find significant twists and turns along the paths of wisdom. The

narrative in Job, for instance, grapples profoundly with the kind of intensely deep personal suffering that by its very nature evokes the most difficult questions about the main character's relationship with God, especially when his friends come calling. The book, by the way, ?has its forerunners in both Egyptian and Babylonian literature, notably in some dialogues dealing with problems of human life and the justice of the gods.? 16

Ecclesiastes, with its hard-nosed realism, opens with a lead that in my profession is called the shocking statement, and it goes on from there to tackle the meaning, or is it the meaninglessness, of life. From thought to thought, it comes to conclusions that startle our materialist sensibilities about ?the good life.? Both books remove the straightjacket tailored for God by earlier sages who presumed that divine prerogatives about our life in the world limited to the act-consequence connection of human behavior. At the end of the day, both books, humanly speaking, give sovereignty and independence back to God; God is not to be limited or coerced by human belief or behavior.

Psalms and Song of Songs (Canticle of Canticles, in the Catholic Bible) have also been included by the Christian church as books in the wisdom literature. Psalms per se, however, as a whole, cannot be attributed to the wisdom movement of ancient Israel, although it is generally recognized by scholarship that the sages collected and assembled the psalms. Attempts have been made by scholars to specify a class of psalms that embodies the wisdom literature, but a consensus has never arisen. What is certain are unmistakable characteristics of the wisdom tradition in passages of some psalms, such as in 1, 32, 34, 37, 112, and 128. Some scholars include 73 and 119.

The Song of Songs has been grouped with the wisdom literature, probably because the Hebrew tradition ascribed the work to Solomon, whose name appears several times in the song (it is actually several songs or odes). Quite unlike Psalms, there is no mention in the book of God, faith, prayer, worship, moral exhortation, or any other aspect of religious life. That is, unlike typical wisdom literature, it seems to be offering something only secular in nature. Yet it is not profane or immoral. Read as it stands, without spiritualizing it as intimacy between the believer and the Lord, it is a deeply moving love song about two people who are passionately in love.

In the Catholic and Protestant Bibles, the Book of Daniel is categorized with ?The Prophets,? but not in the Hebrew Bible, where it is included with eleven books called ?The Writings.? The Christian tendency to emphasize the prophetic and apocalyptic aspects of the book overshadows the equally prominent feature of the main character's heightened wisdom. This, more than anything else about Daniel, stood out to the kings of the royal courts in which Daniel served over many decades. It was in fact the quality that earned him summa cum laude recognition at the end of his political apprenticeship in Babylon and by which he was elevated to increasingly high-level political offices. In the book, Daniel is called a ma?kîl (1:4, 17; 9:22; see also 5:11;12, 14), which is another of those interesting words indicating especially wise insight (see hkm, part one).

It is this neglected key for understanding the book's narrative ? Daniel's wisdom-based approach to politics and government service in Babylon ? that I focus on in some of my writings (see wisdom actors), and it is why I would argue for the book's placement among the wisdom literature. And I would be remiss not to mention, as two other compass points, that the Roman Catholic Church has included the books of Sirach and Wisdom (or Wisdom of Solomon) under the heading of wisdom literature, books which have received much scholarly attention as wisdom literature by scholars in the Protestant tradition.

Wisdom narratives

In addition to entire books of wisdom literature, the Bible includes many incidents and longer narratives that involve political actors of various kinds and center on wisdom-based ways of reasoning in pluralist situations. In part one, I mentioned the story in Genesis of the Israelite slave Joseph, who is called a h?k?m in Genesis 41:33, and who became a kind of prime minister under Pharaoh in Egypt. Let's think too, for a minute, about the books of Ezra and Esther. Although they are not classified as wisdom literature, in my mind they could be.the Bible includes many incidents and longer narratives that involve political actors of various kinds

Ezra, an Israelite priest, was also a key political actor serving as a shuttle diplomat in Artaxerxes government at the end of a long period of Israelite change and reorganization under Persian rule. Appointed by Artaxerxes, Ezra holds a high-profile government

position as a distinguished s?per, which is another of those interesting Hebrew words indicating an official known for wise insight. The s?per?m, in fact, were close colleagues in the old-world Middle East of the hak?m?m (see part one), so close, in fact, that overlapping functions are commonly seen in the biblical literature between the two broad classes of officials. McKane, who has done a lot of work in this area, notes that although a diversity of function is a characteristic that must be expected, the s?per?m share many characteristics of the hak?m?m. These two broad classes of officials, McKane explains, ?belonged to an educated class whose mental habits were shaped by a common educational discipline [in the wisdom tradition] and they have the basic intellectual equipment for positions of power and responsibility...? (Prophets, p. 106; for much more on these old-world political actors, see also: Wisdom Actors, part 1 and Wisdom Actors, part 2 and Wisdom Words).

The story of Esther and her uncle Mordecai, both Israelite nationals, takes place in Persia and is really the story of how the wise, cool head of Mordecai combined with Esther's tact, thoughtfulness, and sensitivity in the Persia royal court prevailed against the privy council of the king Xerxes's hak?m?m (see part one). Like the Song of Songs, the Book of Esther is a patently secular story, which even seems to go out of its way not to mention ?the Lord? even when it would have been quite natural to (e.g., 4:14-16; 6:1, 13).

In the Book of Second Samuel, chapters 14 and 20, the ?wise woman from Tekoa? and ?a wise woman? in the besieged town of Abel Beth Maacah are two other fascinating wisdom narratives. Both women become key figures in separate political situations in which they have dealings with king David's decorated military commander, Joab. In the former, Joab hires the wise woman from Tekoa to act out a dramatic scene before king David concerning his exile of his third son, Absalom. In the latter, the wise woman of Abel Beth Maacah negotiates a settlement with Joab that prevents his army division from destroying the town (see Wisdom Actors, part 1 for more on both wise women).

I'll just mention one more narrative, here, a quite sophisticated one, that of the tragic figure of Ahithophel. Once the most skilled and highly prized political advisor in king David's privy council, he is a study in loss of reputation and political treachery (2 Sam. 15-18).

Many titles in the bibliography will help you explore the compass headings noted in parts one and two, and many others besides. Only one of those books, however, concentrates primarily on the wisdom tradition's relationship with the international relations and foreign policy of the old-world Middle East and the political actors who were trained in that aspect of the tradition. But that book, William McKane's Prophets and Wise Men, does not also deal with contemporary applications.

International relations and foreign policy

This brings us to a ?last but by no means least? consideration, to what I call the ?lost? dimension of the wisdom tradition. Although the international relations and foreign policy aspects of wisdom stand out in the literature, there is, to my knowledge at least, no body of contemporary work that focuses on how we today might apply ideas, principles, and norms of the historic wisdom tradition to our benefit in international relations and foreign policy decision-making.

Perhaps someone can help me out, here. Over the course of many years, I have been able to find only McKane's Prophets and Wise Men specifically dedicated to this field of study. It's a tremendously helpful text, actually, despite its short length and that it keeps its eyes on the distant past. Also, McKane's Proverbs: A New Approach has been helpful. Although his purpose in that book was not solely to illuminate old-world international relations in particular, McKane spends many of the first two hundred pages doing just that. (A few wisdom literature titles in the bibliography do comment at times on the international relations and foreign policy of the old-world Middle East, but chiefly as that relates only to a particular book's larger purpose, not with international relations and foreign policy as its main subject.)the agency wisdom is a unique medium that world leaders would do well to rely much more heavily on

This was clear to me long before 9/11, during the years when my work was focused on wisdom-based approaches to many other areas of contemporary life and work. Waiting in the wings was the highly esteemed role that kings, foreign ministers, political advisors, policymakers, and other high-level officials of the old-world Middle East gave to wisdom in their international dealings with each other. Over the years, I had made brief notes about this narrative but never went beyond that initial stage.

Then one day the incendiary conduct of nineteen men aboard four other aircraft led to severe changes in the foreign policy of the United States. I happened to be six miles above the Atlantic Ocean that bright blue morning, flying from London to Atlanta. It changed my life, too. Our flight was diverted to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where we lived for fours days on a Canadian air force base (see: The Kindness of Strangers). Long story short, I had been knocked off stride and, disoriented back home, couldn't get my bearings. But I soon found myself drawn back to the wisdom literature's narratives about international relations.

My goal was pretty basic, really. I wanted to see what, if any, normative ideas of the tradition might help leaders and policymakers in the West and in the Middle East, who were suddenly faced with a future in which building more cooperative relationships would be like struggling in quicksand. Having seen, first-hand, wisdom-based reasoning successfully practiced in our time in other areas of life, I wondered how the wisdom tradition might now also speak to U.S. ? Middle East relations. It wasn't long before I felt compelled to turn it into a full time research and writing project.

You will find much more about all this elsewhere on this website (see, e.g., Wisdom Project Précis and Wisdom & Foreign Relations). I mention wisdom's silhouette in the halls of power at the end of this summary review merely to note that it is another aspect of our work in the world where wisdom seeks to be heard, sought, and, when found, applied. I don't have any sort of final word on this; only some initial words. And what I offer is provisional, experimental, and subject to correction. It seems to me that with its emphasis on learning from experience, along with its transcultural character and its non-ideological and more relational approach to life and decision-making, as well as with its forbearance toward religion and its stress on building more cooperative pluralist arrangements peaceably, the agency wisdom is a unique medium that world leaders would do well to rely much more heavily on.

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ENDNOTES