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What value has the Wisdom Literature? How does it contribute to Christianity?

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Overview

The term "Wisdom Literature" refers to the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes together with some passages in Psalms. Besides the Old Testament is the Apocryphal works of Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon (Clifford 1998:17). The Wisdom books are traditionally grouped together because of their association with same author² and because of their common themes and style. It is in fact useful to read them together for one to see more clearly their common themes and subtle differences.

Wisdom Literature may be said to represent Hebrew Science and Philosophy, though one must not interpret these terms too literally. The aim of Philosophy is the unification of experience, the discovery of certain ways. This natural philosophy will show that such diverse phenomena as an apple falling from the tree and movement of the ocean tides are both to be explained by the same principle, e.g. Law of Gravity. In the same way Moral philosophy derives right human conduct from a certain number of basic principles such as love, service and self-denial, these and others will produce the good life as they are manifested in various human situations.

Thus, the Wisdom Literature represents the effort of the Hebrew mind to understand and explain all that exists. It is the attempt to interpret the facts of life, to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the sum of things³. However, we may not think of these wise men as Greek Philosophers. The Hebrews did not speculate like Plato and Aristotle. They could not, they were very practical and they "thought with the eye" (Blenkinsopp 1995:13). Their concern was neither the ultimate nature of reality, nor with the Being of God-, which they assumed but with form of His self- manifestation. They were less concerned with the ultimate destiny of man than with the nature of good life. Hebrew Wisdom always has a religious quality. All the facts of the physical world and all the problems of human life are referred to the divine mind. Human wisdom consists of becoming acquainted with God, in "Knowledge of God" or "the fear of the Lord " in yielding to God and His due and proper place in human life. Wisdom is occupied with the whole creation. She "rejoices in his inhabited world and delights in the sons of men".

In this monograph, the value of the books of Job and Proverbs in the light of their contribution to Christianity will be examined. The former probes deeper and deals with one of the major problems of human life, e.g. the problem of innocent suffering. This is done in a concrete and practical fashion, the interest is religious rather than intellectual. The book of Proverbs gives a comprehensive practical Philosophy of life founded on a shrewd observation and based on the firm belief "that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him".

Wisdom Literature is not peculiar to the Hebrews. Proverbs are wise sayings which emerge in every land where men have eyes to observe. "Proverbs represents a deposit of the accumulated

wisdom of the past, a distillation of collective experience based on the observation of order, regularity and causality in nature and human affairs". In many societies, like in the tribal societies in Nigeria, proverbs also play an important role in the administration of justice. Since both proverbial lore and case or common law are based on precedence and draw authority from the transmitted wisdom of the past, it is hardly surprising that in Israel the sapient and legal traditions are so closely connected.

The wisdom writings, with the exception of Job, lack systematic form. They are casual observations rather than an integrated system of doctrines. Most of these writings, though incorporating ancient materials, are to be dated in the later period of Israel history. Most of these collections have undergone extensive editing. However, there are a few which suggest a deliberate modification made for a specifically religious purpose. Since proverbs are practically impossible to date, more than one explanation of such variants is possible. Nevertheless, Blenkinsopp (1995: 25) argued that this kind of instruction was not in its original form, particularly religious in character or at least Yahwistic. Other aspect of cultural and religious life of Israel were eventually brought into line with Yahwistic orthodoxy, which makes it reasonable to conclude that the same is applicable to the instruction impacted by Sages and Scribes. For example, compare the following: "*The crucible is for silver and the furnace is for gold, so a person is tested by being praised*"⁴, with "*The crucible is for silver and the furnace is for gold, but Yahweh test the heart*"⁵.

The former is in accordance with the "ethos of the old wisdom" according to which every one must pass the test of public approval. The latter introduces a quite different criterion of evaluation, which in fact calls the older wisdom to question.

Purpose of the Wisdom Literature

Sages occupied a most significant place in Hebrew life. Their function was to interpret the faith of the fathers and to apply it to changing forms of political and social life. They sought to create a meaningful pattern of life and they did this by the consistent application of religious principles to every aspect of daily life. Man's life in all its commonplace details was to be lived in the light of the Eternal and "man's chief end was to glorify God and enjoy him forever".

Doing this is the only way to find true satisfaction. In as much as the Hebrew was concerned with this life, the sages believed in a duly regulated scheme of rewards and punishments because the Hebrews believed in a righteous God. "Shall not the Judge of the earth do right?"⁶. Moreover, for the Hebrew, the only sphere in which such righteousness could be revealed was the sphere of time and sense. God must reward the righteous here and now, also here and now He must punish the sinner. In the early period this probably is manifested in the experience of Job, piety was accompanied by prosperity. Any exceptions to the rule were such as proved its truth.

However, life does not stand still nor even the "unchanging East". New conditions emerged to challenge old traditions and accepted customs. It is necessary always to examine our religion and theology lest our formulations thereof and our creeds become outdated and inadequate.

Theology and Philosophy must continually be confronted with reality. Also the formula of faith must be set in terms that correspond with reality. Einstein's Theory of Relativity enforced changes in the formulation of many accepted "truth" of Natural Philosophy and Job's final vision enforced a new view of God and His way with men. And surely no greater service can be rendered to a people than the displacement of utilitarian by ideal ethics.

Thought of God

The Wisdom Literature is to enlarge men's "thought of God" and give them wider horizons with a view to assert the rights of the moral personality. It is in this Literature that one sees how man asserts the absolute character of the moral and spiritual as against any array of external reasons. Life is more than logic and "the spirit of man is the candle of the Lord"⁷. Man's search for final truth will not be denied, because God loves an honest thinker. God Himself will endorse the impressive protest against absolutism in theology and He will acknowledge the book's plea for a reasonable service based upon the moral affinity and mutual understanding of God and man. In the book of Job for example a campaign of centuries is dramatically compressed into a single decisive battle. Here the old limited faith gives place to the new and clearer vision which is born like the fable phoenix, out of the ashes of old. There was vast expense of spirit travail of the soul before this poet attained to a place that was luminous with God. This poet tells us in the book.

Innocent Suffering

The context in which the main purpose is worked out is that of history and theology. The Sages, as seen in Proverbs, did not probe deeply enough and it was left to the poet to deal with a main problem, the problem of innocent suffering. The Sages did not pierce to the center of things. Life had not dealt too harshly with them and it may be that the insurgent "Why" had been shifted by a comfortable complacency. But Job was no dilettante; his faith was not fabricated in the school of logic but forged in the furnace of affliction. His book was written with his lifeblood.

In the changing circumstances of life, men failed to observe that it was not always well with the righteous and that the evil doer did not come invariably to a bad end. There is no amount of wishful thinking that could change the hard brute facts of the matter (Psalm 37). Piety was not always accompanied by prosperity. The fall of the good king Josiah in 609 B.C., if taken into consideration must have raised serious doubts in many minds and created a real enigma. How can one justify the word of God in such an event? Again, let it be said that, our theologies and Philosophies must be adjusted to take in all the known facts so that men may "render a reason for the faith that is in them". Life is not a sham fight and no hollow sophistries will avail in the day of the ordeal. Jeremiah must have been struggling with this corollary at the end of the seventh century B.C., when he cried "My God, Why?" He questioned out of frustration, why the old systematic form of religion in Deuteronomy was not the case in his time. *Righteous art thou O Lord, when I complain to thee: Yet I would plead my case before thee: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?*⁸

It was right that the current dogma should be questioned, because it has the most grievous corollary. For if prosperity is a sign and seal of piety then suffering and sickness can only be the mark and token of sin. These are the visible evidences of a man's moral rottenness, as material prosperity is the sign of his spiritual soundness. This becomes extremely clear in the Wisdom Literature. Job suffers therefore Job is a sinner. For *all sufferers are sinners*. Job's character is slain by logic. Job might not know of his sin and it might be unknown to his neighbours but it is manifested beyond any doubt by the telltale evidence of his suffering. Suffering was not a physical fact; it was evidence of the divine reaction in wrath against sin. For that reason we find no asceticism or monasticism in the Old Testament. Poverty and pain were to be avoided at all costs, for they were the out-ward evidence of the divine displeasure.

The tragic element in such a belief, as is clear throughout the book, is that it robbed a man of God the divine consolations precisely at the point where he most needed these. Also it robbed him of the sympathy of his fellow men. Instead he was met with jeers and scorn and regarded as

one "smitten of God and afflicted"⁹. He became a social pariah, his friends "lifted up their heel"¹⁰ against him and inquired in scorn, where is now thy God?"(Psalm or Isaiah). That was the hard flinty theology with which the friends met Job's desperate need and the purpose of the book is to show what "miserable comforters" they really are. For "miserable" means "needing the mercy of God".

Needed a Change of View

Old theologies, like old soldiers, never die. They linger on and surprise us in unexpected places. When the disciples brought the blind man to Jesus their question was "who did sin, this man or his parents?"¹¹. They could not think of physical suffering apart from sin. A similar view may have been the prevalent belief in Calvinist Countries in the nineteenth century. The old view must undergo change and development if religion is to retain its hold and if theology is to obtain the approval of men's minds. The faith must be reformulated in terms that include all the facts. Old dogma must be scrutinized and old Creeds confronted with life. Thus it came about that when men looked at Jeremiah and marked the profound passion of his service and the depth of his suffering they could no longer attribute it to sin. As they looked closely at the martyr prophet they reached the conclusion that they could not say "*all sufferers are sinners*" but that now, in view of this startling light, they must say, "*sufferers are saints*". That was an advance and further advancement was made when men saw that mysterious figure that we call the suffering servant of the Lord¹². The figure was marred and scarred beyond human recognition; here was suffering on a vast scale. But a strange new thought entered here. For it is not possible that the eye forever should cheat the conscience. It was sin, they said but not his sin. It was their sin that brought this about - *He was wounded for our transgressions; he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed*¹³.

Thus men came to recognize the fact of vicarious suffering that one might suffer for other. And so modified the old word and now said "some sufferers are saviours". Such was the development and a most fruitful development it was. It is worth noting that the apostles, when sought to interpret the work of Christ, used the terms applied to the suffering servant and showed that the way of the Cross was God's way of victory. This development does not come in a day. Religious institutions are extremely conservative. Innovations do not enter easily and progress is slow. For Job and his friends there was only that hard barren theology that regarded suffering as judgment upon sin. All these argumentators like Muslims today, agreed to the Omnipotence of God but they left no room for his love. Is God's righteousness arbitrary and despotic or is it morally conditioned? Is man only the play-thing of Deity with whom He sports as with Satan or is man a being who can hold communion with his Maker? Is he only God's creature or is he God's friend? All these questions are paramount issues that Wisdom literature provides answers to.

Formation of National Character

There is clarity of purpose from the onset. The wise man and the fool appear on almost every page of Wisdom Literature and we learn right away that the aim of these Sages was to reduce the number of fools and add to the number of the wise. They sought to educate for life. That is the aim of every wise educator and every good minister. However, in doing this at times one might seem somewhat unorthodox but perhaps we make too much of orthodoxy. Perhaps today we need less orthodoxy and more flexibility in our approach. We might well take a leaf from Paul in his first letters to the Corinthians. Sages had the character of freelancers but none could doubt their unswerving loyalty to the heritage that had made Israel the people of God. And the Sages believed the heritage was for all men. Their parish was the world and their message

was for every man. Many of them had traveled abroad and seen other men and other manners, their minds were liberated from narrow nation prejudices. They represent the finest education of their period in combination with the pious spirit of their religion. They shared fully in the international exchange of ideas and their view point was ecumenical. They counted nothing in humanity alien to them. In the day when foreign fashion was threatening to overwhelm the moral and spiritual life of their people they stood forth to “reprove, correct, and equip men for salvation”¹⁴. For they “regarded religion as a rational relationship to God and believed in the moral government of the world”¹⁵. Who are these Sages? They came to prominence somewhat late in Hebrew history but they have their roots in the early period. It is generally accepted that they are closely related to the earlier government “Scribe”¹⁶ or “Secretary”¹⁷ of whom we read in Samuel, Kings and Jeremiah¹⁸. Like prophecy in Israel which move from its cradle beginning upward to splendour, so Wisdom Literature developed from rather shady forms and practice to the higher form represented by proverbs. The focus of the Sages was to demonstrate that religion was concerned with man’s whole life and that it involved total commitment. Like Paul they urge men that, “whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the Glory of God”¹⁹. They supplemented the ministry of the Priests, theirs was a roving ministry untied to any institution, at street corners, in the public squares, as visitors in Synagogues or guests in a home they were free to speak their piece. The Sages were in fundamental agreement with the Prophets. The Prophets were somewhat remote figures with an air of elevation about them, but the Sages were creatures of flesh and blood, always accessible and ready to meet their fellow men on the same level. They could sit where common folk sat and for such they “broke down small”²⁰ the lofty message of the Prophets that truly might enter in at the doors. They were religious middlemen who mediated the prophetic word to the man in the street.

Further Contributions of the Literature to Christianity

Something has already been said as to the influence of the Sages in their time and that influence is attested by the presence of Wisdom Literature in the Scripture. This is part of our Christian heritage and we are heirs of all the promises. However, we need to find answer to its power and influence in our own generation. What is the contribution of the same Wisdom Literature to Christianity in our time? More of such contribution will be inferred this section.

Problem of Suffering

Looking at Job, it is clear that suffering is appointed in the *eternal counsels* of God. It originates in heaven. This is the abiding mystery of life and constitutes the real problem for Theism. Why does a God of love permit such suffering? Much can be explained as the friends of Job did, but not all. For much suffering is the inexorable outcome of sin. But we may not say, all sufferers are sinners. There is much suffering that is without obvious reason, at least known to man. Such is Job’s suffering, the reason for which was known only to the heavenly council. Job’s suffering was sent upon him to discredit the base cynicism of the Satan and to prove the reality of disinterested religion. In this sense Job is God’s champion. And God is willing “to bet his life”²¹ on Job’s piety. We may be certain that the heart of God was sorely grieved in this ordeal of Job. In all Job’s afflictions He was afflicted. It is worth noting that while we make much of our faith in God, which I suppose is all right, there is another side to this matter. God has faith in us. He believes that we will not let Him down or prove to be a disappointment. And it is the blood of the martyrs²² and not the ink of our theologies that is the seed of the Church. Bruce may be right when he says that, “God is proud of Job in the Prologue and prouder still in the Epilogue”().

The other way to look at suffering is to examine *the problem (object)* of his/her suffering. Actually, the problem of suffering is perennial and the last word has not yet been spoken. However, we have inherited the thought of honest thinkers and we build on them. As one considers Job and his plight, another voice was raising the question, of the suffering servant of the Lord. In Isaiah we come by another view of suffering, meaning that suffering has vicarious power. Here is what he says, “*Yet it please the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shall make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, and he shall prolong his*

days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand” In this song Isaiah regards suffering as an offering for sin while the author of Job viewed it as the vindication of the divine honour and disinterested religion. I suppose that the two views are not so far apart. Job’s piety and prayers availed for his friends while the Servant “by his righteousness justifies many”.

The Old Testament asks questions and the New Testament gives the answers. Religion in the interrogative mood is matched with religion in the affirmative, the positive splendours of the new stand over against the interrogations of the Old Testament. Job’s pathetic cry for a “daysman” or “umpire”(9:33) has been answered. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:14,16). The Incarnation and death of the Death of Christ has shown that suffering is not merely a human experience, it is the heart of God Himself. Pain and suffering have meaning and that meaning is made clear in the Cross. To know Jesus is to know God, when we see Jesus we can say with Job, “now mine eye sees thee” (Job 42:5) NKJV

The suffering of Christ has indirect power. “He was bruised for our iniquities”. (Isaiah 53:5). By his sorrow we have rest and life by his death. The Royal Way of the Holy Cross, to use the words of Thomas a` Kempis, is the way of triumph both for God and man. The Cross is set at the center of our Christian life of service and sacrifice. God hides a gospel in our pain and builds our most abiding joys upon our suffering. We share in the fellowship of His suffering and fill up that which is left in the suffering of our Lord. (Colosians1:24). Not that Christ failed to offer a complete and perfect oblation, once and for all, but that through His complete identification with us He makes our sacrifice His own. For our sake God “made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (I Corinthians 5:21). He was “numbered with the transgressors” that the transgressors might be numbered with the saints. He dwells in us and our life “is rooted and grounded in God” (Ephesians 3:17). And if we share the fellowship of His sufferings, we shall also share the fellowship of His glory. Thus our sufferings, being taken up to His, has vicarious power. And for the vague hope that flickered before the eyes of Job we have a hope that is sure and certain. “This slight momentary affliction is preparing us an eternal weight of glory” (Corinthians4:17).

God loves *reality in religion*. Our service is to be with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength. Job serves with his mind. He believes that God is rational and reasonable. “Come now, let us reason together” (Isaiah 1:18). It is no fool or arbitrary despot that sits on the throne of the universe, although Job comes perilously near to suggesting that. But God, precisely because He is reasonable, will not and does not hold Job’s wild whirling words against him. God knows, as the friends know not, that these words are the words of a desperate man, a man desperate to attain the truth. No second –hand option will avail here, nothing but ultimate truth will satisfy Job’s agonizing search. That truth is reached only through vast expense of spirit and sweat of heart and head. And that God approves such honest thinking is clear from the Epilogue. It was not the friends who said the right things about God, it was the man who said the terrible shocking things in the desperate honesty of his soul who won the divine approval.

It is all the more necessary to say this because Job’s friends are not yet dead. They have simply changed their form in our day and they appear in the guise of the “honest doubter”. There is a tendency in our day to prefer the honest doubter to the real believer. Two things should be said here. Firstly, there is much to be said for a reverent agnosticism in the presence of this problem, but the fact that we cannot know everything should not preclude us from learning and getting to know all we can. The position of ‘honest doubt’ implies indecision, unnecessary and it must always involve agony if the doubt is honest. Our prayer here must be, “Lord, I believe,

help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24). God will hold certain forms of doubt to be culpable and both God and Job would repudiate this tendency to regard the “honest doubter” as a kind of superior person. Doubt is not a thing to be bragged about and this flippant way of speaking is much to be deplored. And secondly, too often it may be found that this “honest doubt” is no more than a smoke screen thrown up to hide an evil heart and cover a reluctant will. Doubt when it is honest is an agonizing thing, as we see in Job and may have felt in our lives and it will give the doubter no rest until he finds rest in God. This is the ministry of God’s own Holy Spirit.

Reward in Service

We must admit that there is much that seems mere worldly wisdom and that there is no sense of absolute moral law. Also, that the emphasis is on the passive virtues, courage is not mentioned and the prevailing thought is utilitarian and of worldly happiness dealing with material welfare. Some theologians argued that there is no strong sense of social responsibility and that the main emphasis is egoistic. One example of the supporting text says “I walk in the way of righteousness, in the paths of justice, endowing with wealth those who love me, and filling their treasuries” (Proverbs 8:20,21)

Piety brings prosperity. Religion is profitable. This idea has been observed in the comments of the friends of Job during his trial. However, there is more truth in this old philosophy than one may be prepared to admit. It is true over a wide area that, “he who gives heed to the word will prosper, and happy is he who trusts in the Lord” (Proverbs 16:20). The Hebrew had no view of a life hereafter, such a belief was late in arriving and if the idea of a righteous God was to be maintained then the divine justice must be revealed in the present life. And that was so in most instances. Christianity itself is frequently assailed on this same ground, that we teach people to be good for the sake of a reward. Anyway why not? It is difficult to see how we can dispense with the thought of reward. Christ offered large rewards to His followers (Mark 10:29) and Paul rightly assures us that “godliness is profitable unto all things” (I Timothy 4:8 KJV). Man has a right to expect profit from religion and it will be time enough to consider this objection seriously when we find those who make the objection living the Christian life without the thought of the Christian reward.

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² Proverbs 1:1;10:1;25:1.

³ Ecclesiastes 7:25.

⁴ Job 27:21(KJV).

⁵ Job 17:3 (KJV).

⁶ Genesis 18:25 (KJV).

⁷ Proverbs 20:27(KJV).

⁸ Jeremiah 12:1(KJV).

⁹ Isaiah 53:4(KJV).

¹⁰ Psalms 41:9(KJV).

¹¹ John 9:2(KJV).

¹² Isaiah 53:11(KJV).

¹³ Isaiah 53:3(KJV).

¹⁴ II Timothy 3:16; 4:2ff (KJV).

¹⁵ Isaiah 38:16(KJV).

¹⁶ According to the Bible, King James Version.

¹⁷ The word translated in King James Version as Scribe was known in Revised Standard Version translation as Secretary.

¹⁸ II Samuel 2:17; 20:25; I Kings 4:3; II Kings 19:2; 22:3-7; Jeremiah 36:20,21.

¹⁹ I Corinthians 10:31 (KJV)

²⁰ Explaining parables or using a common society contextualized word, to enhance a proper understanding of a prophetic messages, instruction and law.

²¹ Job 1:8(JKV).

²² Martyr simply means faithful witness.