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for the Journey of Faith

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Introduction

Wisdom in its essence is an “ability to cope,” an “art of steering,” or a “quest for self-understanding and for mastery of the world.”¹ This definition makes wisdom more than just a literary corpus; rather it is a human experience that encompasses learning and growing. Such human experience records a remarkable thematic coherence in biblical wisdom literature, which communicates one’s progress of growth: from the danger of committing wrongful acts, through suffering and pain, amidst the disproportions of reality. This paper concurs that the “voices of protest” from Job and Qoheleth should therefore be viewed as an integral and genuine expression of faith, rather than as a rejection of traditional wisdom thought.² This paper suggests a theological wisdom model for the journey of faith, by combining three biblical wisdom books, namely Proverbs, the book of Job and the book of Ecclesiastes. I shall embark on establishing the reasons why these three biblical wisdom books, taken together, should be viewed as *a* theological model.

¹ James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 9.

² See Richard Schultz, “Unity or Diversity in Wisdom Theology? A Canonical and Covenantal Perspective,” in *Tyndale Bulletin* 48.2 (1997): 271-306, here 279, 290.

A Theology from Below: Humankind as the Centre of God's Creation

Biblical wisdom literature communicates a theology from below. Wisdom's theological reflection is most apparent in its effort to relate to the phenomenon of the world and humanity.³ The word for "humanity, human, person," *'ādām*, appears 44 times in Proverbs; another term, *'iš*, which means "man", occurs 90 times in the same book.⁴ The word *'énôš*, which means "mortal," often translated as "human", is also remarkably recurrent in the book of Job (e.g. Job 4:17; 10:4; 15:14).⁵ In *Ecclesiastes*, *'ādām* is mentioned 48 times, compares to 40 times for *'ēlōhîm* "God."⁶ The frequency of terms depicting humankind informs the reader of a human outlook in these biblical wisdom books. Since the presence of the divine is also evident, it is "humanity in relation to what God has done in the universe" or "a theological anthropology" that matters in the wisdom writing.⁷

In wisdom thought, God's activity coheres with human activity. Wisdom literature contains an enormous amount of

³ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology Vol 2* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 449.

⁴ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 89.

⁵ Other occurrences: Job 5:17; 7:17; 9:2; 10:5; 14:19; 25:4, 6; 28:13; 34:6; 36:25. Only in Job 4:17 *'énôš* occurs with a definite article.

⁶ Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (The Anchor Bible. NY: Doubleday, 1997), 54.

⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 54-55. Seow comments solely from the perspective of *Ecclesiastes*.

reflection, experience and observation. This inclination is not humanistic but anthropocentric. It signifies a theology from below that starts from a human perspective, a theology that upholds humankind as the crown of God's creation. In this manner, "the fundamental point of orientation" with regard to wisdom books is humankind.⁸ To be human is to be responsible for the search for truth that God has set in the created world, and to learn to live in harmony with this truth. As such, biblical wisdom advocates propriety as a way of life: the right time and place for actions or non-actions, speeches or silence. Similarly, the subsistence of the created world depends on appropriate human conduct, especially when suffering persists, injustice abounds, unfairness occurs, and when mystery overwhelms. Human actions indeed have cosmic implications.⁹

An *anthropocentric* theology of wisdom, however, does not clash with the *theocentric* claim of other canonical books such as found in the *Torah*, or in the historical or prophetic books. Both anthropocentric and theocentric perspectives in the Old Testament take different points of departure and are not mutually exclusive. The natural theology implied in wisdom literature begins with humanity; and it supplements the theology of salvation history articulated in other canonical books.¹⁰ Thus anthropocentric and theocentric approaches go hand in hand in constructing Old Testament theology. Wisdom simply articulates a human perspective of godly living.¹¹ Such an idea

⁸ Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 10.

⁹ Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 11.

¹⁰ Choon-Leong Seow, *Wisdom as Practical Theology* (Guest Lecture; Sabah Theological Seminary, KK, Sabah; 21-25 July 2008).

¹¹ Hence the sense of a common humanity in wisdom writing should not be claimed as a peculiar product of Yahwism. See John J. Collins,

reflects the “theological dimension of being human,” as Childs has argued.¹² This understanding conveys the strong pragmatism of wisdom literature towards concrete and authentic human living.

A Theological Centre: The Fear of the LORD

Michael V. Fox identifies wisdom as the fear of God, which represents both the beginning (Prov 1:7) and the finale of the quest for wisdom (Prov 2:5).¹³ Wisdom enables one to discern right from wrong and empowers one to do right, knowing full well that God is present. The “fear of God” means humankind must live in the knowledge of its place in relation to the divine. The fear of God is *provocative*, since the attitude demands justice to be done and reasons given for failure in this sphere. The fear of God is also *transformative*, for humankind acknowledges that sovereignty falls solely to the hand of the deity.

In *Proverbs*, the limitation of human knowledge, as opposed to God’s, is clearly acknowledged. Von Rad has pointed out that God is mentioned intentionally in connection with human limitation (Prov 16:1-2, 9; 19:21; 21:24, 30-31).¹⁴ In *Job*, the fear of God is illustrated intensely through the “theological

“Proverbial Wisdom and the Yahwist Vision,” in *Semeia* 17 (1980): 1-17, here 13.

¹² Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London: SCM, 1985), 196-203.

¹³ Michael V. Fox, “Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116.4 (1997): 612-633, here 620.

¹⁴ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 99.

whistle-blower verse” (Job 6:14),¹⁵ when Job laments that, “one may abandon the fear of Shaddai.” The fear of the deity has thus inevitably become the focal attention when faith is in crisis. Qoheleth, on the other hand, brings a God-fearing factor into his rhetoric amidst his skeptically constructed observations (Ecc 3:13-17; 5:1-7, 18-19; 7:13-14; 8:15-9:1; 11:9-12:1; 12:13-14), attempting to offer a pointer toward life’s inscrutable reality. Since a mastery of rules and maxims cannot confer absolute certainty, “life retains a mysterious and incalculable element, and it is precisely in this incalculable area that Yahweh is encountered.”¹⁶

The fear of the LORD signifies the beginning of all knowledge and the crowning achievement of wisdom.¹⁷ This fear is part of the essence of Israelite faith. Life’s abundant mysteries evoke gratitude and reverence in the author of wisdom.¹⁸ Such reverence is directly linked to other canonical texts. Wisdom encompasses a theological sense of God’s involvement and intimate communion. This experience “is not separated from the world, but is in the midst of everyday life with its customary, even petty events.”¹⁹ As such, the wisdom experience is a “faith experience.”²⁰ Also, the wisdom corpus is

¹⁵ Choon-Leong Seow, “Job: Theology When Theology Fails,” *Wisdom as Practical Theology* (Guest Lecture; Sabah Theological Seminary, KK, Sabah), 23 July 2008.

¹⁶ Collins, “Proverbial Wisdom and the Yahwist Vision,” here 10.

¹⁷ Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 12.

¹⁸ James L. Crenshaw, “The Acquisition of Knowledge in Israelite Wisdom Literature,” in *Word & World* 7.3 (1987): 245-252, here 247.

¹⁹ Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 125.

²⁰ Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 125.

“theological literature,” for it witnesses to the LORD and to the world which is willed, governed, and sustained by the LORD.²¹

A Theology that Aims at the Realities of Life

Biblical wisdom literature communicates a theology that aims at the realities of life, a continuous arena that provides basic parameters within which one lives and dies. In the biblical world, a dichotomy between secular and sacred did not exist, for people lived in God’s presence.²² The law and historical credos were designed to construct a subjective view of reality under God’s rule; whereas wisdom literature was designed to present a realistic view of human life in God’s creation. Therefore, reality is the realm in which a life begins and ends, a generation comes and goes; reality is a sphere of work and rest, a place of rise and fall.

According to wisdom thought, life in reality is walking by calculation rather than by faith (e.g. Prov 24:27; Ecc 9:12).²³ Wisdom pedagogy is sometimes ironic: one can control one’s actions but not the consequences of those actions (e.g. Ecc 9:15; 10:8-9; 11:6).²⁴ Crenshaw points out three ways of acquiring knowledge as described in wisdom literature: firstly, through personal observation of nature and human behaviour: truth is

²¹ Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence Fretheim, David L. Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 376.

²² Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 14.

²³ John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 207.

²⁴ Fox, “Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9,” 623.

obtained from human enquiry rather than divine initiative. Secondly, through analogy between creed and reality: as in Ps 73, through one's struggle with faith. Thirdly, through encounter with the Transcendent One: people learn about the truth of reality in personal enlightenment.²⁵ All three ways of learning are based on "lived experience"²⁶ that takes place in reality.

Choon-Leong Seow has argued for the place of wisdom literature at the heart of biblical theology. Wisdom, Seow reasons, is about "the life of the present, life here and now," therefore it must not be peripheral when constructing theology.²⁷ Further, the "mode of faith" in wisdom operates in different interpretive categories and demands its own mode of discourse and reflection.²⁸ And biblical theology is "both-worldly": it encapsulates an anthropocentric world of reality on earth and a theocentric world of revelation from above.²⁹ By definition, wisdom is basically a practical life-skill: living morally, making wise decisions, behaving appropriately and exercising common sense. As such, for the people of God, wisdom is the life of worship extended to the home and marketplace.³⁰ Wisdom offers strategies for living in the here and now; and it takes place amidst the realities of life.

²⁵ Crenshaw, "The Acquisition of Knowledge, 245-252.

²⁶ Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence Fretheim and David L. Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 374.

²⁷ Seow, *Wisdom*, 21 July 2008.

²⁸ Birch and others, *A Theological Introduction*, 374.

²⁹ Seow, *Wisdom*, 25 July 2008.

³⁰ William Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 189.

A Theology of Growth in Faith

Theology is concerned with the living faith of God's people. Crenshaw has aptly said of biblical wisdom literature: Proverbs searched for knowledge, Job searched for God's presence, Qoheleth searched for meaning in life.³¹ The temporal focus differs in each instance: Proverbs focused on the *past* when God established an order and humans endeavored to live in harmony with that order; Job's *present* suffering increased the urgency of finding relief; while Qoheleth's doubt arose from an inability to discern the *future*.³² These relenting searches fluctuate, as if swinging on a pendulum between trusting one's ability to grasp hold of existence and a total dependence on God's mercy for survival.³³ The two concepts inspire a sense of tension within wisdom thought. Seow shares this same concern regarding the alleged tension in wisdom thought: it is human confidence tempered with, and balanced by, human limitedness.³⁴ On the one hand, humans represent God's unique creation; on the other, they are mere mortals. This dilemma of human existence gives rise to a creative tension within wisdom writing, often mistakenly perceived as a conflict of perspectives, or wrongly regarded as wisdom's self-correcting. This paper argues for a theology of growth underlying such a self-contained tension within these biblical wisdom books. The creative tension within biblical wisdom literature is intentional, for the tension signifies engagement with the journey of faith, within a believer in God.

³¹ Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 50.

³² Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 50-51.

³³ Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 51.

³⁴ Seow, *Wisdom*, 21 July 2008.

Proverbs: A Good Disciple

In Proverbs, a disciple learns about the hard and fast rules of godly living. The disciple embarks on a journey of faith by learning proverbial generalizations from wise sayings and admonitions: devotion to the LORD is, at the same time, spurning evil. Compliance to the teaching of Proverbs represents submission to the God. A good and teachable disciple, therefore, can easily subscribe to absoluteness and to formulaic certainty. As a beginner in faith, this good disciple exercises his or her discernment, hoping to steer his or her life “safely into harbor, avoiding hazards that brought catastrophe to fools.”³⁵ The disciple represents a good example of a moral agent who believes in rigid retribution, and who reasons from a fundamental premise of practical wisdom.³⁶ As such, every bad consequence, such as suffering, presumes a prior sin or wrongful behaviour. A fresh believer, therefore, holds fast to God’s commandment and lives ethically so as to obtain goodness of life, at the same time avoiding calamity, which represents divine disfavour.

Job: A Questioning Devotee

For Job, practicalities are preferred over the home-schooled theories of Proverbs. A good disciple soon discovers that the

³⁵ James L. Crenshaw, “The Concept of God in Old Testament Wisdom,” in *In Search of Wisdom: Essays in Memory of John G. Gammie*, edited by Leo G. Perdue, Bernard Brandon Scott and William Johnston Wiseman (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993):1-18, here 6.

³⁶ Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 23.

once-learned generalizations are to be questioned when bad experiences or human problems arise. In the book of Job, faith is questioned in the face of righteous suffering. Initial questioning occurs in the prologue of the book of Job, ironically through Satan's enquiry: Job's goodness, which has so impressed God, is merely a ploy to get divine blessing on his life. So the testing of faith begins, prompting "a modern Job" to wonder: "I have learned that God is *good*, but why have I come across a God that is not?" Along the journey of faith, the believer will find God, paradoxically, absent and present: both being equally offensive to a faithful believer. God's absence, represented by Job's silent Divine, demands one's tireless questioning. God's presence, like that of Job's theophany, though sought after, appears confrontational rather than therapeutic. As such, Job's experience signifies a quest for understanding by a faithful follower. This quest for understanding is rather tough, for it is compounded by challenges from other faithful followers. "The friends of Job" become the teachers of Proverbs, who are overly confident of their own teaching.³⁷ Eventually, the questioning devotee charges God with large-scale injustice encompassing social evil and oppression, just as Job does. This picture of internal struggle, however, does not altogether conceal one's hope that God will eventually come to one's assistance. The personal quest leads to a momentous theophany, where the faithful follower is confronted by God's ultimate questioning of who is really in charge of how to run the world. This personal encounter with God does not, however, provide a single answer to all earlier questionings, but, rather, causes the devotee to retreat from all questioning, and yield in trustful submission to

³⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 235.

God, “Now I know that God is *God*.” Nonetheless, undergirding this confession is the virtue of trust.

Qoheleth: A Skeptic Believer

If Proverbs contains confident assertions about the way the world works, “these are rules for life; try them and find that they will work,” both Job and Qoheleth appear to respond, “we tried, and they did not work.”³⁸ When a faithful follower moves from Proverbs to Ecclesiastes, he faces a threatened skepticism more provoking than Job’s. Ecclesiastes is Job without the theophany.³⁹ One finds that truth once learned becomes less and less verifiable, but more and more ungraspable. The reality of life becomes exceedingly complex, difficult to calculate and therefore impossible to explain. Since there is a mystery beyond human control, the once dutiful disciple starts to loose his grip on the hard and fast rules, and settles for a less-structured attitude toward reality, without compromising ultimate trust in a Living Presence. A faith journey which has arrived at this stage has cultivated a God-centred worldview, which is essential for finding meaning in life.⁴⁰ The tested and mature believer, reflected in Ecclesiastes, challenges new believers to contemplate on the core issues of life and to choose to live in surrender to God (12:1-7). This mature believer restrains himself from making hasty judgments, and keeps a skeptical view on life’s happenings. This believer remains a hard -core

³⁸ David A. Hubbard, “The Wisdom Movement and Israel’s Covenant Faith,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 17 (1966):3-34, here 6; quoted in Goldingay, *Theological Diversity*, 208.

³⁹ Goldingay, *Theological Diversity*, 209.

⁴⁰ Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom books and Psalms*, 280.

believer in a God who holds the ultimate meaning of life “under the sun.” Such a disciple is both skeptic and believer; in a word, a “realist.”⁴¹

Walter Brueggemann sees obedience as the sum of Israelite wisdom: “In the completed traditions of wisdom in the Old Testament, new obedience that takes the world seriously is a powerful dialectic of submissiveness and challenge.”⁴² Tracing the sapiential conclusion from Proverbs 3:7-8, through Job 28:28 and eventually on to Ecclesiastes 12:13, a believer in God thus embraces Torah obedience while growing in faith.⁴³ Such obedience demands serious engagement with human life and with the ultimate Living Presence. In this journey of faith and obedience, the God-human relationship is retrospective and two-dimensional. The progression from Proverbs to Job to Ecclesiastes is thus transformative: a believer in God grows from a simple faith to a faith in crisis and on to a renewed faith.

Conclusion

The model I propose upholds a faith journey that involves the people of God facing reality. It is the proposal of a theological model that attempts to reach into the heart of wisdom. The model defends the *unity* of wisdom literature and other canonical books, and a *diversity* within the wisdom books

⁴¹ Choon-Leong Seow, “Ecclesiastes: Theology When Everything is Beyond Control,” *Wisdom as Practical Theology* (Guest Lecture; Sabah Theological Seminary, KK, Sabah), 24 July 2008

⁴² Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 234.

⁴³ Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology*, 236.

themselves. The Bible in general and wisdom literature in particular, points to many possible ways of cultivating the ability to live out faith. A person with faith searches for the aptitude to face life's inscrutability, only to find himself the object of God's pursuit.⁴⁴ Indeed, it is only when one reaches an endless searching, like that of Job and of Qoheleth, that one can encounter the Creator of Creation and the Master of the uttermost mystery, in total submission. Wisdom literature thus offers a perspective on understanding the divine revelation alongside Sinai revelation and prophetic utterance. Wisdom becomes the revelation of God's instruction, indirectly, through human views. This connection between wisdom and revelation delivers, what Claude Cox calls, *a theology of presence* for wisdom.⁴⁵ In my judgment, wisdom literature as a whole is therefore a book of faith, which informs its readers of the struggles and promises that come with faith.

⁴⁴ I am indebted to Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 51 for this thought.

⁴⁵ Claude Cox, "When Torah Embraced Wisdom and Song: Job 28:28, Ecclesiastes 12:13, and Psalm 1:2," in *Restoration Quarterly* 49.2 (2007): 65-74, here 74.