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The Role of „Wisdom" in the Interpretation of Scripture

In a preface to his published lectures of 1526 on Ecclesiastes, Martin Luther states a view of this book that may sound entirely foreign to modern biblical studies:

> It would, therefore, be more correct to call this Book of Ecclesiastes the *Politics* or the *Economics* of Solomon. He [its author] does not, indeed, legislate of prescribes laws for the governance of the state or the family. This is taken care of in great detail by the natural law or human reason, to which according to Gen. 1:28, earthly things have been subjected; this has been, is, and must remain the source, the criterion, and the end of all laws, whether political or domestic. But this book can give counsel to a man involved in the state or the household as he deals with difficult problems, and it can instruct and encourage his mind as he bears the troubles of such a position. Problems and troubles are endless here, as is evident both from all the histories in Holy Scripture and from the stories of all the poets.

Luther, next, illustrates these problems of life by appeal to everything from the labors of Hercules, to the monsters faced by Ulysses, to the biblical account of David's confrontation with Goliath. Certainly, he shows us, once again, that *sola scriptura* did not mean „only scripture" but that scripture was alone a sufficient and adequate source of saving faith. The poets and their depictions of reality still remain important to his theological argument. As did the Apostle Paul, Luther drew illustrations freely from the lives of classical poets and the protagonists in their stories, as easily as he recollected similar events in the biblical narratives.

Finally, Luther concludes, „what the wise man said is true, 'Government dispays the man.'" – again not a biblical proverb though still, for Luther, „true" – „But unless there is some Solomon to exhort and console him, government crushes the man, extinguishes him, and utterly destroys him."[1]

Luther espouses a remarkably positive role for Solomon's „wisdom" in Ecclesiastes and he distinguishes it carefully from other uses of „natural law or human reason" to develop „laws". While „natural law or human reason" are the wellspring of mundane and necessary laws for the governance of household, city, church, and nation, „biblical wisdom" plays a very different role with high consequences. Wisdom is

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[1] *Luther's Works, Volume 15, „Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Last Words of David, 2 Samuel 23:1–7," ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1972), p. 5*

required in order to prevent the best governments established by human reason from „crushing", „extinguishing", and „utterly destroying" the very same reasonable human beings who make laws. Luther argues for this distinct role for wisdom by observing that the Solomonic books – Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs – lack „laws" as found elsewhere in scripture, and, therefore, these books address a different sub-topic related to the application of temporal laws. Wisdom is necessary to protect even the best laws, at any given time in history, froom being destructive of the the very themes they share with wisdom – „righteousness, justice, and equity" (Prov 1:3b) they are necessarily designed to protect, defend, and perpetuate.

What „wisdom" has the power to do, distinguished from the necessary zeal of human reason or natural law to proscribe and to legislate, is to comprehend the real and „difficult problems", „the [actual and „endless"] troubles" of life. Moreover, this perception of life's troubles – including the inner-logic and concrete nature of human tragedy, suffering, prejudice, survival, and restortation – points to a realistic sub-structure beneath the superficial drama of our lives. Without Solomonic wisdom efforts at legislation tend to ignore the limitations of both human reason and perceptions of natural law. The legislation itself drifts into a dangerous idealization of itself and exerts the inhumane tyranny of all autonomous, bloodless abstractions. So, Solomonic wisdom, distinct from a particular set of laws or rules, secures the higher ground of „politics" and „economics". Wisdom, as such, represents a vital meta/legal form of discourse, without which any talk of preserving laws or morality will be potentially destructive of life itself.

This pre-modern view of Solomonic wisdom is not a distinctly Lutheran one. Luther simply expresses a position that had been current for centuries, here and there, in the history of interpretation: Joseph Hall (1574–1656) studied at Cambridge an gained renown for his English prose contributions of both a secular and a religious nature. He was one of many Reformed English protestants who „fell between the stools" politically. His defense of the episcopate was weak enough to summon the attack of William Laud, though its was also sufficiently strong to elicit steady and stinging derision from John Milton. Eleven months after being appointed an Anglican bishop at Norwich, Hall wept openly as Cromwell's troups demolished the interior of the Norwich Cathedral. Here is a man who knew of life's „difficult problems", as Luther called them, and someone who had great interest in Solomonic wisdom. Hall wrote various books on protestant meditation, similar to our contemporary concern with „spirituality", and on wisdom as a response to contemporary philosophy. Though Hall showed no awareness of Luther's lectures on Ecclesiastes he published originally in 1609 an anthology of biblical text from Proverbs and Ecclesiastes ... variously ... entitled: *Solomons Diuine Arts, of 1. Ethickes, 2. Politickes, 3. Oeconomicks: That is; the*

Government of 1. Behaviour, Common-wealth, 3. Familie. Drawne into Method, out of his Prouerbs & Ecclesiastes.[2]

So, we see once again a pre-modern understanding of the Solomonic books as guide to „ethics", „politics" and „economics". Here wisdom was seen to play a special role along these lines within the Bible and it could be distinguished or related to other major inner-biblical idioms, such as Torah (law/teaching), prophecy (promise and judgment), and Gospel.

Biblical Wisdom: Pre-modern Jewish and Christian Interpretation

Prior to the modern period, certain biblical books were regarded as the primary manifestation of wisdom in the Bible. These were the books assigned to Solomon: Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. Sometimes Job would also be seen as greatly concerned with wisdom, though the archetypal characteristics of biblical wisdom had already been established primarily by the Solomonic books rather than by some extra-biblical criteria of what characterized „wisdom".[3] The wisdom character of the Song of Songs remained only indirectly examined in deference to a typological reading of this book: in Jewish circles, as an analogue for God's love for Israel, and in Christian circles, as a *figura* of Christ's love of the church. Though even here, interpretation surely presumed an apprecation of the plain sapiential sense, for such a literal understanding of the unrelenting compulsion of eroticism is precisely what makes compelling the figural analogy to the mystery of God's boundless grace for a rebellious elect.[4]

Just as some of the superscriptions and some internal content link the Book of Psalms to the narratives about David in books of Samuel and Chronicles, so the narrativies about Solomon in 1 Kings 3–11 and in Chronicles provided a resource for recognizing and refining our hearing of the voice of the same Solomon in these other

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[2] *Solomon's Divine Arts: Joseph Hall's Representation of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs (1609), with Introductory Essays*, ed. Gerald T. Sheppard (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1991).

[3] On the pre-modern identification of wisdom books, see Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, chapter 2, „Biblical Genre Theory: Precepts and Models for Religious Lyric", pp. 31–71, esp. pp. 53–69, in her *Protestant Poetics an the Seventeenth-Century Lyric* (Princeton: Princetón University Press, 1979).

[4] E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) and her „Joseph Hall and the Tradition of Christian Interpretation of the Song of Songs", pp. 58–66, in *Solomon's Divine Arts*. Cf. G. Sheppard, „The Role of the Canonical Context on the Interpretation of the Solomonic Books", pp. 72, 101–102, in *Solomon's Divine Arts*.

books.[5] Among English protestants, Hugh Broughton in a lengthy essay, published in 1605, on Ecclesiastes begins with „An abridgement of Salomon's life" before explaining the book within the inner-biblical context of Solomon's life. Similarly, in later editions of Henry Ainsworth's *The Book of Psalms,* we find a short „Life of David" so that we are explicitly reminded how significantly the narrativies about these authors found elsewhere in scripture provided semantic implications for the interpretation of non-narrative books attributed to them.[6] Moreover, we are presumptous if we assume that these pre-modern interpreters were *uncritical* in exploring these intertextual features, for their goals were, at their best, not concerned with harmonizing away what we as moderns see as historical differences. More often than not, they sought a profound intuitive, literal-theological sense rather than either a rigorously historical or a naively literalistic sense. It is easy for us to forget that in the pre-modern priod, *they saw through their own spectacles a different set of differences* in the text than we do through our new fangled tri-focals. Afterall, our glasses should, also, be tinted in order to protect us from dangerous, new rays of the sun that hit our eyes unimpeded by the pre-modern ozone layer. As did readers in any other period, modern readers have their own special advantages and disadvantages over the past.

Within the Old Testament „apocrypha" itself, we have both a self-consciously „wisdom" interpretation of earlier scripture, written in the second-century B. C. by Jesus ben Sira, called *Sirach* or *Ecclesiasticus,* as well as the *Wisdom of Solomon* from the first century A. D.[7] But we also know of many other books, including, the *Psalms of Solomon* (first century B. C.), the *Testament of Solomon* (first to third century A. D.),

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[5] On the similar scholarly studies on David in the biblical narratives and in the Psalms, see Alan Cooper, „The Life and Times of David According to the Book of Psalms", *The Poet and the Historian: Essays in Literary and Histodical Biblical Criticism,* ed. Richard Friedman (Chico: Scholars Press, 1983), pp. 117–131; James L. Mays, „The David of the Psalms", *Int* 40 (1986) 143–155; Brevard S. Childs, „Psalms Titles and Midrashic Exegesis", *JSS* 16/2 (1971) 137–150; and G. Sheppard, „Theology of the Book of Psalms", *Int* 46/2 (1992) 143–155. (1992). For Solomon, see David G. Meade, *Pseudonymity and Canon; An Investigation into the Relationship of Authorship an Authority in Jewish and Earliest Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 44–72, and n. 23.

[6] Hugh Broughton, *A Comment Upon Coheleth or Ecclesiastes: Framed for the Instruction of Prince Henri* (Anno, 1605), 89 pp., and *Henry Ainsworth's The Book of Psalms (1612), with Introductory Essays,* ed. Gerald T. Sheppard (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1993). This first edition of Ainsworth's *Psalms* spawned many reprints with minor revisions, sometimes in smaller handbooks with deletion of the annotations for the purpose of merely using the Psalms for singing. The addition of a „Brief Life of David" occurs in a 16.. edition in the rare book collection of General Theological Seminary in New York City.

[7] See Harvey H. Guthrie, *Wisdom and Canon: Meanings of the Law and the Prophets* (Seasbury, N. Y.: Seasbury-Weston Theological Seminary, 1966) and Gerald T. Sheppard, *Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct: A Study in the Sapientializing of the Old Testament* („Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft", Vol. 151; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980).

and the *Odes of Solomon* (late first to early second century A. D.). In the late medieval period, numerous other Solomonic traditions circulated widely with the promise of providing their readers with esoteric „keys" that could unlock secrets, from insights into human nature to the control of magic and demons. Much of this literature can be shown to derive from older Jewish and Christian tradition that reaches back even to the dawn of Christianity and rabbinic Judaism. Since the time of Origen until about the twelfth century, Solomonic wisdom as an idiom of Christian faith alongside but often distinct from the Gospel, played a greater role in Christian circles, than in rabbinic Judaism.[8]

In Jewish circles, from about the second century, wisdom began to be used more as sporadic rhetorical and interpretive support for a thoroughgoing emphasis on the Torah, Oral and Written. At the same time, Solomon himself often provided evidence of a this wordly fulfillment of messianic text that Christian assigned to Christ.[9] For its inner-biblical interpretation of wisdom and Torah, rabbinic traditions have generally chosen to move in two directions. Hallachic insight into the Torah could begin with a passage in wisdom books as a way to illuminate the significance of the revealed law; or, biblical and non-biblical wisdom could offer rhetorical support for haggadic exposition of biblical texts. These uses of wisdom are integral to rabbinic interpretation, along with the reminder of Henry Fischel that, „In the rabbinic literature proverbs no longer appear in extensive collections..."[10]

The medieval Midrash Misle, the midrash on the book of Proverbs from about the nineth century A.D., confirms these same essential functions for wisdom. Burton L. Visotzsky in the introduction to his English translation of it comments that „In MM she [Lady Wisdom] is virtually always characterized as Torah – the study of rabbinic teachings – without even recourse to a prooftext to buttress this equation. For the

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[8] See the impressive „Introduction" by D. V. Duling, to the Testament of Solomon, pp. 935–959), in *The Old Testament Pseudoepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983). For an excellent overview of wisdom in the time of Jesus, see David Winston's „Introduction", pp. 4–69, in his *The Wisdom of Solomon* („The Anchor Bible Series", Vol. 43; Garden City: Doubleday, 1979).

[9] C. C. McCowan, „The Christian Tradition as to the Magical Wisdom of Solomon", *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* 2 (1922) 14–16. For an overview, see Jacob Neusner, *Torah: From Scroll to Symbol in Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) and his *Messiah in Context: Israel's History and Destiny in Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

[10] Henry Fischel, „The Transformation of Wisdom in the World of Midrash", p. 72, in *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. by Robert L. Wilken (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975).

author of MM, there is no wisdom other than that of the rabbinic sages."[11] The last statement deserves further qualification, but what is clear also from the *„hekalot* curriculum" found in the midrash on prov 10:17 is that biblical wisdom, for the sake of atonement, aids in the study of a hierarchy of primary, non-Solomonic sources of Torah: the carious orders of Mishnah, the Midrash on Leviticus („in fact, every rule which Israel had instituted has been derived from it"), Midrashim on „the Five [Books of the Pentateuch]", haggadah, Talmud, Chariot mysticism („I derive no greater pleasure from the world that I created than when the disciples of the sages sit and behold and look and see and contemplate the recitation of all this great teaching.") and Throne of Glory mysticism. Clearly, midrashim on the Writings is not mentioned here and no independent study of other Solomonic wisdom traditions is recommended. Nonetheless, wisdom books (Ecclesiastes is occasionally cited in MM) and midrashim on the Solomonic books prove valuable precisely in so far as they lead to a better understanding of the more central rabbinic traditions that serve as the primary guides, along with all of the Bible, to the divine Torah.

By contrast, we have many instances of Christian proverbial collections, including the Q source underlying the Gospels and in parts of the New Testament book of James.[12] Other extra-biblical collections of wisdom, immitative of the biblical Solomonic books in style and approximate content, recur from the second century to the present.[13] For example, in about the same period as the Jewish Midrash on the Book of Proverbs, we find extensive evidence of riddles and proverbial collections modeled on the biblical Solomonic books. Christians allowed, far more than did Jewish interpreters, for the role of wisdom as a biblically authorized form of discourse that was distinct from theological discourse focused on the Gospel. Elaine Hansen concludes that much later Old English instructional literature looks back to the same paradigm of biblical wisdom. *The Menoloquium,* for example, „examines the relation between traditional, secular wisdom to well-known Christian doctrine and praxis and its affirms the capacity of human modes and systems of understanding to connect and harmonize

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[11] Burton L. Visotzky, *The Midrash on Proverbs: Translated from the Hebrew with an Introduction and Annotations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 7. Note the midrash at various places, for example, „What [is scriptural proof for] Torah? *The Lord created me at the beginning of His course, As the first of His works of old*" (Prov. 8:22; p. 46).

[12] James Robinson, „Jesus as Sophos and Sophia: Wisdom Tradition and the Gospels", in *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity,* ed. by Robert L. Wilken (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), pp. 1–16, and John S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Tragetories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

[13] K. Preisendanz, „Salomo", *Pauly–Wissowa Supplement* 8 (1956), cols 660–704; C. C. McCowan, „The Christian Tradition", pp. 1–24 and Duling, see n. 8.

sacred and secular time".[14] Luther's preface to Ecclesiastes and Hall's *Salmons Divine Arts* simply represent familiar moments in the long Christian tradition of generating wisdom literature imitative of the biblical Solomonic text up to the modern period.

In sum, while Jews and early Christians have agreed over the centuries that the Torah and wisdom were complementary, Jews after the second century tended to use wisdom in order to better teach legal observance of the Torah, while Christians preferred to see wisdom as expressive of its own peculiar mode of discourse alongside the Torah and the Gospel. The proverb and parable became traditionally as prominent as a guide to the obedient life for Christianity as was the law for Judaism.

Modern Reconstruction and the Late Modern Rediscovery of Biblical Wisdom

The implicit historical references within biblical narratives about Solomon became historically suspect when measured by modern criteria. The association of biblical books with key biblical figures such as Moses, David, or Solomon – much as the association of New Testament books with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – came to be described as „secondary" or even „non-genuine". Even what might seem to support a historical connection could prove its undoing. The editorial comment found in Proverbs 25:1 illustrates this point: „These are the Proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied". R. B. Y. Scott inferred from the statement that „Solomonic" proverbs must not, in fact, have been in circulation at the time, three centuries after Solomon's death. So, when King Hezekiah's scribes create a „copy" of Solomonic proverbs, we have every reason to be suspicious and sceptical about its historical origins.[15] James Crenshaw's standard introduction to „Old Testament Wisdom" concludes bluntly and confidently, „Wisdom and Solomon have nothing to do with one another".[16]

Since the decline of the Biblical Theology Movement and Neoorthodoxy in the 1960's, a substantially new direction is required, if we are to take seriously the criticism of modernity as well as a reassessment of pre-modern scriptural interpretation. For the purpose of this essay, I cannot review the exciting history of wisdom research throughout the modern period. Fortunately there are many good historical surveys

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[14] Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *The Solomon Complex: reading Wisdom in Old English Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p. 116.

[15] R. B. Y. Scott, „Solomon and the Beginnings of Wisdom in Israel", *VTSup* 3 (1960) 262–279, reprinted in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, ed. James Crenshaw (New York City: KATV, 1976), pp. 84–101. See also his *The Way of Wisdom* (New York City: Macmillan Company, 1967)

[16] James Crenshaw, *Introduction to Old Testament Wisdom Literature* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), p. 50.

readily avaiable.[17] My aim here is only to sketch some features in what I see as a fresh approach to the biblical text and the subject of wisdom within current biblical studies and theology.

My own orientation to the Bible falls within what Brevard S. Childs now calls simply a „canonical approach" and Rolf Rendtorff calls „composition criticism".[18] These approaches try to take seriously what happens to pre-biblical traditions when they become parts of a scripture. The pre-history of biblical books becomes less important than our perception of how they have been incorporated into the realistic depiction of the Bible itself. If the Bible fails to meet modern standards of history, that problem becomes less important if we recognize that the actual purpose of the Bible is to offer, within the limits of its own human witness, a revelation of reality. In that case, the realism of the Bible is less determined by the historical accuracy of its implied ostensive references to an ancient past than by its literary-canonical capacity to offer a realistic depiction capable of conveying and illustrating the subject matter of Torah, prophetic in...tion, wisdom, and the Gospel.

A canonical approach ought to employ the widest range of critical scholarship. On the one hand, it must resist any impression of being a synchronic, vaguely „literary" strategy. Few phrases sound more tautological than „Bible as literature". What was it before? The result of an explosion in a print shop? On the other hand, it ought to be able to appreciate the heuristic importance of the newer social-scientific investigations of the Bible championed by Norman Gottwald, Wayne Meeks, and many others.[19]

Without negating the value of various approaches to the Bible for equally diverse purposes, I want to focus on the question of how the Bible's own late form and function warrants its use by readers. In simple terms, I want to know how to read the Bible biblically. Rather than emphasizing the power and influence of its first interpretive community or other types of reader response criticism, I prefer to understand how the text itself invites biblical interpretation and gives it some direction, regardless of who the future readers may be. This approach is text-oriented, but without a naive assumption that „the" text is a fixed „object". Rather the biblical text is as much a subject with its own voice as it is an object. „The text" of such a scripture can signify,

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[17] Henning Graf Reventlow, *Problems in Biblical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1985), pp. 168–186; and Donn Morgan, *Wisdom in Old testament Traditions* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981).

[18] Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Contex* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), pp. 6–17 and Rolf Rendtorff, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), pp. 129–131.

[19] Cf. Norman Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Intorduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); and various essays in *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis,* ed. by David Jobling, Peggy Day, and Gerald T. Sheppard (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1991).

at most, an efficient textual arena, a demarcated and dynamic territory in which interpretation can take place.

We might assume that the Bible testifies to God's revelation only by reference to extra-biblical words and events as they once occurred in the ancient world and that the warrants of the Bible as a scripture rest entirelly on the accuracy of its reference to these moments in the past. As soon as the historical accuracy of the earliest traditions become a matter of dispute, as we have already seen in the case of Solomon and wisdom, the trustworthiness of scripture seems in jeopardy. Moveover, we discover historically that almost no one in ancient Israel, including the key prophets, originally intended to write „scripture". Of course, the same may be said of the New Testament, for example, for Paul's letters and for the Lukan editor's original effort to write an „orderly account". Luke, as a book, is later separated from its second volume, still later called „Acts", when believers began to read the torso of this two volume work as only one „Gospel" – the so-called „Gospel of Luke" – among four others.[20] If the intent of the „original" historical persons associated we read as scripture works written in their names?

Canonical or compositional approaches to the Bible since the 1960's have altered both how we might ask and answer these questions about scripture. First, we see some contradictions in the older or modern Biblical Theology Movement since, fo example, most reconstructed traditions prior to the formation of a Bible are technically not „biblical traditions" at all, but „pre-biblical traditions". Therefore, they are not so obviously a better source than the Bible itself for discovering something called „biblical faith". Second, propentents of „Biblical Theology" tended to use the Bible merely as a piously impaired reference to an ancient world of historically recoverable words and deeds which could, then, be subjected to another equally pious interpretation by modern exegetes. Many of us began to be aware of our hermeneutical preference for a historical and theological interpretation of a reconstructed history. Third, a closer examination of the Bible itself demonstrates that the late form and function of biblical „books", as we now know them, coincides with a later usage, offering some explicit internal warrants for them to be read as „scripture" within Judaism and Christianity. Later editors often provide us with what I have called „canon conscious redactions", linking biblical books with other biblical books the core of which may not have originally been intended to be read together.[21] Hence, we become aware of a late historical and textual interdependence of biblical books qua biblical books.

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[20] See Raymond Brown, *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (Paulist Press, 1981), pp. 29–34.

[21] Gerald T. Sheppard, „Canonization: Hearing the Voice of the Same God Through Historically Dissimilar Traditions", *Interpretation* 34/1 (1982) 21–33.

Some general implications for Solomonic books and biblical wisdom follow. First, what we can know about the historical Solomon does not fully coincide and even contradicts certain details within the biblical presentation of Solomon. Regardless, it is precisely the „biblical Solomon", rather than our modern reconstruction of the „historical Solomon", who is presented in the Bible as the nomen „author" of biblical wisdom in Jewish scripture and in the Old Testament. The biblical Solomon can be just as „realistic" – just as human, vulnerable, and blown about by the winds of time and circumstance – as the historical Solomon. The biblical Solomon can also speak in a fully human „voice", with a personality as distinctive as any other biblical and extra-biblical figure, and the voice of the biblical Solomon can assert things with its own realistically unpredictable mix of authority and insecurity, eloquence and bad prose.

Therefore, if contextual „realism" or the capacity of a text to render a reality is integral to the nature of scripture, this capacity can be shown to exist within the biblical presentation of wisdom with only an indirect relationship to modern historical knowledge. Our acceptance of the validity and sufficiency of biblical realism for the purpose of a theological understanding of scripture need not be weakened by our recognition that a very different conception of „realism" gained ascendancy during the renaissance and in most of the older modern historical criticism.[22] The logic of scripture itself requires its own type of realism so that the perforcely human nature of a biblical „testimony" is expressed through the circumstantial and ordinary language of persons, like us, who are participants in history. This realistic biblical witness of scripture is, thus, itself fully historical and human, as scripture itself requires, even if it appears as the compositional byproduct of editing and does not represent a perfect survival of some earlier historical witnesses to similar claims about God's presence and revelation. The „intent" of this human witness in scripture pertains to the voice and intent of this biblical presentation, far more directly than to the intention, bias, ideas, or religious ideology of the reconstructed original „authors" of pre-biblical tradition or even later „editors". Late editors reflect to some degree their dependence on the patronage of a specific community of readers, and otherwise, their ideological *Tendenzen* are often sporadically registered and further blunted or context and subject matter of scripture itself. They usually exhibit their own peculiar „anxiety of influence", common to specialists who must preserve something if they will have any hope of interpreting it. What is foregrounded most of all is the presentation of the biblical witness itself in the mouth of specific biblical *personae,* in this case, in the human voice of the biblical Solomon.

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[22] See Eugene F. Rice, *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), on the reformation view of wisdom, pp. 147–149, and his chapter on „The Transformation of Wisdom from Knowledge to Virtue", chapter 6, pp. 149–177.

A canonical approach demands a late modern reassessment of Solomon and the Solomonic traditions in the Bible. First, we see that the biblical Solomon is presented as someone whose life is bith attractive and tragic. In the narrative at the beginning of this account, which describes his asking for the gift of wisdom, he poignantly summarizes his need of practical knowledge as a new king of Israel: „I am only a little child, I do not know how to go out or come in" (1 Kgs 3:7b). The wisdom of Solomon is that basic, a skill to know when to go out the door and when to come in the door. Then, he expresses some specific political, economic, and ethical dimensions pertinent to the wisdom, „Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?" (v. 9.) The narrative mixes praise of his building the temple and establishing a great liturgical tradition alongside an admission that „his heart had turned away from the Lord" (1 Kgs 11:9; cf. 1:3b). We see the man in prayer and the mighty king seduced by compromises of faith made in the name of love. He is someone like us, not a type or symbol but a real person, perhaps more impressive than ourselves but certainly as unworthy as ourselves to be a witness to divine revelation.

Second, this presentation of a biblical Solomon serves, at a minimum, as a literary device that marks off whole books according to the subject matter of wisdom, just as the biblical Moses is the *persona* who gives primary witness to the five-book Torah. Note the resemblance between the editorial conclusion of Deuteronomy – „there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (34:10) – and the assurance by God to Solomon immediately after God gave him the gift of „an understanding mind" (I Kgs 3:9) – „I gave you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you." (v. 12). Within the larger biblical depiction of its subject matter, Moses is to Torah what Solomon is to wisdom. Editorial depatures support this idea by various overt signs of intertextuality among the Solomonic parts of the Bible, so that the narrative about Solomon becomes within the Bible a key implicit text and an interpretive aid to our understanding of the Solomonic books both in themselves and in relation to the Torah in scripture as a whole.

From the narrative account in 1 Kings 19 we hear that the Queen of Sheba travelled all the way from the southern tip of the Sinai peninsula „to test him with riddles/hard questions" (v. 1). In the description of both his ability to answer and in what she says, a definition of wisdom is presupposed. She observes as evidence of wisdom „the house that he had built, the food of his table, the seating of his officials, the attendance of his table, the seating of his officials, the attendence of his servants, their clothing, his valets, and his burnt offerings that he offered at the house of the Lord" (vv. 4–5). In other words, his wisdom goes beyond his genius to answer questions to his skills in building an architectually impressive home, in managing his household,

in providing gourmet food and fashionable clothing, and even in the liturgical excellence of his sacrifice and worship. These same themes and especially that of building and maintaining a household recur as key features in the organization of the Solomonic books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The book of Proverbs interweaves the refrain that „wisdom builds a house" throughout the entire collection (cf. 9:1; 14:1; 24:3). Contrasting metaphors within individual sayings about the respective houses of wisdom and of folly, as well as references to „the house of the righteous" and that of the wicked recur throughout the book. Likewise, Ecclesiastes opens with a recollection of Solomon's wisdom as exhibited by his architectual triumphs (1:4–8), accompained by a brilliantly managed household complete with great music („singers", v. 8). At the close of the book, the temporal nature and limits of wisdom (its „vanity" or „vapor-likeness") finds illustration in the description of a house that falls into deterioration when it is no longer maintained (12:1–8). Similarly, sub-themes in the narrative in 1 Kings about the aim of wisdom to „execute justice and righteousness" is echoed throughout the Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (e.g. Prov 1:3; Eccl 4:17). Solomon's love for his wives in 1 Kgs 3:1 and especially in 11:1–2 („Solomon clung to these in love") coordinates well with the positive celebration of the wisdom of eroticism in the Song of Songs. Between the narrative and these Solomonic books, we see clearly that the themes of love and justice play a central role and gain explication within the sapiential idiom of the Bible itself, as well as within the idioms of Torah and prophecy.[23]

Third, the biblical presentation of Solomon's wisdom asserts a particular relationship between the idiom of biblical wisdom and other key idioms of the Bible, such as Torah and prophecy, and, later for Christians, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Within the Solomonic books we may be surprised at how consistently they omit language about the Torah, narrative about the prophets and Israel's salvation history. We hear nothing of the Exodus, the giving of the law at Sinai, the special covenant with Israel, or the specific holiness laws or guidance in the proper worship of God. In fact, even prayer in the proverbs could be easily confused by an outsider with Egyptian or Assyrian prayer to some other God. The admission within the book itself that some of its saying are borrowed from non-Israelites sharpens this difference with other Old Testament traditions. Within the context of the Old Testament, one might say that the Solomonic books show a remarkable and intentional restraint on the part of Solomon. He is presented as self-consciously bracketing out any mention of many traditions he himself considered central to Israelite faith in order to present wisdom as an idiom in unique conversation with the nations and a subject they will recognize as familiar,

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[23] Cf. Gerald T. Sheppard, „The Relation of Solomon's Wisdom to Biblical Prayer", pp. 7–27, in *Scriptures and Cultural Conversations: Essays for Heinz Guenther,* ed. John Kloppenborg and Leif Vaage (*Toronto of Theology Journal* 8/1; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

important, and impressively represented by Solomon. This biblical wisdom shares, even historically retains, some features form ancient Near Eastern wisdom, but is not historically identical with any particular moment among the varieties of Israelite views of wisdom that we can rediscover in the biblical pre-history. Similarly, the book of James in the New Testament explores wisdom with minimal reference to the Gospel.

Rabbinic tradition expressed this feature of biblical wisdom by the advice, „Should someone tell you that there is wisdom among the nations, belive it (Obad. 8), but if he tells you there is Torah among the nations, do not believe it."[24] Scripture, therefore, has established by means of Solomon and the Solomonic books a specialized inner-biblical relationship between the something called „wisdom" in the Bible and other topics, such as the Torah and prophecy. The narrative about Solomon has this same tension built into it. After Solomon receives God's gift of wisdom, God demands *in addition* that he must obey the laws („my statutes and my commandments", 1 Kgs 3:14; cf. 6:11–13; 9:4–9) of the Torah as did his father David. The chief failure of Solomon pertains to his failure to obey the Torah rather than any loss of wordly fame for his wisdom (11:4–8).

My point here is that the Bible depicts a special relationship between Torah and wisdom. This relationship is explored partly in the biblical narrative concerned with Solomon's wisdom and his disobedience of the Torah in 1 Kings 3–11. We best learn about it there, if we wish to understand the scriptural witness to revelation, far better than by any pious speculation we might venture regarding the various different relationships that once existed between ancient Near Eastern forms of wisdom and law. Nonetheless, the latter investigation is still important and essential for a modern scholar, for it contributes directly to the grammar of the text by exposing that deeper pool of possibilities from which the Bible itself derives and asserts its own admittedly eccentric presentation.

In sum, there is an significant logic within the biblical presentation of wisdom that we have almost entirely forgotten in the modern period. This logic alone belongs to the larger claim of scripture that these traditions have a capacity to be heard together as a witness to the same Word of God. Wisdom is clearly not a secular alternative for Solomon receives its as a gift from God. The Solomonic books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes assert repeatedly that wisdom finds its beginning in the fear of God and Proverbs states unequivocally, „For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding" (2:6). Proverbs 30 answers the question about whether wisdom is too far away by even citing other parts of scripture (Prov 10:5, cf. Sam 22:31; Prov 10:6, cf. Deut 4:2) and the epilogue to Ecclesiastes overtly insists that wisdom must

[24] Fischel, *Aspects of Wisdom*, p. 71, see esp. p. 90n32.

be held together with the Torah.[25] But biblical wisdom addresses issues of truth in its own way, in language that the world can easily understand. This self-conscious effort to rival and share wisdom with the world brackets out religious language ideosyncratic to the Torah and to the Gospel.

Now I want to return to Luther's and Hall's assumption that the Solomonic books are concerned with, among other things: ethics, politics and economics. In my view, biblical wisdom points to a wide range of common knowledge that is shared with the neighbors of Jews and Christiansregardless of their religious beliefs. Social-scientific analysis, Marxist criticism of society, the cultural grasp of the insidious logic of racism, studies in sexology, theories of macro-economics, psychoanalysis, and a philosophy of aesthetics serve us best not when they can be made, more Christian or when someone can interject Christian values or religious jargon into them. As Jews and Christians, we join with scientists, philosophers, psychologists, economists, and artists because all truth comes from God wherever it may be found. We also know that not every truth leads adequately to salvation or to the hope of faith. However, truth of every sort is still absolutely essential because it belongs to the whole truth which theology attempts to address in its own bold manner, grounded in faith.

For the matter of how we interpret scripture, I want to suggest two major roles that biblical wisdom can play in modern interpretation. First, I consider most historical criticism to belong to what the premodern interpreters called the „grammatical sense" of scripture or what I might associate with an etymological or archaeological recovery of the pre-history, often the pre-biblical history, of a scriptural text. An understanding of the grammatical senses, ought never to be considered routinely identical with the search for the literal sense of scripture which seeks to hold text and subject matter together. For this reason, the reformers conceded at times that after a grammatical analysis one may still not be able to discern the literal sense of scripture. So, biblical wisdom embraces along with the rest of the world a wisdom derived from an appreciation of aesthetic criticism, historical inquiry, linguistic and semantic theory, the literary-critical love for differences and so forth.

Second, wisdom belongs to that learned capacity of the interpreter of scripture to come to scripture with profound, rather than trivial and prejudiced questions, and, equally, to the capacity of the interpreter of scripture to be prepared for a fresh hearing of the Word of God. We might say that wisdom ought to protect us from well-intended and often quite sophisticated manipulations of the biblical witness in our efforts to hear what we want to hear from the Word of God. On the other hand, wisdom guarentees that the Bible is that kind of rare book, particularly according to modern customs of

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[25] G. T. Sheppard, „The Epilogue to Qoheleth as Theological Commentary", *CBQ* 39/2 (1977) 182 - 189.

reading, that we will need to read twice, or three times, or more accurately, again and again, the rest of our lives. Its role as a human testimony to God's Word means that while God's Word remains the same our wisdom in grasping it changes over time and, therefore, our practical knowledge of the Word does change in some rather radical ways from one generation to the next. Whoever brings better or wiser questions to the Word of God inevitably runs the risk that they may hear a new response to old questions or problems.

So, in time and with new wisdom, the interpreters must hear the literal sense differently on matters such as, for example. Slavery, the role of woman, and the ethics of homosexualities.

I am quite aware thet this essay has focused more on a grammatical element of scripture than has on timely matters in the late modern hermeneutical debate. Yet, this element of „wisdom" has played a major hermeneutical role which ought to be rediscovered in a late modern understanding of peculiarities of scriptural interpretation. Wisdom in this hermeneutical sense allowed Jews, and, by its adaptations, Christians, to find a non-secular form of discourse with the world. This discourse self-consciously, as in the presentation of Solomon, bracketed out essential features of Torah, prophecy, and for Christians, the Gospel. It found a way for a minority religion to talk publicly about God and even prayer, without offering a solution to the problem of unreconcilable differences between religions in the world. Finally, it made room within scripture itself for the central importance of public discourse about ethics, politics, economics, and, by implications, hermeneutics. Even the most pious in pre-modern times seemed to recognize that such wisdom was necessary if are to bring better questions to other parts of scripture, since wisdom offers us hermeneutically this possibility of new questions that, otherwise, we might be too foolish, too prejudiced, too comfortably moral, or too orthodox, to ask.

Finally, I am convinced that these are hermeneutical fallacies on all sides of the current discussion between the older historical critics and the newer comparative literary approaches. Surprizingly little attention has been given in this debate to comparative religion. So, I want to conclude with a hermeneutical and clearly not a pious observation by a pioneer in the study of comparative religion, Wilfred C. Smith, who once said that „historical criticism has taught us how to read scripture pre-scripturally, the newer literary approaches have taught us how to read it post-scripturally. The only thing we do not know any more is, how to read scripture scripturally".[26]

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[26] From a conversation with Wilfred C. Smith. See also his forthcoming book on comparative scripture. Also, from a comparative religion perspective, see my own „Canon" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion,* ad. by Mircea Eliade (New York City: Macmillan, 1987) vol. III. pp. 62–69.