

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF WISDOM

The Only Wise God

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‘To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ!’ (Rom. 16:27). Paul glorifies ‘the only wise God’, he glorifies him ‘forever’, and he glorifies him ‘through Jesus Christ’. Our Biblical theology of wisdom must begin with our wise God, for God is the source of all true wisdom. God’s wisdom is expressed in his work of creation, and God’s wisdom is expressed in his work of salvation in Christ. For ‘by wisdom the LORD laid the earth’s foundations’ (Proverbs 3:19), and Christ crucified is ‘the wisdom of God’ who has ‘become for us wisdom from God’ (1 Corinthians 1:24, 29).

We honour the only wise God when we acknowledge
that his wisdom surpasses our knowledge.
Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!
“Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counsellor?”
“Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay them?”
For from him and through him and for him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen (Romans 11:33-36).

God created the world in his wisdom, and he orders and rules it in his wisdom. We live wisely as creatures in God’s world when we recognise how he has ordered the world, and learn how to live in it so that we receive his blessings.

All this also comes from the LORD Almighty,
whose plan is wonderful,
whose wisdom is magnificent (Isaiah 28:29).

In Calvin's words,

... not only does he sustain this universe [as he once founded it] by his endless might, regulate it by his wisdom, preserve it by his goodness... but also that no drop will be found either of wisdom and light... or genuine truth, which does not flow from him, and of which he is not the cause.¹

And God saved us through Christ in his wisdom. We live wisely when we recognise that 'all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Colossians 2:3) are hidden in Christ, and made known to us in the true message of the gospel (Colossians 1:5). As Calvin claimed, 'Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves'.²

Where may wisdom be found?

In outlining a Biblical Theology of wisdom I understand wisdom as a theological category, rather than a literary category. I do so because while the characteristic literary features of what we call 'wisdom literature' are of vital importance in understanding and expounding those parts of the Bible (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and James), Biblical wisdom is not confined to those books. It is unhelpful to confuse theological and literary categories, as sometimes happens when we describe Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as 'gospels'.

In addition, in studying wisdom in the Bible we have to go beyond a simple word study, because wisdom is translated with a variety of words, as well as expressed by synonyms. So we need to include 'understanding', 'insight', 'skill', 'counsel', 'advice', 'perception', 'plan', 'teaching', as well as the word wisdom itself.³

¹ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1. 2. 1, 40, 41.

² Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.1, 35.

³ E. J. Schnabel, 'Wisdom', 843-848, in T. D. Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, (Leicester: IVP/Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 843.

Approaching Biblical wisdom as a literary phenomenon leads us to a destructive dichotomy between wisdom literature and the rest of the Old Testament; between wisdom and the saving works and covenant words of God; and between wisdom and the Law, history, and prophets.⁴ We are wrong to identify wisdom with creation, and not with salvation. The weakness of dealing with Biblical wisdom in solely literary terms is evident when we see that the book of Psalms, part of the so-called 'Wisdom literature' of the Bible presents us with salvation history and covenant, as well as literary forms of wisdom. Wisdom appears in a variety of literary guises, and in a variety of theological realms.

So much contemporary thinking on wisdom in the Bible links it with creation, because it defines wisdom as a genre, and then focuses on the major theological themes of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. We do need to retain a doctrine of creation, but we need a wider view of wisdom which includes what we can learn from Law, Prophets, Gospels, and Epistles, for here we find the saving wisdom of God. And while we can learn about creation from the wisdom genre of the Bible, we also need to learn about creation from Law, Prophets, Gospels, and Epistles. For example, for a robust theology of creation, we need not only the wisdom books, but also the account of creation from Genesis 1 and 2; the doctrine of human significance and responsibility for the world in Genesis 1 and 2; warnings about idolatry from the Law and the Prophets; the role of Christ in creation from John 1 and Colossians 1; the significance of Christ's miracles from the Gospels; the doctrine of resurrection from the New Testament; and the re-creation of the new heavens and new earth in Romans 8 and the book of Revelation. We do need a good doctrine of creation, but we need to gain it from the whole Bible, not just from the wisdom genre of the Old Testament.

And we need a wider understanding of wisdom than that found in that genre of Old Testament writing. So while there is excellent material in Craig Bartholomew and Ryan O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction*,⁵ it focuses strongly on what wisdom teaches about creation. This is a result of beginning a theological study by selecting evidence on the basis of a literary category. In fact they do add New

⁴ See for example R. E. Clements, *Wisdom in Theology*, (Carlisle: Paternoster/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 13-39.

⁵ Bartholomew, Craig G. and Ryan P. O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction*, (Nottingham: Apolllos/Downers Grove: IVP, 2011).

Testament saving wisdom, but there is insufficient emphasis on the theological themes of wisdom in the non-wisdom literature of the Old Testament.

And linking wisdom to creation can lead to the idea that the heart of wisdom is observation of how things work, of the human search for meaning and order. Biblical wisdom includes the results of observation and reflection, and may also reflect such human searching. But the heart of wisdom is the fear of the LORD, the fear of God.⁶ We learn wisdom from God: wisdom is God's gift, and receiving God's wisdom involves relating to God. Wisdom literature is the inspired verbal revelation of God.

So I am doing Biblical Theology by theological theme rather than by genre. It is not that genre is unimportant. The way wisdom is presented in various genres is of course very different. But theology is a deeper category than literary genre: there can be the same theological substance, though it is communicated in very different ways in different genres.

God's wisdom in creation

God's first act in Biblical history is that of creation. He created the heavens and the earth, and he created humans, made in his image, to live in creation (Genesis 1:1-2:25). The glory and power of the one and only God was revealed both in his act of creation, and in the sacred account of that creation. He created the universe and everything in it by his wisdom. He created wisdom:

When he established the force of the wind
and measured out the waters,
when he made a decree for the rain
and a path for the thunderstorm,
then he looked at wisdom and appraised it;
he confirmed it and tested it (Job 28:25-27).

⁶ Bartholomew, and O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 24-27.

And wisdom delighted in God's work of creation,
and created beings should learn how God rules
and provides for his world, by learning wisdom:
Then I was constantly at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,
rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in mankind.
"Now then, my children, listen to me;
blessed are those who keep my ways" (Proverbs 8:30-32).

As R. E. Clements wrote, 'The operation of wisdom in the world is viewed as a manifestation of a divine providence'.⁷ God created by his word, and designed by his wisdom. Or, as Jeremiah prophesied, 'God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding' (Jeremiah 10:12).

John Calvin recognised the intimate connection between God the creator and sustainer and the universe:

[God] revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe... he shows his glory to us, whenever we and wherever we cast our gaze. ... this skilful ordering of the universe is for us a sort or mirror in which we can contemplate God...⁸

As Zachman has shown, Calvin saw the universe in three powerful images: the theatre of God's glory, the living image of God, and the garment of God.⁹ Calvin rejected the error which tied God too closely to the world and fell into determinism, as he rejected the error of separating God too far from the creation.¹⁰ For the universe is constantly sustained by the direct work of God: 'as soon as the Lord takes away his Spirit all things return to

⁷ Clements, *Wisdom*, 165.

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.1, 52, 53.

⁹ Ronald Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 234-238.

¹⁰ Susan E. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1991), 16-21.

their dust and vanish away'.¹¹ So for Calvin we meet God in his creation: 'O, if we were only truly committed to God! I assure you: all the elements would sing to us and we, we would get to hear in this world a melody made in heaven, so utterly beautiful'.¹²

We need wisdom to live as created beings, as images of God, as well as wisdom to live as believers, people saved by God. Salvation does not remove us from our responsibilities as created beings. The story of salvation occurs with the larger story of creation and recreation, from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. The giving of covenant promises to Abraham and Moses is prefaced by the creation narrative. God as creator is fundamental to God as saviour, and we must praise God our creator as surely as we praise Christ our saviour, as we learn in Revelation chapters 4 and 5. God the creator and God the saviour are not different Gods, nor are creation and salvation different agendas or plans. God's good creation, damaged and distorted by the Fall, is saved, transformed, reconciled and glorified by God's great salvation. God who walked in the garden of Eden will one day live among his people. The 'tree of life' will be for 'the healing of the nations' (Revelation 22:2). And one day, 'the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God' (Romans 8:21).

We are not saved by serving our creator, but we need wisdom to know how to be saved, and we need wisdom to know how to live once we are saved. Our life as believers in Christ, and our ministry to others, will be severely damaged if we do not have God's wisdom to know how to live as believers, and how to live as creatures.

God's wisdom in creation is revealed to us in two distinguishable ways. Firstly, we must learn from the Law and the Prophets. The one and only God is the mighty creator of all that exists, and he sustains and rules all things in his sovereign power for his glory. We must worship and serve God, and must not worship the creation, and we must not worship other 'gods'. Humans are made in God's image, to know God and serve God in the world. We are

¹¹ John Calvin, *A Commentary on Genesis*, (on Genesis 2:15), tr. John King, (London: Banner of Truth Trust, (1847, reprint 1965), 74.

¹² Calvin's Lecture on Jeremiah 5:25, as cited in Marijn de Kroon, *The Honour of God and Human Salvation: Calvin's Theology according to his Institutes*, (Edinburgh and New York: T&T Clark, 2001), 208.

both dependent on God, and also responsible beings who are accountable to him. He is the source of our life, and our judge. We are called to live before him, and to love and obey him.

Secondly, we can also see the wisdom of God in his creation: ‘How many are your works, LORD! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures’ (Psalm 104:24). By God’s wisdom, eagles know how to fly, build nests, and feed (Job 39:27-30, Proverbs 30:19), the ibis and rooster look for their proper food (Psalm 104:27), ants, hyraxes, locusts and lizards are ‘extremely wise’ despite their small size (Proverbs 30:24-28). By God’s wisdom, as we have seen, farmers know how to treat and plant various seeds (Isaiah 28:23-29), craftsmen know how to do skilled work (Exodus 26:1) and kings know how to reign (Proverbs 8: 15,16). People are given this wisdom by God, even if they do not know God. As Calvin wrote:

For what is more noble than the reason of man, by which he stands out far above all animals? How greatly deserving of honour are the liberal sciences, which refine a man so as to make him truly human! Besides, what a great number of rare products they yield! Who would not use the highest praise to extol statesmanship, by which states, empires, and kingdoms are maintained? – to say nothing of other things! I maintain that the answer to this question is that Paul does not utterly condemn either the natural insight of men, or wisdom gained by practice and experience, or education of the mind through learning; but what he affirms is that all those things are useless for obtaining spiritual wisdom.¹³

God’s practical wisdom may be found by observation and reflection, yet God’s relational wisdom while offered to us is elusive, easily missed, not found by human ingenuity, hidden from those who do not observe, hidden from fools, and cannot be bought (Job 28:12-22, Proverbs 8:1-9). For ‘God understands the way to it and he alone knows where it dwells’ (Job 28:23). Why is it so elusive? It is because true wisdom involves fearing the LORD, and because folly is so attractive and seductive, and because despite our wisdom we cannot control the outcome of our actions (Proverbs 9:10, 7:1-27, 19:21). And it is elusive because wisdom is morally and behaviourally demanding. It demands prudence, discretion, self-discipline, integrity,

¹³ John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 38.

humility, sound judgment, hard work, acceptance of correction, keeping promises, generosity, and wise and honest speech; rather than foolishness, erratic behaviour, pride, arrogance, ambition, dishonesty, laziness, evil behaviour, and destructive speech (Proverbs 8:12-14, 12:1-28, Psalm 15). As Graeme Goldsworthy wrote, 'The fear of the Lord means that the Israelite had to see himself as a redeemed but still imperfect person, in a redeemed but still imperfect world'.¹⁴

Paul writes that 'God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made' (Romans 1:20). Those who suppress this truth naturally turn to idolatry, the worship of the creation in place of the creator (Romans 1: 21-23).

It is the verbal revelation of God in the Law and the prophets which clarifies the nature and seriousness of this sin, and promises forgiveness to those who turn to the God of covenant promise and love. At the same time, this wisdom is freely offered, and we are invited to receive precious words of wisdom, that 'tree of life' (Proverbs 3:18). God calls us to receive his wisdom:

Does not wisdom call out?
Does not understanding raise her voice?...
"To you, O people, I call out;
I raise my voice to all mankind.
You who are simple, gain prudence;
you who are foolish, set your hearts on it.
Listen, for I have trustworthy things to say;
I open my lips to speak what is right.
My mouth speaks what is true,
for my lips detest wickedness.
All the words of my mouth are just;
none of them is crooked or perverse.
To the discerning all of them are right;
they are upright to those who have found knowledge
(Proverbs 8:1-9).

¹⁴ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Wisdom: Israel's wisdom literature in the Christian life*, (Homebush West: Lancer/ Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1987), 142.

God is the only wise God, so wisdom comes from him: 'For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding' (Proverbs 2:6). We cannot find out wisdom (Proverbs 30:1-4), but God has spoken his wisdom: 'Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar' (Proverbs 30:5,6). God is the only wise God, so wisdom is ultimately relational: 'the fear of the Lord – that is wisdom' (Job 28:28); and, 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding' (Proverbs 9:10). Truly 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom' (Psalm 111:10). The fear of the LORD 'is profound respect which causes the human to acknowledge creaturely dependence upon him'.¹⁵ The fear of the LORD is the key to the wisdom that is found in God.

The LORD is exalted, for he dwells on high;
he will fill Zion with his justice and righteousness.
He will be the sure foundation for your times,
a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge;
the fear of the LORD is the key to this treasure (Is. 33:5,6)

And here is wise advice: 'The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom' (Proverbs 4:7). Reverential fear of God, 'was the indispensable first step of commitment without which the voice of wisdom could not be heard'.¹⁶ In the words of E. J Schnabel, 'Intimacy with wisdom is not distinguished from intimacy with God. Divine wisdom is a communication for God showing the path to life'.¹⁷

Fearing God is the heart of wisdom, because 'it demonstrates at a gut level that a person knows that they are not the centre of the universe, but rather are dependent on God'.¹⁸ The voice of wisdom is the voice of God. The means of divine revelation in this mode of wisdom is observation, reflection, and instruction. People with wisdom observe the universe, observe creation, observe human behaviour, reflect on its significance and consequences, and teach what they have learnt. But ultimately wisdom comes from God. God

¹⁵ Daniel Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching and learning in Proverbs 1-9*, NSBT 4, (Leicester: Apollos, 1977), 37.

¹⁶ Clements, *Wisdom*, 156.

¹⁷ Schnabel, 'Wisdom', 849.

¹⁸ Tremper Longman III, 'Preaching Wisdom', 102-121, in Grenville JR Kent, Paul J Kissling and Laurence A Turner, *'He began with Moses...'* *Preaching the Old Testament Today*, (Nottingham: IVP, 2010), 107.

speaks through wise teachers of his wisdom. For wisdom is 'the inalienable bond that unites the creative intention of God with the experienced working of the world'.¹⁹

God's blessings and curses, human wisdom and folly

God blessed humans made in his image, but soon he cursed the ground because of them (Genesis 1:28, 3:17). This cursing came because they ate of the fruit of the forbidden tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:9,17, 3:1-24). And this fruit was attractive because it seemed that it was 'desirable for gaining wisdom' (Genesis 3:6). To eat of 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil' was to want to take God's place as the one who determines what is right and wrong, to become like God (Genesis 3:22), to become 'the determiners of their own good and evil'.²⁰

There is the good wisdom of God which he makes known: there is secret wisdom which is not available to humans, and to grasp for it brings God's judgements of death and distance. Increased blessing brings increased responsibility. God's gift of wisdom brings judgment on those who reject it, as also on those who choose folly, those who choose the world's wisdom, and those who grasp for wisdom which belongs to God alone.

There is a parallel between the covenant blessing and curses outlined in Deuteronomy, and the way of wisdom and the way of folly in Proverbs. Both Deuteronomy and Proverbs are concerned with dishonesty in commerce, moving boundary stones, honouring parents, and avoiding adultery, avoiding partiality in justice, avoiding bribes and perjury, and the need to care for widows and orphans and for the poor.²¹ Both Deuteronomy and Proverbs focus on 'the fear of the Lord', and both focus on the retribution implicit in being blessed or cursed by God, by following wisdom or folly.²² And both books include the theme of parents teaching their children, the passing on of instruction from generation to generation. And Israel's wisdom comes from receiving the Law of Moses from God. As Moses told them,

¹⁹ Clements, *Wisdom*, 157.

²⁰ A. S. Reid, *Salvation Begins: Reading Genesis Today*, (Sydney South: Aquila Press, 2000), 33. See 1 Samuel 14:17 and 1 Kings 3:9 for the significance of the phrase.

²¹ R. L. Schultz, 'Unity or Diversity in Wisdom Theology? A Canonical and Covenantal Perspective, *Tyndale Bulletin* 48.2 (1997) 271-306, 296.

²² Schultz, 'Unity', 294, 297-299.

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” (Deuteronomy 4:5, 6).

Corrupted wisdom or folly lead to disaster in Deuteronomy as in the prophets. Moses rebuked God’s people: ‘Is this the way you repay the LORD, you foolish and unwise people?’, and complained of them, ‘If only they were wise and would understand this and discern what their end will be! (Deuteronomy 32:6,29). And Ezekiel prophesied against the king of Tyre,

Your heart became proud
on account of your beauty,
and you corrupted your wisdom
because of your splendour (Ezekiel 28:17).

Wisdom and folly, like covenant obedience and disobedience, are matters of life and death. Wisdom brings God’s blessing, and folly brings his curse.²³

God’s human agents of wisdom

As God has made humans in his image, so he commonly uses them to serve him in the world, not least in ministry to each other. In the Old Testament, God mediated, communicated, and applied his wisdom through humans, notably through rulers and kings, through teachers of the Law, through prophets, and through teachers of wisdom.

Rulers and kings

Joseph in Egypt was endowed with wisdom from God. As we read in Acts: ‘[God] gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace’ (Acts 7:9,10).²⁴ Joseph interpreted dreams, ruled wisely, cared for God’s people, brought blessing to the Egyptians, and showed wisdom in dealing with his brothers.

²³ Jonadab in 2 Samuel 13 is a notorious example of wisdom used for a bad purpose.

²⁴ See Lindsay Wilson, *Joseph Wise and Otherwise: The Intersection of Wisdom and Covenant in Genesis 37-50*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004).

Moses, educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians (Acts 7:22), chose men of wisdom to help him in the leadership of God's people: 'So I took the leading men of your tribes, wise and respected men, and appointed them to have authority over you' (Deuteronomy 1:15). Joshua, successor to Moses as leader of God's people, was a man of wisdom: 'Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him' (Deuteronomy 42:9).

Solomon, king of Israel, was famed for his wisdom. He showed humility in asking God for 'a discerning heart', and God gave him 'a wise and discerning heart' (1 Kings 3:9,12). In the story of the child claimed by two prostitutes, Solomon as judge showed his wisdom, and all Israel 'saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice' (1 Kings 3:28). His wisdom was great and broad, and he was famed for his wisdom. His wisdom was expressed in proverbs and songs, and included study of plant life, animals and birds.

God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He spoke about plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. From all nations people came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom (1 Kings 4:29-34 and see 5:12, 10:1-9,23,24, 11:41, and 2 Chronicles 9:3,22,23).

Solomon at his best, as portrayed in 1 Kings, combines what we might separate: trust in God's promises (1 Kings 8:12-26,56); keeping God's covenant and obedience to God's commands (1 Kings 8:57,58); and receiving God's wisdom (1 Kings 3:5-15). The extent of Solomon's wisdom and wealth shows that he is enjoying the good creation of God, the blessings of covenant obedience, and the blessings of wisdom. Goldsworthy also suggests that the fact that gentiles come to him to learn his wisdom shows the covenant promise of God blessing the nations through Abraham's descendants.²⁵ Beyond Kings and Chronicles, Solomon was associated with

²⁵ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching*, (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000), 185.

what we call 'wisdom literature', including Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs (Psalms 72, 127; Proverbs 1:1-22:16; Ecclesiastes 1:1-18; and Song of Songs 1:1).²⁶

Yet Solomon turned to folly, when his many foreign wives turned his heart away after other gods, and he engaged in idolatry, and so faced the judgement of God (1 Kings 11:1-9). In this he broke God's commandments and God's covenant (1 Kings 11:9-11). Had Solomon been wise, he would have kept the commandments and covenant of God. True wisdom was inseparable from keeping covenant and commandments.

The hope of a wise Davidic ruler surfaces in Isaiah, for David's descendant will be the 'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace' (Isaiah 9:6). 'Wonderful Counsellor' means a wonderfully wise leader, giving supernatural wisdom. This hope is followed by the following promise which includes the striking combination of a Davidic ruler, the Spirit of wisdom, and the fear of the Lord:

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—
and he will delight in the fear of the LORD (Isaiah 11:1-3).

These are themes of messianic hope, and also themes of wisdom. Graeme Goldsworthy points out the remarkable similarities between the words of this prophecy, and the account of wisdom in Proverbs 8: 'I, wisdom... have counsel, sound wisdom, insight, and strength... the fear of the Lord is the hatred of evil... by me kings reign' (vv.12-15).²⁷ The word 'righteousness in Isaiah 11:5 is also significant, as wisdom and righteousness are often associated.

²⁶ We may see David's wisdom reflected in Psalm 78:72. 'And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skilful hands he led them.'

²⁷ Goldsworthy, *Gospel*, 122.

...wisdom is not simply an intellectual endeavour but also has an ethical dimension: doing what is 'right and just and fair' (1:3; 2:9). Thus it is understandable that the categories wise/foolish, though not synonymous, are co-referential with righteous/ wicked: Proverbs 9:9; 10:21, 23; 23:24.71.²⁸

And when Christ came as the Davidic king, he said,

The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here (Matthew 12:42).

Teachers of the Law, prophets, and teachers of wisdom

In Jeremiah 18 we read of 'the teaching of the law by the priest... counsel from the wise... the word from the prophets' (18:18). As Jesus spoke of the three categories of prophets, wise men, and teachers of the law in Matthew 23:34. We tend to regard these as widely disparate ministries, but it is worth recognizing the similarities as well as the distinctives of each.

In each of them, the wisdom of God is revealed. We have already seen Moses' words that connect God's laws with wisdom:

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them.... Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people" (Deuteronomy 7:5,6).²⁹

If the people of God show wisdom in keeping God's laws, they will show their folly by rejecting those words: 'The wise will be put to shame; they will be dismayed and trapped. Since they have rejected the word of the LORD, what kind of wisdom do they have?' (Jeremiah 8:9). If God's people forsake the law, they will not understand what happens to them:

²⁸ Schultz, 'Unity', 298.

²⁹ See Brian S. Rosner, *Paul and the Law: keeping the commandments of God*, NSBT 31, (Nottingham: Apollos/Downers Grove: IVP, 2013), 174-181 on the wisdom character of the law in the Old Testament. There he also argues that Paul uses Old Testament law as wisdom, 181-205.

Who is wise enough to understand this? Who has been instructed by the LORD and can explain it? Why has the land been ruined and laid waste like a desert that no one can cross? The LORD said, “It is because they have forsaken my law, which I set before them; they have not obeyed me or followed my law (Jeremiah 9:12,13).

And Ezra, priest, leader, and teacher of the Law, is a man of wisdom as king Artaxerxes asserts: ‘And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates—all who know the laws of your God’ (Ezra 7:25).

In Jeremiah we read that to turn away from the word of the LORD is to turn away from wisdom:

Even the stork in the sky
...knows her appointed seasons,
and the dove, the swift and the thrush
.. observe the time of their migration.
But my people do not know
...the requirements of the LORD.
“How can you say, “We are wise,
...for we have the law of the LORD,”
...when actually the lying pen of the scribes
...has handled it falsely?
The wise will be put to shame;
...they will be dismayed and trapped.
Since they have rejected the word of the LORD,
...what kind of wisdom do they have? (Jeremiah 8:7-9).

So also prophets show God’s wisdom. This is seen especially in Daniel who praises the wise God for the gift of his wisdom:

Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever;
wisdom and power are his...
He gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to the discerning.
He reveals deep and hidden things;
he knows what lies in darkness,
and light dwells with him.

I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors:
You have given me wisdom and power,
you have made known to me what we asked of you,
you have made known to us the dream of the king
(Daniel 2:20-23; see also Daniel 1:20, 2:14, 5:11, 13).

In giving his wisdom, God also shows the futility of merely human wisdom.

“In that day,” declares the LORD,
“will I not destroy the wise men of Edom,
those of understanding in the mountains of Esau? (Obad. 8).

And God gives wisdom to the wise, that they may teach others. Wise teachers have a vital role in Proverbs. We should understand ‘the wise’ as not so much describing personal qualities as having a public God-given role. They are ‘The Wise’ and their words form a canon of wisdom. They are like fathers and mothers teaching their children (Proverbs 2:1, 3:1, 4:1, 6:20, 31:1), and they are associated with kings Solomon, and Hezekiah, and ‘Wise Men’, (Proverbs 1-9, 10:1-22:16, 22:17-24:22, 24:23-34, 25:1-29:27), as well as from sources beyond Israel, such as Agur and Lemuel (Proverbs 30, 31:1-9). Ahithophel is one of David’s advisors, and is honoured as one whose advice comes from God: ‘the advice Ahithophel gave was like that of one who inquires of God’ (2 Samuel 16:23), even though his role in 2 Samuel is scarcely glorious. We also meet the Wise Woman of Tekoa, who has a significant role in changing David’s attitude to his son Absalom by means of words given her by Joab (2 Samuel 14), in a ministry that mirrors that of the prophet Nathan (2 Samuel 12); and the Wise Woman of Abel Beth Maakah, who negotiated the raising of a siege of that city (2 Samuel 20:15-22).

Wisdom is often taught by proverbs. Proverbs are generalisations about consequences, not absolute statements. ‘A proverb is larger than one case, but not large enough to embrace all cases.’³⁰ They are short, pithy, condensed in meaning, and often show the consequences of actions. They are recorded in order to help people to be wise, and not foolish. They observe the way the world works, they observe human behaviour, they show the benefit of thoughtful reflection, and teach the results of that reflection. But proverbs are more than good advice for a happy life. They

³⁰ Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the literary forms of the Bible*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 55

show the way of God's wisdom, and they warn of the dangers of folly. They invite us to know God and receive life, and warn us of that folly that leads to death. A wise person knows what to say and what to do, and a wise person begins and ends with the fear of the LORD.³¹

Wisdom is also communicated by means of inspired songs (the book of Psalms, the Song of Songs), by narrative and debate (Job), and by personal experience which becomes instruction (Ecclesiastes).

The wisdom literature of the Bible, like the detailed laws of Leviticus, gives us practical advice on how to love the LORD our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength, and on how to love our neighbours as ourselves (Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18). It is as practical, and as concerned with daily life, as are many of the laws in Leviticus. In the words of Graeme Goldsworthy, 'wisdom is a theology of the redeemed man living in the world under God's rule'.³²

We need to learn God's wisdom. As surely as we need to learn from true prophets of God, and turn away from false prophets, so we need to learn from authorised teachers of wisdom, and turn away from false wisdom which is folly. The wisdom of God is found in the teaching of the wise in the Bible:

My son, if you accept my words
and store up my commands within you,
turning your ear to wisdom
and applying your heart to understanding—
indeed, if you call out for insight
and cry aloud for understanding,
and if you look for it as for silver
and search for it as for hidden treasure,
then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God.
For the LORD gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding (Prov. 2:1-6).

³¹ Longman, 'Preaching Wisdom', 105, 107

³² Goldsworthy, *Gospel*, 142.

In Jesus' teaching, it is clear that God's wisdom is the source of all words of God, and of all ministries of those words. We read in Luke: 'God in his wisdom said, "I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute"' (11:49). And in Matthew we read: 'Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers' (23:34). God's teaching comes through his wisdom, through his Son, and through his human agents, including prophets, apostles, the wise, and teachers.

Christ, the wisdom of God

In the gospels we find Jesus Christ described as a person of wisdom, and as a teacher of wisdom. The young Jesus 'was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him', and he 'grew in wisdom' (Luke 2:40, 52). The coming of 'the wise' to worship him at his birth may echo the coming of the wise from many nations to learn from King Solomon (Matthew 2). Christ claimed superior wisdom, as we have seen:

The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom; and now something greater than Solomon is here (Luke 11:32).

Not only did Christ surpass Old Testament wisdom, he was the only teacher and the only giver of that wisdom which enables us to know the Father.

At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Luke 10:21,22).³³

As Calvin wrote, 'For he... has always been the eternal Wisdom of God'.³⁴ And again, 'Will he not be wise who is God's eternal wisdom?'³⁵ To claim that Christ is the wisdom of God does not equate him with the created or

³³ See further, Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000).

³⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.48, 916.

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.24, 152

personified wisdom we read about in the Old Testament, but means that he is the incarnation of the God who is wisdom, as he is the incarnation of the God who is love, light, power, and holiness.

Jesus challenged his disciples to be wise, and to be wise by hearing and doing his words. Here the true and definitive wisdom of God was to be found. And the choice was not between less knowledge and more knowledge: it was between survival and destruction.

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash (Matthew 7:24-27).³⁶

Jesus Christ was the incarnation of the only wise God, and so Paul wrote of ‘the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (Colossians 2:3). Christ is God’s Wisdom, as Christ is God’s Word. In the context of Colossians, those treasures of wisdom and knowledge in Christ include creation as well as reconciliation. For Christ the Son is:

the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created... all things have been created through him and for him... and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:15-17).

And also,

God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross (Colossians 1:19,20).

³⁶ These two ways are also expressed in Christ’s words about the narrow gate and the broad way Matthew 7:13, 14.

As Christ is the focus and embodiment of God's wisdom, so the cross is the focus and embodiment of God's wisdom in salvation.

God planned to destroy human wisdom in the cross of Christ, as we see in 1 Corinthians:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate" (1:18, 19).

And Christ crucified is the power of God and the wisdom of God:

Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1:20-24).

Christ is the wisdom that God has given us: 'It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption' (1:30).

Paul did not preach a message of human wisdom:

When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power (2:1-5).

God's wisdom was unrecognised by those without God, but revealed by the Spirit:

We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived"—the things God has prepared for those who love him—these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit (2:6-10)³⁷.

Through the Spirit, the apostles know the mind of God in words taught by the Spirit, so they can in turn teach these words to others.

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God...This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words... for, "Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ (2:10-16).

And we should remember that in Corinth it was the believers who were following worldly wisdom:

Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become "fools" so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"; and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile" (3:18-20).

For false Christianity can have the appearance of wisdom (Colossians 2:18), and yet be futile folly.

³⁷ See also Romans 1:22.

In all this, God's gospel plan in Christ is God's wisdom:

With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ (Ephesians 1:8-10).

And the content of this plan, including the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God, is 'the manifold wisdom of God' (Ephesians 3:10). As Calvin wrote, 'we experience such participation in him that, although we are still foolish in ourselves, he is our wisdom before God'.³⁸

Believers and ministers

We become 'wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus' through the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:15).

And in Christ, 'we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding' (Ephesians 1:7,8 NIV 1984). We need God's wisdom in Christ to be saved, and then we need to grow in knowing God's will in wisdom and understanding. So Paul prays for the Colossians:

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God (Colossians 1:9,10).

We progress as believers by God-given wisdom. So James encourages us, 'If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you' (James 1:5). We need wisdom to be saved. We need wisdom to live as believers. And we need wisdom to engage in ministry to each other. So Paul wrote of his own ministry:

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.15.5, 793.

[Christ] is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ (Colossians 1:28).

And he challenged the Colossians:

Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts (Colossians 3:16).³⁹

And those who are teachers and preachers of God's words need even more wisdom, because we are judged with great strictness: 'Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly' (James 3:1). This includes wisdom in speaking, in controlling our tongues (James 3:2-11).

As always throughout the Bible, there are two paths, described by James as two kinds of wisdom, wisdom from above, and wisdom from below. Godly wisdom is found in godly lives and so in godly ministry: 'Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom' (James 3:13). This is what folly looks like among teachers of God's words:

But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice (James 3:14-16).

James calls us to lives and ministries of pure and true heavenly wisdom:

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness (James 3:17,18).

³⁹ This ministry may include 'a message of wisdom' (1 Corinthians 12:8).

Those with administrative ability in the church also need to have wisdom. In Acts 6, the apostles ask the people to choose men ‘full of the Spirit and wisdom’ (6:3) to take responsibility for the distribution of food. And of course all who engage in the ministry of the word need practical, administrative wisdom as well, to organise their own lives and ministry, and to function as leaders of God’s people.

God is the only wise God, and we find his wisdom expressed in his words, and fulfilled in Christ, incarnate wisdom, and in the wisdom of the cross. We need his wisdom to live in his creation, as we need his wisdom in salvation. We need to become wise to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus, we need God’s wisdom to live as believers, and need God’s wisdom to do ministry. Our lives need to reflect the breadth and depth of Biblical wisdom.

We preachers need God’s wisdom to know God through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. We need God’s wisdom to understand and preach the Bible. We need God’s wisdom to understand ourselves as created, fallen, and saved. We need God’s wisdom to know how to relate to people, how to lead them, how to teach them, how to love them, and how to grow them to maturity in Christ. We need God’s wisdom to proclaim Christ to our world. In our ministries we need to reflect the breadth and depth of Biblical wisdom.

Praise God that he gives wisdom generously to those who ask, and that in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. The apostle Paul quotes from the book of Job and from the prophet Isaiah as he reflects on the wisdom of God in the atoning death of Christ, in God’s work of salvation:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!

“Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counsellor?”

“Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay them?”

For from him and through him and for him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen (Romans 11:33-36).