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Creation and Wisdom: Three Themes

PHILLIP McMILLION

The connection between creation and the wisdom literature is part of a much larger discussion about Old Testament theology as a whole. One of the major concerns of Old Testament theology is how the divergent materials in the Old Testament should be organized. Is there a central organizing theme or concept? Is there an outline or a series of key points that holds the material together? That continues to be one of the central issues of Old Testament theology and will certainly not be settled here.¹

That discussion is important, however, for the relationship between creation and wisdom. Some scholars have suggested that wisdom is not especially theological in nature. In fact, some have suggested that wisdom is actually one of the most secular parts of the Bible with little that is overtly theological. Norman C. Habel and others have countered that there is indeed theology in the wisdom material. Wisdom does have much to say about the nature of God and the relationship between God and this world. It also has something to say about the human response to the Lord. This theology is related, at least in part, to the theme of creation.²

Much of the modern discussion about creation deals with issues of science and theology. Since science deals with knowledge and information, there would appear to be a clear connection to wisdom, since wisdom also deals with information and observations about the natural world around us. This is misleading, however, because the two areas of science and wisdom are not as closely related as they first appear. Science observes the natural world in order to gain factual information and in order to categorize and systematize that information. Wisdom, on the other hand, observes the natural world, but primarily in order to determine how to act, that is, how to behave in wise and understanding ways. God has created the world with certain basic principles built into the fabric of the universe. The Old Testament scholar, Walther Zimmerli, has stated simply that, "Wisdom theology is creation theology."³ God has also created human beings to be a part of that universe. How does one live so as to be in tune with the natural order that God placed in this world at creation? That is one of the key questions for the wisdom literature. In that sense, wisdom and the relationship between wisdom and creation are not so much about science as they are about ethics.

WISDOM AND ETHICS

In the influential book, *Character in Crisis*, William Brown argues that one of the major purposes of the wisdom literature in the Old Testament is character development.⁴ Wisdom literature is about developing right thinking, right acting, and passing on the traditions that are important to the community of faith. The wisdom literature of the Old Testament reflects an intentional effort to promote the values central to the community of Israel and to see that they continue to be at the core of the beliefs and actions of the people of Israel.

1. Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Issues in the Current Debate*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991). Hasel gives a good overview of the major issues involved in the discussion of Old Testament theology.

2. Norman C. Habel, "The Symbolism of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9," *Interpretation* 26 (1972): 150–51.

3. Walther Zimmerli, "The Place and the Limit of the Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology," in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, ed. J. L. Crenshaw (New York: KTAV, 1976), 316.

4. William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

One passage that reflects this concept of passing on values from one generation to the next is Prov 3.19, which reads, “The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens.” The opening chapters of Proverbs contain admonitions from parents to children concerning wise behavior and wise choices. Chapter 3 of Proverbs connects those admonitions to the Lord’s work with calls to “Trust in the Lord” in verse 5, “Fear the Lord” in verse 7, and “Honor the Lord” in verse 9. The call to fear the Lord in verse 7 is especially significant since that is a key idea in much of the wisdom literature. In Prov 1.7, the fear of the Lord forms the basis for the wisdom of the Book of Proverbs. There is much discussion about the meaning of the term “fear of the Lord,” but one important element is mentioned in Prov 3.7, and that is the idea of turning away from evil. If one truly fears the Lord as the Old Testament suggests, then one will turn away from evil and turn toward God in obedience. This idea of wisdom that leads one to turn from evil is also reflected in Prov 8.3 and in 16.6. Job 28.28 places the fear of the Lord in a parallel structure with departing from evil. The two concepts are basically equivalent.

In Prov 3.11–12, the writer recommends the Lord’s discipline and reproof. The reference in verse 19 to the Lord’s wisdom is the last of six uses of the term “Lord” in Prov 3.1–20. This high density of references to the Lord suggests a strong connection between the wisdom recommended here and the work of the Lord. True wisdom will honor the Lord, will trust in him, will fear the Lord and turn away from evil.

The message of 3.19 is similar to the concept in Prov 8.22 ff. “By wisdom, the Lord founded the earth.” The Hebrew word for “founded” is also used in the context of God’s creation in Pss 24.2; 78.69; 89.12; and 104.5. Wisdom is a part of God’s creation from the very beginning, and so there are, in fact, some choices that are wiser than others. Wisdom is built into the very fabric and foundation of all of God’s work. Because of this, there are some paths that follow God’s intended design, and others that do not. The wise person will seek those paths that are a part of God’s design and follow them.⁵

How is one to determine what those wise choices will be? Beginning in Proverbs 10, the book begins to recommend specific actions in many different situations in everyday life. The situations include farming in Prov 10.5, trade in 11.1, neighbors in 11.12, companions in 13.30, wise use of speech in 15.1, and many others. In many of these passages, the Lord’s connection through creation is not mentioned, but it is always in the background. All of the wisdom literature is built on the foundation of the importance of the fear of the Lord. This includes the recognition that God is behind the creation. God has created with wisdom and order. The wise person will acknowledge God and follow God’s plan.

One important point for a modern application is that these observations about wise choices are not based on a specific Israelite context. Wisdom is not based on God’s actions on behalf of the nation of Israel. Wisdom rarely refers to God’s call of the patriarchs or the deliverance from Egypt at the exodus. These wise choices are not grounded in God’s relationship to the nation of Israel, but are good for all of God’s creation. Because of God’s work in creation, these choices are good for all people at all times. The proverbs are not just good advice. They are not simply nice sayings like *Poor Richard’s Almanac*. The proverbs are based on God’s nature and God’s work in creation. As the creator, the Lord knows what is best for creation. The wise person will try to determine those wise choices and live according to them. In this way, creation provides a link between the nature of God and the broad area of ethics and right behavior. Gerhard Von Rad has written that wisdom is “the divine principle bestowed upon the world at creation.”⁶

Prov 10.5 may serve as a specific example of the connection between behavior and the order of creation. This proverb makes an observation about the right choice of action in harvest time. The harvest comes at a specific time in the cycle of the year, and the wise person must seize the opportunity at the right moment. If one fails to act at the right time, the moment is gone and the harvest will be lost. The right time in this case is a part of the cycle of the seasons that is built into the fabric of creation. The loss of the harvest is not

5. Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 117–18.

6. Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 441.

inevitable, however, because one has the freedom to choose the right action and work during the harvest. In this way, the order built into creation and the freedom of human choice come together to form the wise action in this particular event. The recognition of God's order in creation and the human choice to act on that information join to form the basis for wisdom.

In the modern world, there are certain right actions that are a basic part of human life. These would include, mercy, justice, and honesty.⁷ Each person must then decide to follow the wise path and exercise these traits in specific situations in life. Wise behavior combined with human choice to act wisely leads to ethical behavior.

WISDOM AND IDOLATRY

A second important theme connected with wisdom and God's work in creation is the Lord's superiority over idols. In Jeremiah 10, the prophet condemns the idols of the nations around Israel because they are powerless. In fact, they are no gods at all. In Jer 10.11, he states, "The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens." This is followed immediately in verse 12 by the words, "it is he who made the heavens by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens." This verse refers to the Lord's wisdom at creation, and it echoes a number of terms from Prov 8.22–31 that also link creation and wisdom. The opening phrase in Jer 10.12—"He made the earth"—is exactly the same in Prov 8.6. The poetic term for "the world" in the second line of Jer 10.12 is also found at the end of Prov 8.26. The word for "established" in Jer 10.12 is found in Prov 8.27, and the word "heavens" is found in both Jer 10.12 and Prov 8.27.

Jer 10.12 has clear connections with the wisdom tradition and the important role of wisdom in creation. God's work in establishing the universe with its order and symmetry is important evidence of God's wisdom. God has set everything in its proper place and placed boundaries for the rivers and seas. God's great wisdom as exhibited in creation is in sharp contrast to the idols of the nations. Jer 10.14–16 paints a graphic picture of the dumb idols that can do nothing and the foolish people who place their confidence in the work of human hands (cf. Ps 115.1–8). The Lord has demonstrated real wisdom through his work in creation. The wise person will acknowledge that wisdom and live according to it. The wise course is to follow the Lord and to reject the foolishness of idolatry.

This same lesson is still important for people today. God has shown his wisdom in creation that is made with a structure and purpose. How foolish it would be to place one's trust in the work of human beings. Modern science and technology have made wonderful discoveries that can be a great benefit to humanity, but they are certainly not the source of ultimate wisdom. Medicine and psychology can alleviate suffering and lead to a fuller life, but again, they can not give one the ultimate answers to life's great questions. Only the Lord, the source of real wisdom, can provide the ultimate answers to the real questions of life.

Many people today are searching for answers. People want to find meaning and wisdom for their lives. In some cases, however, they look for answers in new age philosophies and human wisdom. Those new age philosophies are not really so new after all, but are actually simply new manifestations of the same old idolatries that try to place humanity in control rather than God. The desire to search for meaning in life is a valid one, but the key is where to find that meaning. The Lord who created this world is the true source of meaning, and real contentment will be found only when one turns to the wise architect and designer of this world.

WISDOM AND PRAISE

A third theme that connects wisdom and creation is the praise of the Lord. In Job 38–41, God's wonderful work in creation is a source of wonder and awe. God has done things far greater than Job can comprehend. God's creation is far above human understanding. Job acknowledges that he has spoken about things that he

7. Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 112.

did not really understand. Job humbles himself in faith before the Lord. One of the great lessons of Job is that one can still have faith, even when life is difficult to understand. Job does not get the answers he sought, but he still maintained his faith in the God who was the source of wisdom and understanding.

In the Psalms of creation, God's work is a source of praise for all the works that God has done. This is seen especially in Psalm 104. This is one of the classic creation psalms, and it is significant that it opens and closes with praise for the Lord of creation. In Psalm 104, there are several links between creation language and wisdom as already seen in the comparison between Jer 10.12 and Prov 8.22–28. In Ps 104.2, God is praised as one "who has stretched out the heavens like a tent." The verb "stretched out" is the same root as the one used in Jer 10.12 when God "stretched out the heavens." God laid the foundations of the earth. He set the mountains and valleys in their places. God set the boundaries for the sea so that they should stay in their place.

Just as in Genesis, God not only created all the living creatures, but he provides for their needs as well. God created the plants for the animals to eat. He made the habitation of the birds of the air. The trees are watered so that they will grow and the birds can build their nests in them. Even the heavens are set in proper order with the sun and moon to mark the times and the seasons. The point in all this is that God's creation is in proper order with everything in its proper place. God cares for all parts of creation, and each creature has what it needs to thrive. Every creature has both food for nourishment and a place to live. God not only creates, but he cares for and provides for his creation.

Then in Ps 104.24, the psalmist breaks forth in praise for the wonderful way that God has designed and carried out his creation. In wisdom God has made the world and all the creatures that dwell in it. Only a God of great wisdom and power could have conceived of this magnificent cosmos and then brought it to fruition.

The psalm comes full circle and returns to praise of the Lord in the last section of the poem. In verses 31–35, the poet breaks forth in praise once more. The psalm concludes as it began with the phrase, "Bless the Lord, O my soul." Then the final word is that one Hebrew word known to most people as Hallelujah, or simply "Praise the Lord."

In Psalm 104 the work of the Lord in creating and sustaining the universe is a cause for praise and adoration. The psalmist recognizes that only God's great wisdom could have brought about this marvel of the creation. The psalmist uses striking images of God riding on the chariot of the clouds, or God as the master builder establishing the foundations of the earth. These were familiar images to the people of ancient Israel, but they communicated that the Lord, and no other, was the true creator and controller of the forces of the cosmos.

What does this kind of praise have to say to people today? Modern descriptions of the universe may be quite different from those of ancient Israel. The poetic symbolism that spoke to their day may not resonate with the modern ear. That does not mean that the sense of awe and wonder should be lost. There is much in the natural world that is still beyond the explanations of modern science. There is still much to learn and to understand. The way that the different systems in nature are connected and related is a mystery.

There is also a place for caring and protecting what the Lord has created. Because God has created such a beautiful and intricate world, humans should strive to care for that creation and preserve it for generations still to come. There is a role for Christians to play in the conservation and ecology movements. The creation should be protected exactly because it is from God. When creation is appreciated and protected, that is another way to praise the one who made it all.

CONCLUSION

As indicated here, creation plays an important role in at least three ways in the wisdom of the Old Testament. Since wisdom is a part of the basic foundation of creation, this should influence the way people act toward God and toward each other. So an understanding of God's wisdom as seen in creation will impact one's ethical and moral behavior. God's wisdom in creation also shows that

God is the one true God to be worshiped above any other. No other part of God's creation or work of human hands can rival the Lord. Wisdom calls on all to worship the Lord. Finally, God's wisdom as seen in creation calls on all creatures to praise the Lord. God deserves honor and worship because of all he has done in creation through his wisdom. The wonderful wisdom of the Lord seen in creation should influence our ethics, our worship, and our praise for the Lord.

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