

WISDOM IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

A Summary for David Griffith's Interfaith Zoom on Tuesday 22 September 2026

Perhaps surprisingly, I want to begin with the Old Testament concept of Wisdom, without wishing to tread on what might be the specifically Jewish understanding of Wisdom. The Christian Bible contains two Testaments or Covenants. And, of course, for the incarnate Jesus and indeed for the early Christians 'the Scriptures' of which we read in the New Testament was referring to our Old Testament or the Jewish Scriptures. In fact, teaching the Bible in general terms and the Old Testament in particular is one of my passions. In 2016 I put together a course running over 18 evenings which is now available through 55 podcasts of 15-20 minutes each – just in case anyone is interested!

Wisdom in the Old Testament

So I begin with the Wisdom literature in the Old Testament. Wisdom is a type or genre of writing, a category alongside history and law and prophecy, for example. We find it in particular in the Books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs, while recognising both that some of those Books does not really constitute Wisdom and also that we find Wisdom in other parts of the Old Testament, for example The Psalms.

What is Wisdom? A simple definition is the ability to make good and godly choices. It is not so much about intelligence or IQ but about spiritual perception, that is the knowledge of the value of things. The opposite of the wise man or woman is the fool, not the unintelligent or the uneducated. The fool is someone who lives his or her life without reference to God and to Wisdom and ignores the structure of the world. See Psalm 14:1 'The fool says in his heart, "There is no God"'.

It is easy to miss the fact that the Bible recognises the existence of Wisdom in nations and societies outside Israel. See for example 1 Kings 4:29-34, where we read: '... Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt.' All the nations came to hear Solomon's Wisdom. While the Queen of Sheba visited Solomon partly because of his wealth, it was also because of his Wisdom.

There is a famous passage in 2 Chronicles 1:7-12 where God appears to Solomon at the beginning of his reign and asks Solomon for whatever he wants God to give him. Solomon answers Wisdom and knowledge, that he may govern this great people of God's. This pleases God and because Solomon has not asked for wealth, possessions or honour or for the death of his enemies and for long life, God chooses also to give Solomon wealth, possessions and honour.

That said, the tragedy of Solomon's life is that, no doubt for largely political reasons, he married many foreign women who brought to Israel the worship of their own nations' gods, so that the country was drawn away from following the one true God YHWH. And after Solomon's death the nation was split into two: Judah in the South and Israel in the North.

That expression 'the fear of God' to which Ecclesiastes moves as its conclusion, is the starting point of Proverbs (1:7) and the pivot of all Wisdom literature. See Proverbs 9:10 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.'

Secular philosophy tends to measure everything by mankind and comes to doubt whether Wisdom is to be found at all. But the Old Testament turns the world the right way up with God at its head; His Wisdom the creative and ordering principle that runs through every part; and man, disciplined and taught by God's Wisdom, finding life and fulfilment in His perfect will.

Wisdom is different from other Near Eastern traditions in that it comes not just through experience, but also through revelation, as we have seen: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'. This is the distinctive approach in Israelite Wisdom from the traditions in other countries. This is where you start: fear is not terror, but rather respect, attentiveness, focus ...

Wisdom in the New Testament

The New Testament identifies Jesus as the embodiment and fulfilment of God's Wisdom. The apostle Paul explicitly calls Jesus Christ 'the power of God and the

Wisdom of God' (1 Corinthians 1:24). And the key message of a crucified Messiah turns worldly status and intellectual pride upside down, showing that God's Wisdom looks more like sacrifice than human power. In fact, in 1 Corinthians Paul expressly contrasts the Wisdom of humanity with the foolishness of God.

At the heart of the Christian faith stands the Cross, on which Christians believe that Jesus (as the only perfect human being who has ever lived) died the death which the sins of the whole world deserve, so that by belief in and following Jesus a person's relationship to our Creator God is restored.

In general terms New Testament Wisdom follows the Old in being essentially practical. The Wisdom of God which derives from God's revelation is contrasted with worldly Wisdom which is based simply on intuition and experience apart from revelation and in fact can even oppose the Wisdom of God.

So those who are really wise are those to whom God has graciously given Wisdom, for example Joseph and Solomon in the Old Testament and, in the New, Stephen (the first martyr) and Paul. Wisdom is essential not just for leaders of the Church (Acts 6:3) but for all Christian believers that they may understand God's purposes in redeeming the world through the Cross of Christ (Ephesians 1:8, 9) and can walk humbly before God (Colossians 1:9, James 1:5; 3:13-17) and discretely before those outside the Christian faith (Colossians 4:5).

We read that God's provision of redemption through the Cross of Christ clearly demonstrates His Wisdom (Romans 11:33), which is manifested in the worldwide Church, that is beyond individual denominations (Ephesians 3:10). The best attempts of humankind to resolve the problems of human existence are shown to be foolishness in the light of the Cross.

As a boy, Jesus grew in Wisdom, as demonstrated in Luke's Gospel Chapter 2, and then on growing up amazed his audiences by his Wisdom. In two particular instances he personifies Wisdom in a way which reminds us of Proverbs.

Jesus' teachings in Matthew's Gospel on the Sermon on the Mount where he reinterprets the Torah or the Law gives rise to the view for the Apostles that Christ was the new Torah, the complete revelation of God's will replacing the old rule. Given that in Deuteronomy 4:6 the commandments are linked to Wisdom, it is not surprising that Paul would see Jesus as the new Torah and as the Wisdom of God.

In the book of Revelation, the final book of the Bible, Jesus is lauded for Wisdom as the crucified yet exalted lord of the Church (Revelation 5:12).

Conclusion

I conclude by going back to the very beginning of Old Testament and Genesis 1:27, the account of creation, where we are told that God created humankind in His own image. It's a challenging concept – 15 years ago I wrote a 3,000 essay on it! Part of that image, apart from Love and Holiness, is Wisdom. So I want to suggest that for the Christian - and indeed, humbly, for the Jew - part of our seeking to be more like our Creator God is seeking to grow in Wisdom.