

# BE SOBER AND WATCH

By DENNIS J. McCARTHY

*Hear, O heavens and give ear, O earth;  
for the LORD has spoken:  
Sons have I reared and brought up,  
but they have rebelled against me.  
The ox knows its owner  
and the ass its master's crib;  
but Israel does not know,  
my people does not understand.<sup>1</sup>*

THIS ORACLE was selected to open the collection of Isaiah's words because it states a basic theme of the book: the ungrateful infidelity of God's people. The sin is the more striking because it is unnatural. It goes against the proper order of things. Simple observation shows that the brute beast knows its master, as the birds know the paths for their mysterious migrations.<sup>2</sup> All the more, then, should superior creatures, a people chosen by special divine favour, acknowledge their God and follow his ways. The force of the argument, and especially of the implied condemnation, lies in the unquestioned experience of an order which should obtain in the human sphere as it does everywhere else.

This fundamental conviction that there is an order in the world which can be discerned by experience and to which life should conform is a central doctrine of ancient wisdom literature. This same tradition is reflected in the prophet's vocabulary: 'know' and 'understand', was the aim of the whole enterprise of the ancient schools of wisdom. The form of the prophet's utterance, a parable drawing a lesson from homely experience, is part of the same tradition. Nor is this the only use of elements from wisdom in the prophet. The Lord's judgment on his people can be expressed in the workings of history whose meaning is revealed to the prophet: the assyrian army comes, 'with all their arrows sharp, all their bows bent, . . . roaring like a lion', to smite the people which has aroused the anger of God.<sup>3</sup> This is what we expect from a prophet; but he also conveys the divine judgment in the words of a wise man condemning those who

<sup>1</sup> Isai 1, 2-3. Quotations are from the *Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> Jer 8, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Isai 5, 25-30.

contravene a proverbial maxim: 'Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes'.<sup>4</sup> Or again, the Lord condemns the 'practical atheists', those who act as though there were no God to see and punish. The ideas and the words put in the mouth of the Lord himself are taken directly from a major wisdom theme.<sup>5</sup>

The prophet does not seem to have drawn a distinction between his visionary experiences and the teachings of wisdom as a source of knowledge of God. He had seen the glorious king of the universe enthroned, and he learned about the same God from the contemplation of the order in that universe. Now one experience, now the other, now vision, now wisdom doctrine, provides the content for an authentic prophetic word.

The wisdom tradition, then, is not alien to prophecy. But is the point worth making? After all, wisdom contributes whole books to the bible. Why should one expect the tradition to be incompatible with another major part of scripture? The question is sensible enough, but in fact standard scholarship has tended to see the prophetic tradition as central and to treat wisdom as a mundane late-comer without real theological relevance. In part this has been so because it has been fascinated by the personality, the doctrine and the poetry of the prophets, or, more recently, by the idea that the special character of biblical revelation comes from the fact that God reveals himself through his actions in history. The wisdom tradition is often a bit prosy, and it is not much concerned with history. Wisdom, then, has been treated as a theological step-sister because it has seemed less exciting than other aspects of the bible.

We know now that this is unrealistic. Prophecy used wisdom.<sup>6</sup> In the historical books it turns up in the Joseph story in the Tetrateuch, and the whole of the later complication from Deuteronomy to Kings – the deuteronomistic history – was affected by wisdom ideas. Wisdom turns out to be ubiquitous, and this is really what one would expect. Wisdom was not a special thing, the property of a separate group in Israel. In its fullest meaning it was the traditional practical lore of ancient society and of each important group within that society. Any technical skill – that of the farmer,<sup>7</sup> of the housewife,<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Isai 5, 21; cf Prov 3,7: 'Be not wise in your own eyes' (*The New American Bible*, (NAB)). The condemnation in the form 'Woe to . . .' had its origins in wisdom teaching. Cf J. W. Whedbee, *Isaiah and Wisdom* (Nashville and New York, 1971), pp 80–110.

<sup>5</sup> Isai 29, 15–16; cf Ps 94, 7–8; Prov 20, 12, for the wisdom parallels.

<sup>6</sup> For a full study of this important point see Whedbee, *Isaiah and Wisdom*, pp 149–153.

<sup>7</sup> Isai 28, 23–29.

<sup>8</sup> Prov 31, 10–31.

of the craftsman,<sup>9</sup> of the king,<sup>10</sup> was considered to be true wisdom. Especially important, kings needed counsellors, and it was the wise man 'who has entrance to the ruler'.<sup>11</sup> Hence the emphasis in wisdom on a good address: 'A man may live by the fruit of his tongue',<sup>12</sup> and even table manners: 'Eat what is set before you like a gentleman'.<sup>13</sup> Priests had the wisdom proper to their class, but they were also royal counsellors.<sup>14</sup> Men from a priestly background like Jeremiah and Ezekiel must have learned some forms of wisdom. So had anyone who had learned writing, as did, apparently, Isaiah and Habakkuk.<sup>15</sup> Thus anyone who was likely to preach, to teach, to lead, to produce a book in ancient Israel had been touched by wisdom traditions. Vision was a glory granted occasionally to a few prophets during a particular epoch. The truisms of Proverbs and the like were the stuff of ordinary living.

Wisdom, then, must not be treated as a side-issue in any effort to use the bible according to the perspectives of the bible. In a very real way wisdom was the life-setting of much of the Old Testament, not just those books classed as wisdom literature. This is not to say that the profoundest insights of a Job were there from the beginning and known to all. Nor were the most exalted prophetic states or theological insights always operative. No doubt wisdom evolved within Israel over the course of a long history. However, the basic attitude and the major themes were there from the beginning, for wisdom did not develop *ab ovo* in Israel. Rather, Israel took the tradition over from its neighbours, probably beginning when the administration of the kingdom under David and especially Solomon began to demand trained scribes. They could not come from the rural tribes which were Israel. They came from without, and they brought their training in the wisdom tradition with them. These wisdom traditions of Mesopotamia and Egypt had long since raised the great questions about the meaning of life, including the classic problem of the suffering of the good man and the justice of God. Israel's wisdom started out full-grown. Its oldest expression, the Joseph story, can already state one of the insights of developed wisdom: there is an order in things directed by the will of God, though men often cannot see it.<sup>16</sup>

We are well advised, then, to consider this fundamental element of biblical revelation on its own terms, even though these terms can

<sup>9</sup> Exod 31, 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> Prov 31, 1-9.

<sup>11</sup> Sir 39, 4 (NAB).

<sup>12</sup> Prov 18, 20 (*The New English Bible* (NEB)).

<sup>13</sup> Sir 31, 16 (NEB).

<sup>14</sup> Cf 2 Kg 12, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Isai 8, 1; Hab 2, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Gen 50, 20; cf Prov 19, 21.

seem so much less exciting than the exaltation of visions or the fear and fascination of theophanies on trembling mountains. If wisdom can rise to the lofty poetry in Job and elsewhere, this is not its characteristic form, the thing which makes it a valuable complement to the more spectacular presentations of revelation. But what is characteristic of wisdom? What are the attitudes and the themes which made it so acceptable as a basis for life in old Israel and might commend it to us? Generally commentators insist on two points. The central wisdom doctrine is that which we have already seen: the world is an ordered place. The basic attitude is empirical: the belief that men can come to know this order through experience. Here one can see at work the practical and empirical character of the origins of wisdom. The proper workings of a trade or of a farm or of an administration depend upon orderly procedures; and in the ancient world these were learned from those in the previous generation who had practised them: that is, persons whose experience confirmed their knowledge of the orderly art they taught.

However, while it never denied nor wished to deny its connection with practical particulars, wisdom goes far beyond this. It affirms an order in the whole of creation. This is implied in its analogy between human behaviour and the ways of nature on which the prophet based his condemnation of a faithless people. The order observed in part of nature should obtain in all of it. This order is no impersonal rule of law either. Creation works according to the plan of a personal God.<sup>17</sup> He directs it, and the wise man can see him in it. Indeed, in one of his incarnations, the wise man moves beyond simple observation to ardent contemplation:

I will call to mind the works of the LORD,  
and will declare what I have seen . . .  
How greatly to be desired are all his works,  
and how sparkling they are to see!  
All things are reciprocal, one opposite the other,  
and he has made nothing incomplete.  
One confirms the good things of the other,  
and who can have enough of beholding his glory?<sup>18</sup>

This wise man looks upon the world and sees that it is good. He accepts it and is moved to praise his creator.

<sup>17</sup> Sir 43, 24, (23): 'His is the plan which calms the deep' (NAB). The 'deep' is the 'abyss' (Gen 1, 2), the primordial watery chaos whose conquest was the basis of all creation in the ancient near eastern concept.

<sup>18</sup> Sir 42, 15, 22, 24-25.

However, one should have no illusions. This was not a state one could acquire easily. The proponents of wisdom knew otherwise. There was always that practical background. One does not learn a trade in a day or a year. How much less could one learn this fundamental wisdom in a hurry and alone. It required application and submission to authority: 'Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and reject not your mother's teaching'.<sup>19</sup> Any single individual, after all, is 'but of yesterday'. How can he know anything unless he turns to those who can open out larger vistas than those his narrow span of life affords?<sup>20</sup> He must turn to the elders who have had experience and, more important, the instruction which enabled them to interpret experience. They could direct experience into the proper paths. The beginner is sure to err. The important thing is that he learn from his errors, and to do this he must be prepared to listen: 'he who heeds reproof is honoured', but 'he who hates it will die'.<sup>21</sup> This is experience speaking already. Anyone who ignores the past must repeat its mistakes. He must rather learn from it, and this means he must listen to the authorities, those who know the tradition in which the experience of the past is stored so that it can be applied. Only thus can one move forward from the past.

Wisdom, then, is open to those who will learn, 'those who seek her'.<sup>22</sup> They must have self-control.<sup>23</sup> They must accept their limitations and take things in order:

Seek not what is too difficult for you,  
nor investigate what is beyond your power.  
Reflect on what has been assigned you,  
for you do not need what is hidden.  
Do not meddle in what is beyond your tasks.<sup>24</sup>

One can almost smell the dust of the school-room! Surely this is enough to cool over-generous enthusiasm. But we are reminded of more; a little adversity helps too: 'before I was afflicted I went astray'.<sup>25</sup> However, one must not be misled by this. So much of this wisdom instruction is directed against various forms of ardour that we are likely to see the wrong thing. Ardour is not condemned nor suppressed; it is presupposed. It is the truly eager seeker who can submit to tough discipline without discouragement. It takes strength

<sup>19</sup> Prov 1, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Job 8, 8-10.

<sup>21</sup> Prov 13, 18; 15, 10.

<sup>22</sup> Sir 4, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Prov 14, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Sir 3, 21-23.

<sup>25</sup> Ps 119, 67. This psalm, a meditation on the law, is dominated by wisdom ideas and wisdom vocabulary, as are other psalms.

and ardour to learn from reproof and affliction, and so come back to the task again and again. The danger is not felt to be that energy will be destroyed by too much discipline, but that it will be dissipated through misdirection. A powerful drive must be channelled, conformed to reality. Wisdom means control, but controlled power.

This is still austere enough. What results can it promise? Wisdom could hardly be content with the search as such, not if it saw it as difficult and restrictive as this. In any case, the idea of the search being its own justification is a romantic one which would hardly have occurred to an Old Testament thinker. The disciplined search for wisdom must take the seeker somewhere. But where? When we look for the answer we meet the problems of plurality and lack of system. Wisdom simply presents the results of its experience in aphorisms, not in any logical whole. So we are confronted with a number of ideas on the results of the search for wisdom. They do not seem to agree with one another, and we are not told how to relate them among themselves. We can only notice a number of ideas which are relevant to our problem and which are emphasized because they recur or because they are discussed at length. Then we can see if they hang together in any way.

Wisdom claimed that it came to know from experience an ordered world which proclaimed a wise God. But it also knew from experience that there is much in the world which it could not understand. Man is a mystery to himself: 'It is the Lord who directs a man's steps; how can mortal man understand the road he travels?'<sup>26</sup> Much in the world is beyond him, and God himself is the greatest mystery:

Let us praise him the more, since we cannot fathom him,  
for greater is he than all his works.  
Beyond this many things lie hid;  
only a few of his works have we seen.<sup>27</sup>

This is a splendid profession of faith which is ready to praise what it cannot understand. But it is also an affirmation of the inadequacy of the methods of wisdom, for it admits that experience really cannot perceive the total order of things.

This may be described as a kind of theoretical failure, an experience of the limits on what wisdom could contemplate. It is more serious when wisdom has to admit practical failure. It wanted to know and understand primarily that the order it learned might be a

<sup>26</sup> Prov 20, 24 (NEB).

<sup>27</sup> Sir 43, 29 (28). 34 (32) (NAB).

guide to conduct. But here too it ran into limits. A man can plan, but God may determine that things go otherwise. The divine order is a mystery and therefore with all the good will in the world a man may fail to follow it. The wise Joseph had already affirmed this, though without any emphasis on man's good will in the case involved!<sup>28</sup> Proverbs repeats it: 'Many are the plans in the mind of man, but it is the purpose of the Lord which will be established'.<sup>29</sup>

Thus wisdom confesses its own limitations. Much stands outside any order that man can see by ordinary experience. How does it come to terms with this? To repeat, 'it' does not. There is no one solution. Instead, one finds a number of reactions to this drastic experience of limitation. We meet one mood in Proverbs:

Two things I ask of you;  
Put falsehood and lying far from me,  
give me neither poverty nor riches;  
provide me only with the food I need;  
Lest, being full, I deny you,  
saying, 'Who is the Lord?'<sup>30</sup>

This is all that the wise man asks of life. If he just has enough sometime in his life, it is enough. The limits are seen to have positive value. They keep a man from rising above himself or falling beneath the human. They keep him properly subject to the Lord. This abnegation, this readiness to accept and exploit the possibilities of a narrow life, is admirable though it is not very exciting. It does keep the old faith in a world ordered by God. It finds it good to conform to this order, restricted as it is.

This is one possible response to the recognition of limitations. There is another: 'I have seen all things that are done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a chase after wind'.<sup>31</sup> This is the central thought of a whole book which, without being a logically constructed system, forms a rather complete survey of the major wisdom themes. It considers power and pleasure, work and reward, friends and family, and the value of wisdom itself. One by one the topics are pondered and the conclusion is always the same: the efforts of man to understand and guide his life are all vain. And so 'I thought the dead more fortunate than the living . . . but better than both he who is not born'.<sup>32</sup> This is a denial of life parallel to

<sup>28</sup> Gen 50, 20.

<sup>29</sup> Prov 19, 21.

<sup>30</sup> Prov 30, 7-9 (NAB).

<sup>31</sup> Eccl (Qoh) 1, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Qoh 4, 2-3.

the worst pagan pessimism. However, it is the low point of a collection of *pensées*, not a final logical solution. More frequently Ecclesiastes offers a glimmer of pale light: 'it is God's gift to man that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in his toil'.<sup>33</sup> He too, with all his scepticism, can finally accept life with all its limits as something from God.

The wisdom tradition is not yet exhausted. Indeed, it seems at one point to take issue with Ecclesiastes. He had offered a magnificent poem about the seasons of things with a conclusion sceptical of man's ability to know and meet them.<sup>34</sup> Sirach returns to the theme. It too recognized the limits of wisdom,<sup>35</sup> but found there a reason to praise the God whose greatness and goodness exceeds human understanding. It has the same message on this theme:

The works of God are all of them good;  
every need when it comes he fills.  
No cause then to say, 'This is not as good as that';  
for each shows its worth at the proper time.<sup>36</sup>

This is no doubt true, but Ecclesiastes' point is that the wise man does not experience this worth. Hence his melancholy. Nor does Sirach deny the fact. It simply reacts differently to it.

This seems to be the key to the different conclusions we find drawn from the experience of the limitations of wisdom. They meet the same problem from the point of view of the same tradition, but experience and training – wisdom – are not the whole story. There is the person who experiences too. In one mood he can accept limitation as a positive value. In another he finds it negative, something against which he chafes. In another, he is moved to exult in the power of the supreme mystery. Each state is very human. Each is something most of us must come to terms with sometime or other. We would be the poorer without the record of Proverbs' resignation, Ecclesiastes' revolt or Sirach's confidence. In proper wisdom fashion we can turn to the experience of those who have been there before. The elders offer guidance, or at least the knowledge that we are not alone. It is wisdom as a way, a method, which offers help; for the difficulty is that, in the end, enlightenment comes only from God:

Whence then comes wisdom?  
and where is the place of understanding?

<sup>33</sup> Qoh 3, 13. Cf also 2, 24; 7, 14; 9, 7; 11, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Sir 43, 28.

<sup>34</sup> Qoh 3, 1-15.

<sup>36</sup> Sir 39, 33-34 (NAB).



It is hid from the eyes of all living . . .  
 God understands the way of it,  
 and he knows its place.<sup>37</sup>

All man can do is wait patiently in the service of God: 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom'.<sup>38</sup> Of course, he may grant insight to the persistent seeker, but the success of the search does not depend on the man himself. Confronted with mystery and his own impotence, all he can do is possess his soul in peace and wait upon God.

It is here that the discipline of wisdom assumes its real importance. It turns out to be insufficient to bring one to enlightenment. This is the paradox of wisdom. It demands long practice in patience and control to prepare oneself to learn from experience. Then experience reveals that man cannot penetrate the mystery of his own life, let alone that of God. It is then that its emphasis on humility, on self-control, on persistence, is really needed to enable one to live with the limited results of all effort. And it is comforting to be ready to learn from those who have gone before: Sirach shares our moods of confidence, Ecclesiastes our need to endure in times of discouragement.

Nor can one say that things are very different in the new dispensation. True, the New Testament emphasizes prophecy. The Church was heir to the prophetic gifts of gold.<sup>39</sup> But, as in the Old Testament, this must be balanced with other factors. 'Be sober and watch', we are admonished.<sup>40</sup> That call to be sober is surely the voice of wisdom calling for patience and self-control, and this before a mystery far deeper and more terrific than that which the limitations on human experience presented to the wise men. We must be on the alert, sentinels ever on the watch. We are waiting for something. What? In the New Testament era one cannot think of waiting without thinking of the coming, the ultimate victory,<sup>41</sup> when 'God will be all in all'.<sup>42</sup> But 'that hour no one knows but the Father'.<sup>43</sup> Like the wise men of old we can but wait upon the Lord.

<sup>37</sup> Job 28, 20-21, 23.

<sup>38</sup> Job 28, 28.

<sup>39</sup> Cf Acts 2, 17-21; 1 Cor 12, 10.

<sup>40</sup> 1 Pet 5, 8.

<sup>41</sup> In 1 Pet 5, 9 it is true that the immediate object of watchfulness is the devil prowling 'like a lion' to catch the Christian here and now, but ultimately it too looks to the final intervention of God in Christ.

<sup>42</sup> 1 Cor 15, 28 (NEB).

<sup>43</sup> Mk 13, 32.