

LIVING WITH TRADITION: ISRAEL'S QUEST FOR WISDOM

By FREDERICK MORIARTY

IT WAS an unusual and moving experience to see the film *Fiddler on the Roof* in a Jerusalem cinema. Beyond the exuberance of the principal characters and the pathos of their final tragic journey into exile, there is the unforgettable scene of the patriarchal Tevye letting the world know the truth by which he and his people will survive. *Massorah! Massorah!* (Tradition! Tradition!), he cries, with almost a defiant exultation. It is a glimpse into the heart of hebrew belief, the vital relation to a holy experience of God which they dare not forget. Tradition is the remembrance of a past which enables the people of Israel to support the present and to hope in the future; it is not something alien, standing out there and open to objective examination. It is a part of themselves, an element of self-recognition — to say nothing of self-preservation — embracing a sphere of reality which has God as its focal point. We will look at this tradition from two aspects: first, the wisdom movement in Israel provided a test of that tradition's power to assimilate and transform new material from the wider environment of the ancient Near East; and secondly, once established as an authentic expression of Yahwistic faith, the wisdom tradition itself was challenged by a radical form of questioning, evident above all in Job and Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes), which shook the foundations of conventional hebrew wisdom.

Wisdom and understanding beyond measure (1 Kg 4, 29)

In Old Testament scholarship there is a debate, as yet unsettled, about the origins of israelite wisdom. Some see this activity rooted in a family situation, others in clan or tribal wisdom; still others situate

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it in scribal circles attached to the royal court, and particularly evident in the time of Solomon. Whatever the final conclusion of the debate, which will probably recognize that all of these proposed sources contributed in some way to the origin and development of so complex a movement, it is agreed by all that the Age of Solomon, in the tenth century B.C., provided a context for that sapiential activity which was the hallmark of his reign. I do not mean that Israelites only began to use their brains in that era. But it was precisely during this time of national expansion, sometimes referred to as Israel's 'Age of Enlightenment', that the hebrew people definitively broke out of a certain tribal insularity and faced up to the new challenges and opportunities of the international scene. Forced to cope with a new and rapidly changing world in which Israel was determined to play a part, the court of Solomon became a centre for the cultivation of that practical, empirical wisdom which had, centuries earlier, produced a large body of proverbial literature in those great foyers of civilization, Egypt and Mesopotamia. On the anchoring of Israel's wisdom to the name of Solomon, the hebrew tradition is firm and enduring. No matter that what began in wisdom ended in folly, as the Old Testament faithfully reports; the lively interest in wisdom, with a strong international flavour, must be seen in relation to a religious and cultural pluralism which raised new questions for a united and prosperous kingdom impatient with the answers of an earlier time.

The traditions about Solomon and his wisdom have, it is true, been edited under strong deuteronomic influence; but there is no warrant for dismissing the record as pure legend. Even as David lay dying, he counselled his son and successor to act 'according to your wisdom' (1 Kg 2, 6). In the mysterious vision by night at the high place of Gibeon, Solomon set out his priorities in response to Yahweh's open-ended offer of divine favour.

Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil; for who is able to govern this great people of yours? (1 Kg 3, 9)

The response of Yahweh to this act of royal humility is both an exercise in divine liberality and a reminder that the gifts of Yahweh carry with them a claim to live in obedience to his will.

Because you have asked this and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for wisdom to

rule justly, behold I will do as you have asked. I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you did not ask, riches and honour, more than that of any other king, And if you walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and commandments, as David your father did, I will also lengthen your days (1 Kg 3, 11-14).

To meet the needs of a monarchy which differed so drastically from the loose tribal unity of pre-Davidic days, Solomon realized that new administrative structures were needed; these would help him carry out his own large social, economic and political plans. For the first time we read of scribes and recorders to whom we owe those first collections of proverbs, songs and legends which have clustered around the name of Solomon. Dependence upon earlier Egyptian models is quite probable; in any case, there was such an unprecedented burst of literary activity, especially in the sapiential genre, connected with his court, that Solomon became the patron of wisdom literature: a tradition which persisted to the very end of the biblical period. Even in some of the psalms which have a strong sapiential imprint, we may see Solomon's preoccupation with the temple of Jerusalem and its cult.

A lover of learning delights in its discipline (Prov 12, 1)

Apart from bureaucratic needs and the consolidation of power in royal hands, what are some of the deeper causes which explain this new flowering of wisdom literature? There must have been an inner dynamic which accounts for this new and intense curiosity about human conduct and the world as theatre of this activity. Why was Israel so partial to collections of practical, empirical wisdom, to those maxims or directions for almost any contingency in everyday life? Perhaps Psalm 115 gives a clue: 'The heavens belong to Yahweh, but the earth he has given to the sons of men' (v 16). The Hebrew sees life as a task, as a job to be done. God had made men and women proprietors of his creation; we are answerable for the way we manage the territory entrusted to us. In this life, a Hebrew is called to a certain mastery over this environment, constrained to cope as well as possible with life in all its dimensions. Life on earth is something to be relished; and its joys, risks, sorrows and rewards are within that person's reach. The daily routine, no matter how apparently trivial, is an aspect of that task in the world. Having dominion over creation means entering wholeheartedly into the

work to be done. This gives meaning and savour to hebrew life even at its most humdrum level. If it is true that the orientation of most branches of contemporary theology is towards the human person, then we should recognize the people of Israel as our spiritual forebears. They took the world very seriously, not in a shallowly secularistic fashion, but with full attention to all levels of human experience. This brings us to the distinctive quality of Israel's wisdom, to the point where tradition decisively shaped the quest for meaning and direction in life.

If we define wisdom as the search for meaning in a changing world, then the central place of experience becomes evident. Wisdom affirms life as a human enterprise, with emphasis upon freedom and the decisions by which one brings coherence and order into one's world. The proverbs of Israel have been compared to so many buoys set out to help us steer a right course. Unlike their powerful story of salvation where the emphasis rests upon the divine irruption into history, wisdom is centred upon the human choices, the lived experience with all its ambiguities. Still, one must not distort the meaning of experience by restricting it to the merely secular, the exclusively human. Israel's experience is essentially religious, caught up in the awareness of a transcendent God upon whom one is absolutely dependent.

The religious basis of responsible action in the Old Testament yields a very different picture from that of the nations surrounding Israel. The divine authority underlying human choice has nothing to do with a world of many gods. Israel had long been freed from the oppressive constraint of any mysterious taboo. Divine authority rested upon a single personal will which made its unconditional demand even as it respected the autonomy of human choice. Wisdom, as W. Eichrodt long ago noted, gives practical instructions for mastering life; but here, too, we are always aware that life's earthly foundations may be smashed by God's judgment. There is no incompatibility between wisdom and faith in this God, for the lessons and ideals inculcated by wisdom were simply expressions of their way of understanding Yahweh and life. By failing to see their experience of Yahweh as an essential dimension of the total experience, we irresponsibly drive a wedge between faith and life. The apparent secularity of wisdom in the Old Testament, involving human decision and responsibility within a context of divine claim and love, is totally different from a modern secular humanism which affirms that the human person and the visible world are of ultimate

significance. The inter-locking experiences of Yahweh and the world are expressed in a saying attributed to Solomon:

A man plans what he will say,
But his tongue utters what Yahweh wills.
The ways of a man seem pure in his own eyes,
But Yahweh weighs the heart.
Commit your work to Yahweh,
And your plans will bear fruit.
Yahweh has made everything for its purpose,
So the wicked will have his day of doom (Prov 16, 1-4).

To fear Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1, 7)

The above saying, repeated many times in the Old Testament, reveals the point at which Israel's ancient faith impinged most directly on the search for wisdom, giving it a new and specifically israelite character. Comparing this insight with egyptian wisdom, we note that the latter set down what they called *maat* as the ultimate reality to which both the gods and humanity were obliged to conform. It is a concept essential to the understanding of egyptian culture. *Maat* is difficult to translate. H. Frankfort defined it as 'the divine order erected at the time of creation; this order is manifested in nature through the normal course of events; it is manifest in society as righteousness; and it is manifest in the life of the individual as truth'.¹ It concerned both the cosmos and the ethical order, and the task of the wise man was to hand it down, not to modify it in the light of experience. To offend against *maat* was to transgress the divine will. In various texts *maat* has been translated as 'truth', 'justice', and 'primordial order'. Theodicy was scarcely an issue; for divine justice was incomprehensible, and salvation was found only in unquestioning piety.

The mood and spirit of mesopotamian civilization were quite different. The same cosmic rhythms prevailed, but there was an element of violence and unpredictability which we do not find in Egypt. In the floods and searing winds from the desert, in the very instability of their environment, men and women were keenly aware of their own powerlessness before forces over which they had no control. A threatening world robbed them of that calm serenity which characterizes so much of the art and literature of ancient

¹ *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York, 1948), p 63.

Egypt. How were mere mortals to make their way and achieve some kind of peace in a world which appeared to be wholly beyond their power to influence? These are the fundamental questions raised by the religion of Mesopotamia. In his brilliant history of mesopotamian religion, Thorkild Jacobsen has singled out three phases of their belief. The first, representative of the earliest period, centred on the worship of natural powers which would ensure survival. To have enough to eat and drink was the primary objective of human reasoning and action. The second, covering approximately the third millenium B.C., concentrated on the gods as rulers, with all power in heaven and on earth vested in the assembly of the gods. Finally, in the second millenium B.C., the concept of a personal god emerged, and with it greater attention to individual as against communal needs. The final, and declining, stage of their religion is described by Jacobsen in these words:

In the latter half of the second millenium and in the following first millenium a dark age closed down on Mesopotamia. The old framework within which to understand the workings of the cosmos survived, but it moved from the interplay of many divine wills to the wilful whim of a single despot. The major gods became national gods, identified with narrow political aspirations. There was a corresponding coarsening and barbarization of the idea of divinity, no new overarching concepts arose, rather doubts and despair abounded. Witchcraft and sorcery were suspected everywhere; demons and evil spirits threatened life unceasingly.²

While we can see easily enough shared human concerns and common aspirations in the cultures of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Israel, the differences are even more striking. Granted the same broad intercultural background which cannot be minimized in the light of steadily mounting evidence from the ancient Near East, there is a totally different spirit pervading Israel's wisdom literature, from the simplest type of practical maxims to the profoundest observations about the mysterious purposes of her God. Anguish, perplexity and doubt are not absent from the deepest levels of this literature, as we shall see; but there remains the image of an accessible God, in whose presence the community of faith can find support and comfort. 'Finding God in all things' is a cherished principle of christian asceticism. The fashioner of proverbs as well as

² *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, 1976), p 21.

the questioner of Yahweh's disposition of things was doing exactly that.

How are we to understand this *yir'ath YHWH* (fear of Yahweh) which confronts us, in both Old and New Testaments, with a strange ambivalence? We are told, 'Fear not!', just about as often as we are told to fear the Lord. A speech of Moses attests both meanings in a single verse:

And Moses said to the people, 'fear not: for God has come to prove you, and that the fear of him may be before your eyes, that you may not sin' (Exod 20, 20).

Isaiah plays on the same ambivalence in his advice to the people of Judah:

Do not call conspiracy all that this people call conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But Yahweh of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread (Isai 8, 12-13).

In the one case we are dealing with a harrowing, incapacitating fear which paralyses action. The same word passes over easily into that fundamental religious attitude or disposition of soul which combines such virtues as awe, worship, humility and obedience. Abraham Heschel described it as a sense of awe in the presence of mystery, a radical amazement at the wonder of God's creation. From this reverential stance the Hebrew came to recognize that the human mind, for all its power, was not the measure of all things. There remained a sphere beyond our comprehension but under the providence of God.

As the beginning of wisdom, this fear paves the way for a liberating commitment to Yahweh; it is both the basic principle and the best fruit of wisdom. More than one author has noted that the doctrine of creation lies at the centre of wisdom thinking; and there is no doubt that the idea of creation appears in both conventional and radical wisdom. In a real sense this fear is a corollary of our creaturehood: an honest evaluation of ourselves before the Holy One who has brought us into existence. This involves some understanding of both our strengths and weaknesses, and acceptance of ourselves and a refusal to panic over our shortcomings. There is nothing quite like a realistic self-assessment to keep us on an even keel. Israel's wisdom literature even suggests here and there that a sense of humour may carry us a long way in life's different

situations. Perhaps an excessive solemnity in the face of divine revelation has obscured for us the healing power of humour which occasionally lights up the Old Testament record. The Hebrews were not concerned with covering up the fact that their God could laugh.

We have seen that recent study of wisdom places great emphasis on the experiential character of this quest for understanding and meaning in the world. How does this choice or this course of action affect my situation here and now? This experiential quality was not, of course, confined to Israel alone. We are looking at a human and therefore universal concern; and it is verified in both the more conventional, proverbial expressions of wisdom and in its more radical, challenging forms. To see once again the distinctive character of Israel's contribution to wisdom, we can appeal to a general principle: a faith deeply held will leave its mark on every facet of a people's experience. It is not surprising, then, to see the prior tradition, that complex of Israel's belief and practice, moulding and transforming her wisdom literature. These reflections on the human condition, as Israel experienced it, were meant as guides to decision. But what kind of decision? Responding to the story of earlier divine interventions as well as to the advice of the sages, Israel was trying to meet the overwhelming reality of the present, which was still the encounter between Yahweh and his people. The ancient tradition was transposed to a new key.

A useful example of refashioning pagan material into an authentic expression of Yahwistic faith is the attractive personification of wisdom which appears in several of the wisdom writings, and which has, up to now, resisted a fully satisfactory explanation. That the wisdom writers, in their lively personification of wisdom, were borrowing from the heritage of other cultures is now certain. A background in the religious imagery of Canaan/Phoenicia is most likely. Nor can Egyptian influence be ruled out; though it may have been mediated through Canaanite channels. Each passage has its own special emphasis, Proverbs (8, 22-31) relating wisdom to creation, Sirach (ch 24) picturing her as dwelling in Israel by divine command, and Wisdom (7, 22-31) describing her as reflecting the majesty and goodness of God; and all three come from very different times and milieux. In all of them, Wisdom, divine in her origin, reaches out to men and women. The personification is highly poetical, but hardly a clearly defined personality; in no case could a Jewish poet conceive a wisdom as a divine person alongside of Yahweh. But this literary form of personification aptly portrays God

as seeking to communicate himself to the world he created. This is not an anticipation of New Testament revelation; but it is at least a partial preparation for that ultimate communication of God in the Incarnate Word, as revealed by John in a Prologue which borrows from the Old Testament imagery of personified wisdom. The phenomenon of personification, in either its Jewish form or in its radically new appropriation by a Christian writer, illustrates the key role of a tradition in adapting earlier and alien imagery to the expression of orthodox belief.

Sorry comforters are you all (Job 16, 2)

The strength of a tradition can be measured by its openness to criticism. In fact there is a generous literature of dissent in the history of religion, disclosing the human tendency to raise basic questions within the framework of deep religious commitment. It is in the context of our limitations — sin and guilt on the one hand, and our urgent demands for meaning and value in our lives on the other — that these questions arise. Situations of crisis stimulate reflection about the divine purpose and its relation to our own relatively insignificant lives. Israel had more than her share of crises; and the book of Job, a byproduct of crisis, is the most creative expression of dissent from a tradition which had nourished countless generations of believers. Job is nothing less than a protest against the bankruptcy of a traditional piety out of contact with real human problems.

Tradition and experience clash in the angry and frustrating exchanges between Job and his friends, as the protagonist searches for an alternative to the rigid, flinty orthodoxy which he is never able altogether to shake off during the debate. The anonymous author of Job has left us a major tract in the evolution of religious belief, along with a major problem of interpretative analysis. Israel could never return to the old clichés of traditional belief, after this new vision of the hidden God who escapes our comprehension and control.

The tradition against which Job protested goes by various names. Some call it, not altogether accurately, the deuteronomic theology of reward and punishment (cf Deut 28). The difficulty with this characterization is that it fails to do justice to the very individualistic doctrine of retribution proposed by the friends; Deuteronomy is concerned with national retribution within a clear covenant context. Both of these elements are missing in Job. That good or evil conduct carried with it divine sanctions was a widespread conviction in the

ancient Near East. For example, the problem of the righteous sufferer had arisen in the religious consciousness of Mesopotamians as early as the second millenium B.C., finding expression in the remarkable poem *Ludlul bel nomeqi* ('I will praise the lord of wisdom'): an articulate rebellion against injustice in the world. Turning to the hebrew tradition, we may see it in the belief that there is a divinely established order in the world by which evil would inevitably be punished and good rewarded. The book of Proverbs reflects this belief in many sayings (cf Prov 10, 3.27). Doctrinaire theologians have a habit of reducing the complexity of experience to the simplicity of a single formula. In the early stages of the debate, Job has nothing to set against this but his experience. The pat dogmatic formula simply does not work in his case!

What can be said of Job's faith as he sets out to challenge an ancient orthodoxy shared by him and his friends? The Prologue to the debate lets us in on a basic insight: religious faith is a matter of boundless commitment. This is what Yahweh praises in Job (1, 8). The body of the work reveals a Job struggling for a deeper realization of what is implied in his faith. Only after the appearance of God at the end of the dialogue does Job come to a renewed commitment. Now he realizes that the old equation between righteousness and prosperity, sin and misfortune, is baseless. The self-importance which requires that the universe adjust to his needs and his righteousness is overcome, and the full majesty of God as creator and ruler of the universe is affirmed. We may even say that, where there is perfect faith, questions about God's justice are simply irrelevant. Responding to the voice from the whirlwind, Job has won a new and totally open relationship to God: the commitment of an I to a Thou which is the focal point of a believer's whole life. It is true, I think, that Job's challenge to tradition goes beyond the problem of human suffering; it shows us how a person, in the difficult journey of faith, can arrive at a wholly new commitment to God. The book moves beyond the problem of suffering to a new vision of human existence as total openness to the hidden God. Yahweh does not answer Job's questions; he asks more questions! Yet Yahweh has met his fundamental demand: to meet God. Job now enjoys a deep peace, not because of arguments he has heard, but simply because he has encountered Yahweh (42, 5-6).

Access to the divine presence released Job from the stuffiness of his friends' smug orthodoxy. His challenge to tradition allowed him to grow spiritually even as he painfully confronted the mystery.

Here we witness the break-up of an old world. The crisis of suffering, attended by a faith which refused to waver, gives us a glimpse of a new world in the making: painful and incomprehensible but radiant with God's glory.

Though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find out (Qoh 8, 17)

G. K. Chesterton once observed that 'despair does not lie in being weary of suffering but in being weary of joy'. In this fascinating but unsettling book of Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) the melancholy sage has posed the ultimate challenge to the received hebrew tradition. In the apt description of G. von Rad, he has pitched his tent at the last frontier of Yahwism; and we can only admire the courage and self-confidence of a community which could accept this book into the canon of her sacred writings. The book of Job reflected on our suffering, Qoheleth on our happiness; and the process called into question the most deeply cherished values of his own people. Picture a Jew, passionately attached to learning, as he read the following:

So I turned my mind to the nature of wisdom and knowledge, to the nature of madness and folly. I perceived that this also is a chasing after wind. For with much wisdom comes much worry. One who adds to knowledge adds to pain (Qoh 1, 17-18).

Imagine the jolt to Judaism's strong work-ethic in these lines:

So once more I gave my heart up to despair over all that I had achieved under the sun, Since a man who has toiled with wisdom, knowledge and skill must hand over what he has earned to one who has not worked for it. . . . This also is vanity and a chasing after wind (Qoh 2, 20-23).

Amidst Qoheleth's disparate observations about life and its values, scholars have observed a common thread running through the work. It is the basic insight of Qoheleth which saves his orthodoxy, as it places him firmly on the side of its radical critics. Central to his perspective is the incomprehensibility of God and the design or order he has given to the world. Gone are the sweeping, reassuring affirmations of the saving history; the thunder of the prophets has been silenced. There is, instead, the painful awareness of a hidden God and of a world which has become an insoluble riddle; order and direction are there but we cannot discern them. Against the bland assurances of unreflected faith, Qoheleth tells us

that we must live within a structure we do not understand. Not even love and hate are in our own hands; everything has been laid out by God; but both human existence and divine reality remain opaque.

Attempts at analysis of Qoheleth are so much chasing after wind; but we can recognize the honest challenge to a tradition which had not given sufficient weight to the darkness (a favourite word in Qoheleth) surrounding the human struggle for meaning in life. The tradition is not shattered; it has been broadened and enriched by the reflections of one who had felt the haunting realization of ultimate powerlessness in an inscrutable world. Every reader of the book senses immediately the contemporary appeal of this wise man who caught better than any other artist the sense of our own mortality and the limitations of human existence. No other book in the Old Testament appeals so strongly to the modern reader.

Living with a tradition is a process of spiritual growth, maturity. The sages of Israel, in addition to adapting the experiential, accumulated wisdom of the ancient Near East to the needs of their Yahwistic faith, challenged that tradition, forcing it to advance in the face of new realities. Their authenticity rests upon their willingness to speak directly and honestly to the problems and the pain of good people trying to face up to life. These teachers give us a model of theological communication which must apply a tradition to the problems, anxieties, risks and opportunities which confront people right now. Theology will not give instant answers to all our difficulties; but, like the wisdom literature of Israel, it will speak to the needs of ordinary men and women, challenging their values yet ultimately nourishing their faith.