

STUDY 1

We Need to Be Wise

Ian Pennicook

The writer of Ecclesiastes observed: ‘Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh’ (Eccl. 12:12).¹ This is not a student’s lament; it is the exhausted cry of one who has looked for wisdom from so many sources and found nothing.² In spite of the total emptiness, the vanity of vanities, the search went on because of the desperate need to understand his own life. Romans 1:18–32 exposes the desperate need which humans have for a sustaining anthropology and cosmology³ which attempts to meet our own need while fearfully avoiding the truth of who we are as the image of God. The end is a wasted life filled with degrading efforts and mindless corruption. How much better had the preacher remembered his creator in the days of his youth!

Stating biblical truths is one thing, but it is possible to do so and to remain enmeshed in foolishness. For instance, it may be possible to give expert analysis of academic issues while remaining seduced by the pseudo-wisdom which surrounds *us* as believers. The ‘desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride of life’ (1 John 2:16, lit. trans.) are real temptations continually. For us this could imply the desire for recognition, the desire for ‘things’ or even the vainglory of actually having all of that, since it all passes away, moth and rust taking their toll and the grave leaving nothing but dust. In the face of coming final consuming judgement, there are more important issues:

And you, do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them; for I am going to bring disaster upon all flesh, says the LORD; but I will give you your life as a prize of war in every place to which you may go (Jer. 45:5).

The study of God’s wisdom, if pursued for its own sake, say, perhaps as fulfilling the criteria for continuing education or whatever, could easily be an expression of foolishness. But were we actually to pursue wisdom *as coming from* God, then we would be in a different situation. Then we would be seeking to know God himself and we would be forced to submit to his wisdom. We would encounter God in all his dealings with humanity, in particular as he chooses to do his work. Our theological rationalisations, good as they may be, would be brought under the divine scrutiny as

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

² See Study 14 in this volume: ‘Ecclesiastes: The Search for Wisdom’.

³ Anthropology is the study of ‘Man’ (humanity) and Cosmology the study of the world, in this context as those relate to providing a rationale for both. What does it *mean* to be a human being and how do I *understand* the world and my/our own place within it?

We Need to Be Wise

no better, and possibly much worse, than faithful human attempts to express our understanding of what God himself has said.

At best, our theology can only be a response to what God has said. At worst, it can be exposed as us uttering words without knowledge:

Thus says the LORD: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth;⁴ but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the LORD (Jer. 9:23–24).

The Lord is known in his acts. In fact, that may be what is intended by the name Yahweh, the LORD:

When Moses asks the Name of God, the answer he receives is: ‘I am who I am’. The fact that the word ‘am’ is a verb in the Hebrew, and was rendered in the Septuagint with a participle with the function of a noun,⁴ is of tremendous historical significance. Via the Septuagint this text found its way into history, and provided the basis for Philo, Origen and their countless followers to link up with Greek thought and to speak of God as the eternal, unchangeable, and self-sufficient being. Indeed, the Septuagint translation (*ho ōn*) was a well-known term for God in Greek philosophy—meaning ‘Being’ . . . Today we know that the Hebrew ‘I am what I am’ means something very different from the Greek-inspired translation of the Septuagint—‘Being’ . . . the little word ‘is’ is not used in Hebrew sentences such as ‘The LORD our God (is) one LORD’. Where the word ‘is’ (or ‘am’) is used in Hebrew its verbal significance is stressed. With reference to the LORD the verb is used when he does something, when he acts . . . Just because ‘I am’ means: I do things, I am the acting God, it implies and presupposes the being of God—but that must be understood as an active and acting being, involved in history. This is radically opposed to the static, withdrawn, sufficient-unto-himself being of Greek philosophy.

. . . God is described by means of a verb, and a verb that is particularly used in the Old Testament to point to something happening. By means of telling them his name, God seems to say to his oppressed people: ‘You may depend on me; I will intervene in your history; I am the same still as the One who intervened in your history; I am the same still as the One who intervened for Abraham; Isaac and Jacob.’ In this sense God is unchangeable—unchangeably faithful.⁵

There can only be one valid response to the revelation of the name of God and that is worship. We recognise that God is in action in full accordance with his own purpose and we submit willingly to that purpose. It is irrelevant whether we understand that purpose, too, since there are secret things which belong to the Lord our God, while the things revealed are given for us to *obey* (Deut. 29:29). So Jeremiah recognised:

I know, O LORD, that the way of human beings is not in their control,
that mortals as they walk cannot direct their steps (Jer. 10:23).

It is God who freely acts in wisdom and we act wisely when we acknowledge that. His wisdom means that he acts according to his own purpose, never in response to circumstances outside himself. For instance, God is merciful and gracious, not because we need it but because he is merciful and gracious. He acts in the fullness of *his* time:

⁴ MT: אֲנִי אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה; LXX: Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν.

⁵ Adrio König, *Here Am I: A Christian Reflection on God*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1982, pp. 67f.

We Need to Be Wise

Then the LORD said to Abram, ‘Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years;¹⁴ but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.¹⁵ As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.¹⁶ And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete’ (Gen. 15:13–16).

As a result:

The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God.²⁴ God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.²⁵ God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them (Exod. 2:23–25).

Our wisdom lies in our submission to his wisdom. For instance:

The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,³ and said to him, ‘Leave your country and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you.’⁴ Then he left the country of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After his father died, God had him move from there to this country in which you are now living (Acts 7:2–4).

In contrast, there was the judgement on Moses:

But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them’ (Num. 20:12).

THE WISDOM OF CREATURES

We should beware of ‘logic’.⁶ That does not mean we should be mindless, since our love for the Lord is to be with all our minds as well as with our other faculties. But human logic is strangely different. We as humans can reason things through, but as men and women under the revelation from God we must see that his thoughts are ultimately higher than our thoughts and his ways than ours. We know and reason as creatures. But also we are fallen creatures, meaning that our powers of reasoning are now defective (Rom. 1:21–22, 28). So attempts to trace the whole of God will fail because we are creatures. Sometimes it all does not seem to fit, that is, to fit with our ‘logical’ expectations. If (a) and (b) then we should expect God to be or do (c). Unsurprisingly it does not always work out that way. But against what could we measure his purposes? Could the living God be reduced to a creature’s syllogism?

Our sinfulness, of course, means that even the revelation we have will need to be filtered by us before it is acceptable to us. This is especially so since the truth, if it is first *revelation*, is recognised as personal before it is propositional. Suppression of the truth is more than rejection of propositions. It is the direct choice to act other than in ways that are consistent with the character and purposes of God. These acts are ‘unrighteous’ and the result is not merely illogical, but anti-logical. As stated above, the result is a wasted life filled with degrading efforts and mindless corruption.

⁶ By this I am referring to the ‘popular’ use of the term. The place of logic as a necessary discipline is not being questioned.

We Need to Be Wise

COMMANDED TO BE WISE

As creatures, we are obliged to be wise. That is fundamental to being the image of God. We are to be wise as creatures responding to and corresponding to the wisdom of God. It is that obligation which makes the suppression of the truth so ugly, in whatever form it appears. Claiming a wisdom for oneself is the supreme foolishness.

But what of us? How do we as the redeemed stand in all of this? James' command is clear:

If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. ⁶ But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; ^{7,8} for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord (James 1:5–7/8).

There are some who lack wisdom and who, on discovering their situation, can come with confidence to God and ask him. Given that James was expressly written to believing Jews, they would no doubt see that their status as believing Jews indicates that they are the new Israel of God. All the talk of wisdom in Israel of old (the Old Testament) has direct relevance to these people. They would know that all creation declares the wisdom of God and that such wisdom is beyond human capacity to realise. The questions posed to Job by God demonstrate that:

Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? Can you establish their rule on the earth? (Job 38:33).

These ordinances are in his covenant with the creation (cf. Jer. 33:20–21), but who could see that?

Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this (Job 38:18).

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. ⁵ Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? ⁶ On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone ⁷ when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? (Job 38:4–7).

Indeed, who could even see by observation or reason that the ages were brought into being by the utterance of God? Only faith could know that.

And what of the restoration of worship given to Israel? Why did Bezalel need the spirit and wisdom in order to devise the designs of the tabernacle (Exod. 31:3)? Although modern translations recognise this as the gift of skill or ability, and surely that was needed, was it because insight into the character of God and his eternal purpose was required if the worship of Israel was to be true to the revelation given to Moses on the mountain (Exod. 25:40)?⁷ Geoffrey Bingham puts it:

Likewise wisdom is equated with skill or ability, and this is seen in the fashioning of the high priest's garments (Exodus 28:1ff) and the tabernacle together with its furniture (Exodus 31:1ff,

⁷ See also Exod. 31:6. However, the semantic range of the Hebrew חֹכְמָה (*chokhmāh*) includes the idea of skill, though evidently with the understanding that 'craftsmanship was still associated with the manipulation of the appropriate powers' (H. -P. Müller, חָכָם *chākhām* in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (TDOT)*, vol. 4, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1980, p. 378).

We Need to Be Wise

35:30ff). These artificers are filled with the Spirit of wisdom and skill. This is not only to be able to form their work, but to understand why it should be as it is.⁸

James recognised it and Solomon knew it: wisdom, though commanded, can never be humanly attained. The man or woman of faith will receive it as a gift (1 Kings 3:9). So: ‘The whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind’ (1 Kings 10:24).

Why is God ‘slow to anger’ (Exod. 34:6; etc.)? Why does he work through such expanses of history and not instantly restore creation? Barth’s analysis links God’s wisdom with his patience. He observes that God is patient because he is wise:

God is wise in so far as His whole activity, as willed by Him, is also thought out by Him, and thought out by Him from the very outset with correctness and completeness, so that it is an intelligent and to that extent a reliable and liberating activity. We have to say of His activity in His works and also of His inner activity, of the essential actuality of His divine being, that God is wise, that in Him is wisdom. God Himself is wisdom . . . God is glorious in His wisdom . . . [His wisdom] is the meaning of the world.⁹

He adds that this does not mean the immanent meaning of the world but that the meaning of the world and the meaning of life derives from who God is and what he has purposed in wisdom. And it is sufficient that we acknowledge that he is wise. So it is when the questions are asked concerning creation and the further purposes of redemption, the response must always be the same:

Then Job answered the LORD:

- ² ‘I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
³ “Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?”
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
⁴ “Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you declare to me.”
⁵ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you . . .’ (Job 42:1–5).

I know that *you* can do all things; in the face of my culpable protestations I acknowledge that you know what you are doing and your reasons for doing it. I do not demand answers to my questions, since I now see you as you are, the only wise God. Indeed:

- See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you?
I lay my hand on my mouth.
⁵ I have spoken once, and I will not answer;
twice, but will proceed no further (Job 40:4–5).

Similarly, when shown the valley of dry bones, the great prophet is asked: ‘Mortal, can these bones live?’ He answered, ‘O Lord GOD, *you know*’ (Ezek. 37:3), and the great king, faced with the overwhelming promise for history, could only say:

⁸ *The Wisdom of God and of Man*, Living Faith Study 35, NCPI, Blackwood, 1980, p. 119.

⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics (CD)*, vol. 2, pt 1, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1957, pp. 425–7.

We Need to Be Wise

... Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far ... And what more can David say to you? For *you know* your servant, O Lord GOD!' (2 Sam. 7:18, 20).

He also could say God's 'knowledge is too wonderful for me' (Ps. 139:6) adding: 'When my spirit is faint, *you* know my way' (Ps. 142:3). This is true wisdom and it is not an attainment but the humble acceptance that God is wise and that our place is joyfully to do as we are told (contrast Deut. 28:47f.). The heart of it all is recognising that God is wise, and our wisdom lies in him alone.

Note that where this is not humbly accepted, everything is perverted:

How can you say, 'We are wise,
and the law of the LORD is with us,'
when, in fact, the false pen of the scribes
has made it into a lie?
⁹ The wise shall be put to shame,
they shall be dismayed and taken;
since they have rejected the word of the LORD,
what wisdom is in them? (Jer. 8:8–9).

In such circumstances, even the Aaronic blessing is turned by God into a curse (Mal. 2:1–2). In the light of his eternal purpose he makes our vaunted wisdom demonstrably foolish. Small wonder, then, that Paul told the Ephesians not to be foolish but to understand what the will of the Lord is (Eph. 5:17).

WISDOM FOR THE MATURE

... among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. ⁷ But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him'—
¹⁰ these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God (1 Cor. 2:6–10).

There is wisdom for the mature, not the wisdom so familiar to the Corinthian readers or, indeed, to today's world. But it is the wisdom established before the ages for our glory. It may be incomprehensible to others, beyond sight, hearing or ken, but it is fully declared by the Spirit of God, who alone knows the depths of God:

If Hegel's philosophy of History is built upon the idea: all that is real is rational, the Christian philosophy of History is based upon the idea: everything that happens is a means of the Divine Wisdom. Hegel's thesis breaks down when confronted by what is obviously irrational and contrary to reason. Thought controlled by revelation includes all this in the Divine Wisdom. It is able to do this because its centre is the 'folly of the Cross', in which God reveals His Wisdom, and the plan for the world which He has made on these lines. The irrational and contra-rational elements in that event, the fact that it is against all common sense, that the Holy One of God should be condemned as a criminal blasphemer and executed—this is the decisive method in the Hands of God for revealing His Holiness and His Love. From this centre we can also perceive the same law at work at other points in the history of redemption, that is, that God takes the very things which seem most contrary to His

We Need to Be Wise

Purpose and uses them to accomplish His Will. This was already the view of the Prophet of the Exile: the Servant of the Lord, the true Israel, bears the sickness and guilt of the people. It was also the view of the Apostle Paul: the present rejection of disobedient Israel is the means by which God makes room for the heathen nations in His Kingdom, in order that He may finally include rejected Israel within it, too. In face of this revelation the Apostle breaks out:

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgements and His ways past tracing out!

But this wisdom is only accessible to faith: it can only be perceived '*sub contraria specie*'¹⁰ in the folly of the Cross. God's [']wisdom is unsearchable' . . . His 'ways are past tracing out'; the reason of God is not our reason, therefore it cannot be reached by our own efforts of rational thought. To call the ways of God in history 'wise' and 'rational'—does not lie in the sphere of natural judgment, based on perception and logic; this is only possible *παρά δόξαν* [*para doxan*], against appearances, against all the natural evidence, upon the ground of that revelation which conceals the Glory of God in the 'form of a servant'. When the Evangelist says: 'We saw His Glory,' this 'seeing' is a supernatural act; it is 'seeing' with the eyes of faith.¹¹

Any wisdom we ever had or have is God's wisdom but specifically it is now totally found in Christ: 'we have the mind of Christ' (1 Cor. 2:16). He 'became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption' (1 Cor. 1:30).

The Old Testament saints confessed to God: 'You know'. We, on the other hand, join the apostles and confess to the eternal word become flesh, to *the* image of the invisible God: 'Now we know that you know all things, and do not need to have anyone question you' (John 16:30).

This wisdom, the mind of Christ, is for the mature. It is for those who are morally mature, who, having received the Spirit go on being filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). It is for those who, in fulfilment of God's wise purpose, having been given birth by the word of truth, go on letting the word of Christ dwell richly in them (James 1:18; Col. 3:16):

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is (Eph. 5:15–17).

¹⁰ Under a form which contradicts our thought and comprehension.

¹¹ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics vol. 1*, Olive Wyon trans., Lutterworth Press, London, 1966, pp. 284f.