

June 15, 2003  
Pentecost Sunday

### Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Developed in many contexts and over several centuries, the Wisdom tradition contained in the Bible is varied and rich.

In what is probably its earliest stage, Israel's interest in the pursuit of Wisdom is seen in those old accounts of the practical shrewdness of its ancestors. One recalls, for example, the cleverness of the Hebrew midwives at the beginning of Exodus, those ladies who outwitted the evil designs of Pharaoh. There was also young David, of course, who consistently euchred the king of Philistia in the closing chapters of 1 Samuel. Most of all, perhaps, one thinks of Jacob and how he outsmarted even the wily Laban. In these, as in many other instances over the centuries, it was sharp, artful thinking that guaranteed the family's survival, and it is clear that the story tellers of the Bible loved to describe how their forebears could outthink their opponents.

As Israel became a real political entity after the Exodus, there emerged the need to incorporate that ancient familial trait into public policies. Indeed, the need was pressing. Almost immediately after entering the Holy Land, Israel had been duped into an unwise treaty by a local group called the Gibeonites (Joshua 9), and the wiser Israelites began to ask themselves how a nation so easily deceived by the lackluster Gibeonites would fare against the likes of Egypt and Syria? It was necessary, then, to advance intelligent men to positions of national leadership, especially after Israel's adoption of a monarchy near the end of the eleventh century. As Israel endeavored to create a geopolitical place for itself near the western end the Fertile Crescent, such men would be trained in the arts of diplomacy, finance, and international trade. Examples would include Elihoreph and Ahijah, who served in the court of Solomon (1 Kings 4:3).

Alongside this sophisticated cultivation of political prudence, Israel's search for Wisdom was also preserved in the folk traditions of its non-governing citizens, especially the farmers, craftsmen, and local merchants. This latter form of Wisdom is contained mainly in short, pithy sayings, easily memorized from childhood, maxims of the sort collected and preserved in the Book of Proverbs. The Wisdom in this book is traditional, in the sense that the emphasis falls on such

themes as fidelity to inherited standards, respect for the teachings of parents and elders, adherence to Israel's historical legacy, and so forth. Proverbs habitually asks "how?" not "why?" The tone is immensely conservative, recommending what may be called tried and true, safe and sane. The Wisdom here is always of a practical kind, having to do with common sense, sobriety of judgment, prudence in one's business affairs, personal discipline in the maintenance of one's time, money and other resources, strict marital fidelity, and the consequent joys of home, property, tradition, and family.

Quite different is the approach to Wisdom taken in the books of Job and Qoheleth, or Ecclesiastes. These two books are not traditional and conservative. They are better described as bold and probing. They undertake the investigation of those philosophical questions in which the Book of Proverbs showed no interest, such as man's sense of tragedy and futility in life. These books are not conservative or traditional in their outlook. Indeed, individual pages of Ecclesiastes and Job are sometimes shocking in the boldness of the questions they put to God. Their voices push toward the outer limits of speculative reflection about the meaning of suffering and the temptation to despair. They do not ask "how?" but "why?" The author of Ecclesiastes, facing frustration throughout all of existence, seems perpetually on the brink of discouragement and despondency, sentiments so alien to the stern cheerfulness and cautious optimism of the Book of Proverbs.

Finally, the Wisdom pursued in Holy Scripture is the Wisdom of God Himself, the Wisdom by which He created the world and continues to govern history. This Wisdom is described in Proverbs 8 and several parts of The Wisdom of Solomon and The Book of Ecclesiasticus, or Sirach. It is the teaching of these texts that man's mind, purified by discipline and transformed by God's grace, can be illumined and elevated to the contemplation of this divine Wisdom that gives structure and significance to all of reality.

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