

## JEWISH WISDOM LITERATURE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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**I**N the NT we face two distinct bodies of Wisdom literature. The one centers around Jesus. The other is in the Epistle of James. The Wisdom literature having Jesus as a center can be divided into three groups: Wisdom parables of Jesus; proverb sayings of Jesus; and Wisdom material having Jesus as a subject.

1. The parables of Jesus represent the method of teaching most popularly associated with him. He used parables often and effectively. Such use is characteristic of prophetic teaching. But it is also a part of Wisdom teaching. The six parables of Jesus which lie in the prophetic tradition include: the two builders (Matt 7 24-27), the soils (Matt 13 3a-9), and others which declare doom or blessing for the people, depending on their reception of the message. The sixteen Wisdom parables include the good Samaritan (Lk 10 30-36), the Pharisee and the Publican (Lk 18 10-14), and others whose intent is to point home a moral truth.<sup>1</sup> The thirteen parables of the Kingdom lie partially in both fields, but are more distinctly prophetic in character.

2. The proverb sayings of Jesus emphasize the fact that Jewish Wisdom literature is, in the NT, reverting to older forms of expression. Wisdom is personified by Jesus only twice (Lk 7 35 and Lk 11 49), and both times the personification is casual.

<sup>1</sup> The complete listing of Wisdom parables according to content is: *A man's true worth* — Lk 10 30-36; 12 16-20; 13 6-7; 16 1-8; 16 19-31; *Sincerity* — Matt 21 28-31a; Lk 7 41, 42; *Counting the cost* — Lk 14 28-30; 14 31-33; *God loves mankind* — Lk 11 5-8; 15 4-7; 15 8-10; 15 11-32; 18 2-7; *Humility* — Lk 17 7-10; 18 10-14.

This abandoning of the newer personification technique and the frequent use of proverbs and parables indicates two general facts about Jesus' Wisdom teaching: *a.* It is not a literary effort. Literary Wisdom productions had come to place their proverbs in a setting of personification. *b.* It is, nevertheless, a conscious art-form or/and education technique. One or two well phrased proverbs might spring spontaneously into an inspired utterance, but the consistent recurrence of proverbs (A city that is built on a hill cannot be hid . . . By their fruits ye shall know them . . . Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to destruction . . . etc.) indicates conscious craftsmanship.

But if Jesus was a conscious craftsman of proverbs and Wisdom parables, he was a sage. Let us, therefore, consider him in this light. In the first place, he taught in the manner of a sage. Where the prophets spoke the word of God directly to the rulers of the nation (I Sam 15 17-35; II Sam 12 1-14; Is 7 3-9; Jer 38 1-28) or to a formal assembly (Jer 26 1-15; I Kings 12 21-24; Amos 7 10), or where the ordinary rabbi would sit in the synagogue and expound the Law, the sage taught under more intimate circumstances — in his own house (Mk 2 1-12) or while eating (Mk 2 15-22), or at the home of friends (Lk 11 37-52). And, in the second place, Jesus was a sage in that he taught the same universally applicable moral truths which the sages of the ages had taught.

One example of his continuity with the most ancient teachings of the sages may be noted in Lk 14 11. Here Jesus says, "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted." Some hundreds of years before, the Jewish sages had a proverb saying, "A man's pride shall bring him low, but the humble in spirit will attain to honor." (Prov 18 12). And their maxim itself echoed the accumulated wisdom of the sages who had lived before. For back in the dawn of history the Egyptian sage, Ptah-hotep, had counceled humility in these words, "Be not proud because of thy learning. Take council with the unlearned as with the learned, for the limit of the craft is not fixed and there is no craftsman whose worth is perfect."

Jesus, then, used Wisdom techniques (proverbs and parables)

when he taught. He taught what the sages had taught. And he taught in the manner of a sage. Perhaps we have been blinded by the popular theology of western orthodoxy with its emphasis on Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King; certainly Jesus as a sage has been underemphasized. If this aspect of his life had received proper attention, we would have realized that here is material antedating the Gospel accounts. In other words, the synoptic accounts lay their primary emphasis on Christ as prophet and as Messiah. His teachings are included almost as an afterthought. Mark, for example, opens his account with the picture of John the Baptist. Then he introduces Jesus as assuming that prophetic mantle. But the person thus pictured as John's successor had a personal history before that moment. It was a history which made him a conscious craftsman of vivid parables and proverbs. It was a history which enabled him naturally to return home after his baptism and teach in the synagogues of Galilee. It was a history which had accustomed him to teaching in intimate, informal circumstances.

The portrait which thus emerges is that of a popular sage suddenly having Messianic claims thrust upon him. When the sage of Galilee returns home from Judea he has unexpectedly stepped out of character and assumed a revolutionary role — to the amazement of his family and friends. (If we could be certain from the first chapter of the fourth Gospel that six of Jesus disciples, including the most important ones, had followed John the Baptist, we would be justified in concluding that they regarded Jesus as a sort of figurehead, with Peter as the real power behind the throne. Indeed, the concept of Jesus as a popular intellectual chosen to front for a patriot party illuminates many passages in the Gospel accounts).

Despite his new Messianic movement, Jesus continued to conduct himself as a sage. Both through his Wisdom parables and in his proverbs he continued in the tradition of Jewish Wisdom Literature. The only clear break between Jewish and NT Wisdom literature comes in the third group, the NT Wisdom material having Jesus as a subject.

3. The Christology developed in the first century and later was not content to leave Jesus as a sage. It gradually equated him with Wisdom itself. Paul, in writing to the congregation

at Corinth, spoke of "a Christ who is the power of God and the wisdom of God." (I Cor 1 24) and "Christ Jesus, whom God has made our Wisdom." (1 30) and further said, "We teach a mysterious Wisdom of God which God ordained for our glory before creation." (2 7) Again, in his letter to the Colossians, Paul speaks of a "...mystery which has been hidden from ages and generations, but is now made manifest to his saints (Col 1 26) ... which is Christ in you (1 27) ... Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2 3). And he urges his readers to "Walk in Wisdom ..." (4 5).

After Paul had gone this far, it was an easy step for the author of the fourth Gospel to complete the equation. In doing so he used a Greek philosophical term, *Logos*, to contain, or envelop, the Jewish concept. *Logos* is not merely Wisdom, but it has in it the Jewish idea of Wisdom. Later writers were often content to assume the equation. The Shepherd of Hermas, for instance, speaks of the Son of God in the terms (Sim IX 12) which Proverbs uses (Pr 8 27-30) of Wisdom. And Tatian's Diatessaron harmonizes Luke 11 49 and Matthew 23 34 as "Therefore, behold, I the Wisdom of God ..."

Of the three groups, then, the third marks the break between Jewish and Christian Wisdom. It represents a step possible only for the Christian. The first two groups, however, can reasonably be called Jewish Wisdom Literature — if by that term we mean the product of a Jewish sage teaching in the Jewish tradition.

The second corpus of NT Wisdom literature belongs in the same category as the Wisdom teachings of Jesus. It too appears to be the product of a Jewish sage teaching in the Jewish tradition. Nevertheless, this does not imply that the author was not a Christian.

The Epistle of James is today usually regarded as either a general epistle or as a sermon. Both descriptions are accurate but fall short of characterizing the letter. It is actually a Wisdom teaching which was dictated and distributed as a general letter. Its conglomerate impersonal nature would be disconcerting in a personal letter, but it is typical of Wisdom products. Like the Wisdom teachings of Jesus, it is not an overt attempt

at literature but the transcription of verbal instruction. It does not personify Wisdom, nor does it use the parallelism of Jewish poetry. The factors which merit its classification as Wisdom literature are: its use of proverbs and parables, its teaching of universally applicable moral truths, and its use of traditional Wisdom themes.

The proverbs employed or coined in James include those on the dangers of injudicious speech, a Wisdom theme. The epistle says, "The tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison." (3 8) In the *Pirke Aboth* we find the same sentiment attributed to Simeon, the son of Rabban Gamaliel, who says "Whoever makes many words occasions sin." (*Aboth* 1.17) Proverbs had handled the same theme thus — "In many words sin will not be absent; but he who holds his tongue is wise." (*Prov* 10 19) And from the Assyrian Wisdom tablet of Assurbanipal's library comes a like precept:

"Thou shalt not make large thy mouth, but guard thy lip;  
In time of anger thou shalt not speak at once.  
If thou speak quickly, thou wilt repent afterwards  
And in silence wilt thou sadden thy mind."

Other Wisdom themes among these proverbs are humility (4 6b; 4 10), the folly of trusting riches (1 10, 11), and the final authority of God (4 14, b+c).

The parables in the epistle treat similar themes. The parable of the self-sufficient (4 13-16) contains the proverb "Life is a vapor which appears for a little while and vanishes away." The parable itself is an elaboration of the theme expressed by Proverbs 27 1, "Boast not of tomorrow, for you know not what a day may produce." And behind that lies the Wisdom of Amenemope, "Man knoweth not how the morrow may be."

Both the Wisdom teachings of Jesus and the Epistle of James have their Wisdom characteristics obscured by their method of presentation. Neither a gospel account nor a general epistle is a vehicle suited to Wisdom literature. As a result the teachings themselves have suffered. Evangelical Christianity has been ungentle with the Jewish Wisdom literature which is its peculiar trust.