

THE BIBLE TAKE 2: YEARNING FOR WISDOM

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The passage from the Book of Ecclesiastes that we just read responsively is one of the most famous passages in the Bible, even more so after it was set to music by the British group the Byrds in the 1960s. The Hebrew Bible—what most Christians refer to as the Old Testament—is divided into three sections: the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. The Torah (the first five books of the Bible) offers stories about the beginning of the world, the special status of the Jewish people as Yahweh’s chosen people, and the detailed covenant they must observe in order to maintain their favored status.

The second part of the Old Testament—the Prophets—warns of the consequences if the chosen people fail to live up to their covenant with Yahweh. Prophets like Amos and Jeremiah cried out against the unjust social system that had evolved in Israel in the decades after their conquest of the land of Canaan (Palestine), which had become a land of the rich and powerful dominating the poor. Their warnings went unheeded, and soon the two kingdoms of Israel were themselves conquered and dominated by foreign powers from the north. For a period of time many of the survivors of the invasion were forced into exile in Babylon. From that time to the present, the status of the Israelites as God’s Chosen People was called into serious question.

The third section of the Hebrew Bible is known collectively as “the Writings,” a hodge-podge of stories, poems, and theological reflections that express a growing pessimism about the Jewish people’s special status. Whereas the Torah and the Prophets are concerned with the relationship between Yahweh and his Chosen People, the Writings concentrate more on the meaning of individual life in issues such as personal morality, suffering, and love. At the core of these Writings are the so-called “wisdom books” of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job—all of which were composed during or after the Exile. The tone of these writings is more reflective and far less assertive than the earlier books of the Old Testament.

The Book of Proverbs is intriguing because it introduces for the first time a **feminine** image of the divine, as personified in the original Hebrew name *Chochma*, later translated into the Greek name *Sophia*. In Proverbs, Wisdom/Sophia plays such a prominent role that she is spoken of as having been present with God during the creation of the universe:

When He established the heavens, I was already there.
When He drew a circle on the face of the deep,
When He made firm the skies above,
When He established the fountains feeding the seas below . . .
I was beside Him, the master builder.

I was His daily delight, rejoicing before Him always,
Rejoicing in His inhabited world, and delighting in the human race.

[Proverbs 8:22-31, translated by Rabbi Rami Shapiro, *The Divine Feminine in Biblical Wisdom Literature*, p. xxi]

Rabbi Rami Shapiro compares this feminine image of divine wisdom with the wisdom expressed in Taoism: “Something mysteriously formed, born before heaven and earth . . . It is the mother of ten thousand things.” [*Tao Te Ching*, 25] Rabbi Shapiro writes, “All things flow from Her, arise in Her, embody Her as a wave embodies the ocean. You are Her; it is only arrogance that blinds you to the fact. To know Her is to know yourself. To know yourself is to know the world, Her children, as your siblings.” [Shapiro, p. 4]

Imagine that: a description of the divine as feminine--right there in the Bible! This illustrates once again that the Bible is not a book. It's a library, composed by many different people with very different perspectives. In stead of regarding the Bible as the single-voice Word of God, we are challenged to listen to the variety of voices through which our human predecessors express their experience of sacred reality. Nowhere is this more evident than in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew scriptures, where the image of God as a possessive and vindictive male character is called into serious question. No wonder this portion of the Old Testament is considered by many biblical scholars to be **subversive**.

The books of Ecclesiastes and Job are considered the most “existential” books in the Bible because they squarely confront the most vexing issues of human existence: the meaning of life in the face of suffering, death, and unfairness. The Book of Ecclesiastes was one of the last books of the Hebrew Bible to be written--probably around 300 to 250 BCE. The word “vanity” appears frequently. It is an imprecise translation for the Hebrew word *hebel*, which means vapor, fog, mist, breath--things that are fleeting. Another frequent metaphor is “chasing after wind,” which conveys futility--pursuing something you can never grasp. Ecclesiastes challenges the conventional wisdom that if you lead a righteous life, you will be rewarded with a long, satisfying life. Consider this sampling of passages from the Book of Ecclesiastes:

In my vain life I have seen everything: there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing. [7:15]

There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous. [8:14]

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all.” [9:11]

So how are we to live in the face of these great paradoxes? Ecclesiastes' advice is **balance**, as expressed so memorably in the passage we read together earlier. The outlook of Ecclesiastes is once again reminiscent of Eastern philosophy. Our constant striving for prosperity, comfort, and longevity of life often turn out to be fruitless, for reasons that are beyond our understanding. Indeed our grasping is often the **cause** of our suffering. Therefore we should be content with the blessings of each new day. Ultimately, life remains a mystery.

While Ecclesiastes offers a God who **allows** suffering to exist, the Book of Job carries the issue one step further by portraying a God who deliberately **inflicts** suffering. Let me recap the plot of the story. Job is a righteous man whose life has been truly blessed. He enjoys great

prosperity and a large family. After hearing God brag about his good and faithful servant, Satan offers a challenge. Why **shouldn't** Job be faithful? God has given him everything. Take away all his blessings says Satan, and Job will abandon his faith. Amazingly, God agrees to a wager. In one tragic episode after another, all of Job's earthly blessings--his possessions, his family, even his health--are deliberately stripped away. In spite of all these misfortunes, Job refuses to renounce his faith in God. He engages in a prolonged dialogue with three of his friends, who insist that he must have done **something** wrong to deserve his sudden turn of fortune. Job not only maintains his innocence to his friends, but in a dramatic climax, Job confronts God himself about the unfairness of his suffering. "You know that I am not guilty, and there is no one to deliver me out of your hand. Your hands fashioned and made me, and now you turn and destroy me." [Job, chaps. 9 and 10]

In response to Job's challenge, God puts on a mighty display of his powers, accompanied by what I call his "you little pipsqueak..." speech: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? . . . Have you ever commanded the day to break or assigned the dawn its place?" [Job 38] God's cosmic power play works. At the end of their encounter, Job backs down. "Therefore, I melt into nothingness, and repent in dust and ashes." In what seems like a contrived happy ending, God once again blesses him with new riches and even a new family. Let us remember, however, that his original family--mere pawns in this game--have been lost forever.

The Book of Job continues to stand as one of the world's great pieces of literature, not only because of the profound issues it raises but because of its many layers of meaning. It is a meditation on human suffering and our inability to explain why bad things happen to good people. It reminds us to always remain humble in recognition of our miniscule significance in the grand cosmic scheme of things. Yet I struggle with this interpretation. Job never challenges God's **power**, only his fairness. Therefore the intimidating display of God's control over nature seems to miss the point. God never really explains **why** he has used his immense power to inflict pain. If anything, the character of God in this morality story is an **abuser** of his power.

The late psychologist C.G. Jung makes this the centerpiece of his analysis of the Job story. In his book *Answer to Job*, Jung argues that the character called God demonstrates that he is in fact **morally inferior** to the character of Job. After having his moral inferiority exposed by a lowly human, God decides that he must send a divine/human messenger, his own "son," and make **him** suffer in order to redeem--get this--not sinful humanity, but God's own moral standing. How's that for a twist?

For me, perhaps the most valuable lesson from the Book of Job--and from the other books in this portion of the Old Testament--is its warning against using religious faith as a means to some other personal end, whether it be prosperity, freedom from anxiety, or going to heaven. These wisdom writers tell us in no uncertain terms that a life of faith and virtue is its own reward, and that using faith in the service of self-interest is like chasing after wind.