

WISDOM AND CREATION*

ROLAND E. MURPHY, O. CARM.

The Divinity School, Duke University, Durham, NC 27706

Wisdom is no stranger to the presidential addresses delivered at the Society's annual meeting. This is not to say that an outgoing president increases wisdom, biblical or otherwise, much less increases in wisdom. In 1960 R. B. Y. Scott presented wisdom in a triad of priests, prophets, and sages, who contributed "something indispensable to the Bible as the Book of the Knowledge of God."¹ In 1966 John L. McKenzie pushed wisdom as far as it can conceivably go: "Evidently I have identified the wise men of Israel with the historians and thus effectively designated the historical books as wisdom literature."² In 1984 the present incumbent continues the presidential tradition by proposing reflections about wisdom and creation.

We begin with a broader contextual question: How has the biblical data on creation been integrated into OT theology? The answer to this question is usually guided by a fateful presupposition: theology has to do with something called "Yahwism," which may be described as a religion of salvation focused upon the patriarchal promises, the Exodus experience, Sinai, and the prophetic development of this heritage. In this view, creation doctrine has to be *justified* as genuinely "Yahwistic" or pertinent to OT theology.

Various ingenious solutions have been provided. Gerhard von Rad found a place for creation in the decalogue: the prohibition of images of the Lord pointed to a transcendence that issued into an understanding of the world and creation.³ Further theological support was derived from the biblical positioning of Genesis 1-11 in such a way as to constitute the beginning of salvation history. The final touch to this theological systematization (where creation is "swallowed up" in redemption), is seen in the use of the creation theme in tandem with salvation in Deutero-Isaiah (Isa

*The Presidential Address delivered 8 December 1984 at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature held at the Palmer House, Chicago, IL.

¹ R. B. Y. Scott, "Priesthood, Prophecy, Wisdom, and the Knowledge of God," *JBL* 80 (1961) 1-15; see p. 14.

² John L. McKenzie, S.J., "Reflections on Wisdom," *JBL* 86 (1967) 1-9; see p. 8.

³ G. von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 130-65, comprehending his two essays on creation and on worldview; see especially pp. 142, 150.

40 28, 42 5, 44 24, 45 12, 49 24–28, 51 9–10) and in Psalms (Psalms 33, 136, 148)

The view of C Westermann is somewhat different. The theological justification of creation is secured by subsuming it under the category of blessing, the benign outreach of the creator Lord of Genesis. However, it remains pretty much of a bastard, by making it a child of blessing. Creation is not an item of belief, a *credendum*. Again, the saving experience is essential: “the history established by God’s saving deed was expanded to include the beginning of everything that happens.”⁴

Like his colleagues, Walther Zimmerli sought to “legitimate” wisdom theology, which he correctly characterized as “creation theology.” He anchored it in Gen 1 28. Thus the Lord authorizes human dominion over (better, harmony with?) creation—wisdom’s task.⁵ Zimmerli also raised the question whether the creation doctrine and wisdom lore might be considered as possibly a “second source of revelation.” He denied this and claimed that “what happened was that Israel opened the entire world of creation and entered it with its faith in Yahweh, by subordinating the realms it discovered there to Yahweh. This is the locus of wisdom lore, whose international character was well known to Israel.”⁶ Again, wisdom and creation are felt to be foreign to a true Israelite.

For all three of these scholars, creation and wisdom turn out to be mirror images. In their methodological treatment of Old Testament theology, creation has found an insecure, if necessary, home. Wisdom too is treated as marginal.⁷ Although both are obvious components of the Hebrew Bible, they have to be tacked onto the “real” faith of Yahwism.

One may surely agree that Israel’s encounter with the Lord has historical roots, whether one locates them in the patriarchal promises, the

⁴ Claus Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology* (Atlanta: Knox, 1982) 86, this is set in a chapter entitled “The Blessing God and Creation.” Westermann’s understanding of belief is based on a narrow analysis of *he’emin b-* which must necessarily allow of an “alternative” (p. 72). His view of creation reflects his understanding of wisdom, whose purpose “requires neither revelation nor theological reflection. Wisdom is secular or profane” (p. 100).

⁵ W. Zimmerli, “The Place and the Limit of the Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology,” *SSJT* 17 (1964) 146–58.

⁶ W. Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline* (Atlanta: Knox, 1978) 158, see also p. 40. One should note also the nuanced conclusion of B. W. Anderson in the introduction to the volume he edited, *Creation in the Old Testament* (Issues in Religion and Theology 6, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), that the “cosmic view of creation was probably introduced into the mainstream of Israelite life and thought by interpreters who stood in the royal covenant tradition” (p. 8).

⁷ The dilemma created by wisdom literature was most obvious in G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts* (SBT 8, Chicago: Regnery, 1952) 102–5. G. von Rad’s final location of wisdom seems adequate: “The wisdom practised in Israel was a response made by a Yahwism confronted with specific experiences of the world” (*Wisdom in Israel* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1972] 307).

revelation to Moses, or elsewhere. Israel became a people under the ineffable name, *yhwh*. It was by this name that they identified with the God of creation and the God of wisdom. There was in fact no other alternative for the "true believer." There is no evidence that they regarded creation/wisdom as outside their faith. They were obviously aware of the wisdom and the creation stories of their neighbors, and their understanding of the Lord permeated whatever they assimilated from their neighbors. But the Israelites did not hold creation/wisdom apart from their belief at a secondary level. In fact, they developed their own theology of wisdom/creation, and it should be accepted as a genuine heritage from the Bible. They did not advert to the "tension" that modern theologians find between salvation and creation. They created a canon that embraced both. One need not therefore justify wisdom and creation from the standpoint of an alleged "Yahwism" with a relatively narrow track of encounter in salvation history. Rather the concept, as well as the development of creation in wisdom theology, can be accepted as a genuine element (and not merely an importation) of the faith of the Israelites as they encountered the Lord in the created world.

The implications of this are significant on two counts: creation as the story of "beginnings," and creation as the arena of human experience where people live out their lives. Considerable attention has always been given to creation as the doctrine of "beginnings." The current debate on creationism shows how lively a topic that is. On the other hand, the role of creation in human experience has been somewhat glossed over. I wish to comment briefly on both aspects of creation from the viewpoint of wisdom.

1. Creation as "beginnings." The contribution of wisdom on this score has been ambiguous, because of the uncertainty of the translation of *'āmôn* (craftsman or nursling?) in Prov 8:30.⁸ Lady Wisdom has received great press by reason of her association with creation, but her precise role remains unclear. The Wisdom of Solomon solved the ambiguity by calling her a *technitis*, or crafts(woman) (Wis 7:22; 8:6; 14:2). The common interpretation of the pedantic statement in Prov 3:19 "reduces" her to the status of a divine attribute, lost among the other attributes of divinity. For the most part theology has not been able to do much with the role of Lady Wisdom in the act of creation, but we shall return to her at a later point.⁹

⁸ See H. P. Ruger, "Amôn—Pflegekind. Zur Auslegungsgeschichte von Prov. 8:30a," in *Übersetzung und Deutung: Studien zu dem AT und seiner Umwelt* A. R. Hulst *gewidmet von Freunden und Kollegen* (Nijkerk: F. Callenbach, 1977) 154–63, for a survey of opinions; he concludes that *'āmôn* "can be well translated as 'favorite' or 'foster-child'" (p. 161).

⁹ We prescind here from the use of personified wisdom as the background of NT Christology. On this see H. Gese, "Wisdom, Son of Man, and the Origins of Christology: The Consistent Development of Biblical Theology," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 3 (1981)

2 Creation as an arena of experience This aspect of wisdom/creation deserves greater elaboration We are considering creation here as continuous and ongoing, providing the fundamental parameters within which humans live and die In comparison with the prophetic experience, which is unique and then shared with the community, or the liturgical experience, which recalls and re-presents primarily the saving acts of history, the dialogue with creation may be termed the "wisdom experience"¹⁰ It lives in the present and reacts to the variety of creation, of which a human being is part The wisdom experience is not something necessarily apart from a faith experience In the concrete it involves an attitude to God that can be described as faith In the case of Israel, von Rad expressed this reality very clearly "The experiences of the world were for her always divine experiences as well, and the experiences of God were for her experiences of the world"¹¹

By creation the Bible understands the whole range of existing things, from humans to ants, not excluding the abyss and Leviathan. This is the world open to human experience (or to human imagination, in the case of Leviathan) And this world was not dumb

Job admonishes the three friends to learn from beasts and birds, from reptiles and fish, the agency of the Almighty in all that happens (Job 12.7–8) Similarly, the sage draws on the animal world to underline the lessons (Prov 6 6–8, 30 15–31) Creation speaks but its language is peculiar (Psalm 19) It is not verbal, but it is steady, and it is *heard* (Ps 19 2) It is parallel to the Torah, which "gives wisdom to the simple" (Ps 19 8)¹² With fine perception both Karl Barth and Gerhard von Rad concur that the Lord allowed creation to do the speaking for him in Job 38–41 ("will [the lightnings] say to you, 'Here we are?'" 38 35)¹³ Creation had a voice which spoke differently to Job than the chorus of the three friends

These examples suggest that wisdom is more than a set of rules. It is not to be reduced to a teaching—and certainly not to an optimistic doctrine of

23–57, and the essay by S Terrien, "The Play of Wisdom Turning Point in Biblical Theology," in the same issue, pp 125–53

¹⁰ See R E Murphy, "Israel's Wisdom A Biblical Model of Salvation," *Studia Missionalia* 30 (1981) 1–43, esp 39–42

¹¹ *Wisdom in Israel*, 62

¹² Not all would interpret Psalm 19 in this fashion In contrast to his earlier view (*The Problem of the Hexateuch*, 157), G von Rad later recognized this as a language heard by humans (*Wisdom in Israel*, 162) H-J Kraus explicitly denies that creation has anything to say to human beings because Ps 145 10 supposedly indicates that the works of creation direct their message to the creator, see H-J Kraus, "Logos und Sophia" in *Karl Barths Luchterlehre* (TS 123, Zurich Theologischer Verlag, 1978) 24 The implications of this language of the world have been developed by O H Steck, *World and Environment* (Nashville Abingdon, 1978) 113–227, and C Link, *Welt als Gleichnis* (BEvT 73 Munich Kaiser, 1976) 268–310

¹³ See *Wisdom in Israel*, 225

retribution. It is as much an attitude, a dialogue with the created world, as it is a set of admonitions or insights concerning various types of conduct. We must distinguish between doctrine and style, just as Qohelet did. He dissented from traditional wisdom at several points, but he never ceased to be a sage. He constantly employed the experiential tests of wisdom (Eccl 2:1-3; 7:23). The approach of the sage turns out to be a model for living, a style of operation that aimed at *life*, the gift of the Lord.

G. von Rad described the style in the following words: "The most characteristic feature of her (Israel's) understanding lay, in the first instance, in the fact that she believed man to stand in a quite specific, highly dynamic, existential relationship with his environment."¹⁴ This relationship extended far beyond events in Israel's history such as the Exodus or the Sinai covenant. It was a relationship to well-being and suffering, life and non-life, as the psalmists portrayed in their complaints. They clamored for deliverance from Sheol, for the presence of the Lord, for life. Their interpretation of their experience, whether beneficent or evil, was an interpretation of their relationship to the divinity. While the liturgy indeed re-presented the saving events of Israel's history, it was also a telling witness of the high points and troughs of daily life, in which God hid his face (Pss 13:2; 104:29) but also showed it (Pss 31:17; 80:20).

The wisdom experience was reflected not only in the limit situations recorded in Job and Ecclesiastes. It was found also in the jejune events of everyday life. These were not unambiguous. Silence, a wisdom ideal, cut both ways (Prov 17:27-28): it could signal folly as well as understanding. Poverty might be the result of laziness (Prov 6:9-11), but not always: "Better a little with fear of the Lord . . ." (Prov 15:16; cf. 16:8). Kindness to the poor is frequently emphasized (Prov 14:21, 31; 17:5). The uncertainty of the meaning of riches did not go unnoticed; they could be a temptation (14:28). Although one could conclude from appearances (Prov 6:13), these were often deceptive; a bitter thing could turn out to be sweet (Prov 27:7), and a soft tongue could break a bone (Prov 25:15). The most delicate area is that of personal motivations and judgments (Prov 16:2; 21:2): "Sometimes a way seems right to a man, but the end of it leads to death" (Prov 16:25).

It is important to underscore the uncertainties that the sages entertained, because so often they are accused of being simplistic. This judgment may be derived from the lapidary style in which they expressed their conclusions. Such is the style of many teachers! But this should not blind the interpreter to the tentativeness of wisdom. Experience spoke with a forked tongue many times. Above all, the greatest limitation on wisdom was the Lord himself (Prov 16:9; 21:30). An appreciation of the

¹⁴ See von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 301.

divine mystery, God's being beyond wisdom, underlies the entire enterprise. The most dogmatic expression of the triumph of wisdom as opposed to folly, with its guarantee of life and prosperity, must be taken more as a matter of trust and hope than of experience. What the Lord had guaranteed through similar teaching in Deuteronomy and the prophets could not be without effect—even when the claims of certain sayings seem to be opposed by facts. Hence the sage advised the youth to trust in the Lord (Prov 3:5, 16:3, 20).

The wisdom experience is further characterized as gift (even as much as any event in salvation history is gift). Wisdom is a gift of the Lord (Prov 2:5–6), for it is the reverential fear of God that leads to wisdom (Prov 1:7). The gift character of wisdom is in tension with the obvious pedagogical ploys of the sage, who makes use of discipline and even coercion. The sayings are directed to making wisdom obvious and hence available to any who will listen. But if it is true that “what the tongue utters is from the Lord” (Prov 16:1), wisdom is unattainable without the divine activity.

Thus far we have tried to exemplify the role played by wisdom/creation in the experience and faith of the Israelite. We may now turn to the topic of wisdom's personification and assess its contribution to our understanding of wisdom/creation. Biblical theologians generally regard this development as a later stage in wisdom thinking, when wisdom reflects on itself or becomes “theologized.”¹⁵

As we have already seen, the particular role of Lady Wisdom in the creative activity described in Prov 8:22–31 is not clear. But there can be no doubt about her divine origin, and it is certain that she is somehow associated with creation. Indeed, a specific role in the created world is clearly stated: her delight is to be with human beings (Prov 8:31). Her intercourse with humans is to be gleaned from her preaching to them (Proverbs 1, 8, 9). She threatens, cajoles, and issues a promise of life that is identified with the divine favor (Prov 8:35). She is a divine gift (Prov 2:16, Wis 9:4) to all who will listen (Prov 1:20–22, 8:4–5, 32, 9:4).

Who is Lady Wisdom? Current biblical scholarship has excelled in providing more her pedigree than her identity. She is variously interpreted as goddess (Ishtar? Ma'at? Isis?), queen (Prov 8:12–16), and teacher (or “personified school-wisdom”).¹⁶ It is hard to deny that these elements have entered into the portrait that emerges from the Bible. They constitute, as it were, her literary prehistory, but they fail to

¹⁵ So H. H. Schmid, *Wesen und Geschichte der Weisheit* (BZAW 101, Berlin: Topelmann, 1966) 144, and earlier G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 1:441.

¹⁶ See the helpful study of Bernhard Lang, *Frau Weisheit: Deutung einer biblischen Gestalt* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1975) especially 147–84. Lang takes Lady Wisdom to be personified school wisdom.

answer the question of identity. The most profound answer to date seems to be that of G. von Rad: Lady Wisdom is the "self-revelation of creation."¹⁷ This bold conceptualization of von Rad appears in his interpretation of Prov 3:19: "the Lord by wisdom founded the earth, established the heavens by understanding." This means that God established the earth *into* wisdom, not by wisdom. Wisdom was somehow outside of God, not merely a divine attribute. To the desperate question of Job 28:12, 20 ("where is wisdom to be found?") von Rad pointed to the order implicit in creation. Wisdom is a mystery, distinct from the works of creation, yet somehow present. Ben Sira put it best: "He has poured her (wisdom) forth upon all his works . . . he has lavished her upon his friends" (Sir 1:9-10; Job 28:27).

Just at this point one may ask if von Rad has gone far enough. For him Wisdom turns out to be an "order," a mysterious order truly, but rather abstract all the same.¹⁸ The concept of order is widely accepted in the current understanding of biblical wisdom.¹⁹ One need not deny that the presumption of regularity underlies the observations of the sages, but it is another thing to say they were searching for order, or that the lyrical description of Proverbs 8 is adequately captured by the term "order." The biblical metaphors portraying Lady Wisdom indicate a wooing, indeed an eventual marriage. Who has ever sued for, or been pursued by, order, even in the surrogate form of a woman? The very symbol of Lady Wisdom suggests that order is not the correct correlation. Rather, she is to be somehow identified with the Lord, as indicated by her very origins and her authority. The call of Lady Wisdom is the voice of the Lord. She is, then, the revelation of God, not merely the self-revelation of creation. She is the divine summons issued in and

¹⁷ So the title of a chapter in G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 148-76; on this see also R. E. Murphy, "What and Where is Wisdom?" *Currents in Theology and Mission* 4 (1977) 283-87.

¹⁸ Perhaps it can be inferred that von Rad himself was not satisfied with the concept of "order," which at the same time addresses human beings. Cf. *Wisdom in Israel*, contrasting p. 157 with pp. 107, 109. And on p. 95 there is the tantalizing question, "Is it faith in the orders or faith in Yahweh?" That should not be hard to answer. See also S. Terrien, *The Elusive Presence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) 384 n. 38.

¹⁹ A standard presentation of wisdom as "Ordnung" can be found in H. H. Schmid, *Wesen und Geschichte der Weisheit*. In a giant leveling process Egyptian *ma'at*, Sumerian *me*, and Israelite *hokmâ* are subsumed under this concept (e.g., pp. 17, 116, 196). He has gone on to make the concept of order (= justice) the basis for a new program in biblical theology. Order is the basic ingredient in the world view of the ancient Near East, and applicable as well to the notion of salvation: "Creation-faith, that is, the belief that God has created and maintained the world with its manifold orders, is not a marginal theme of biblical theology, it is basically the theme." Cf. *Altorientalische Welt in der alttestamentlichen Theologie (sic!)* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1974) 25. For Schmid, "creation theology," based on the concept of world order, constitutes the total horizon (*Gesamthorizont*) of OT theological statements (p. 31).

through creation, sounding through the vast realm of the created world and heard on the level of human experience. Thus she carries out her function with human beings (Prov 8:31).

If this assessment of Lady Wisdom is correct, there are serious implications here for systematic theology. The classical disciplines of philosophy and theology have separated out rational knowledge of God (or "natural theology") from revealed knowledge. But this distinction, a valid enterprise in itself, does not square with the experience of Israel. It should not be imposed on biblical literature in such a way as to separate out documents of faith as opposed to rational knowledge. The simple fact of the matter is that Israel did not distinguish between faith and reason.²⁰

The further description of Lady Wisdom in Sirach 24 is in harmony with what has been said thus far, even if Ben Sira goes beyond it.²¹ Her speech is now described as uttered before the heavenly court (24:2), but nonetheless she issues an invitation to all who desire her (24:19). She describes her divine origin, but also her restlessness, making the circuit of the vault of heaven and walking in the depths of the abyss (24:5) until finally she follows the recommendation of the creator to make her dwelling in Jacob, where she will perform a liturgical service (24:8–10). The truly new move of Ben Sira is to identify Lady Wisdom with the Torah, an identification prepared for by Psalm 19 and derived from the idea that wisdom is somehow a communication of God. It matters not whether one terms this

²⁰ This fundamental observation has been made by such different scholars as G. von Rad and Karl Rahner. See *Wisdom in Israel*, 64: "We hold fast to the fact that in the case of the wise men's search for knowledge, even when they expressed their results in a completely secular form, there was never any question of what we would call absolute knowledge functioning independently of their faith in Yahweh." Compare K. Rahner, who speaks from the point of view of a systematic theologian in *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 57: "From a theological point of view, the concrete process of the so-called natural knowledge of God in either its acceptance or its rejection is always more than a merely natural knowledge of God. . . . The knowledge of God we are concerned with, then, is that concrete, original, historically constituted and transcendental knowledge of God which either in the mode of acceptance or of rejection is inevitably present in the depths of existence in the most ordinary human life. It is at once both natural knowledge and knowledge in grace, it is at once both knowledge and revelation-faith. . . ." For a differing point of view, see John J. Collins, ("The Biblical Precedent for Natural Theology," *JAAR* 45/1 Supplement [March 1977], B: 35–67, esp. p. 42) and also A. De Pury ("Sagesse et révélation dans l'ancien testament," *RTP* 27 [1977] 1–50), who considers wisdom the realm of the rational, as opposed to revelation, which is an encounter.

²¹ For the textual relationship between Proverbs 8 and Sirach 24, see P. W. Skehan, "Structures in Poems on Wisdom: Proverbs 8 and Sirach 24," *CBQ* 41 (1979) 365–79. See also J. Marböck, *Weisheit im Wandel* (BBB 37; Bonn: Hanstein, 1977) 34–96; O. Rickenbacher, *Weisheitsperikopen bei Ben Sira* (OBO 1; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1973) 111–72.

the divine will or any other divine attribute. There is movement here, a divine communication, which is also necessarily a revelation of some kind. This view of wisdom suggests (again?) how insufficient is the conceptualization of wisdom as “order.”

Finally, we should admit that it is hazardous to make conclusions about wisdom because of the serious gaps in our knowledge. Wisdom is largely a postexilic phenomenon, at least as a literature (Ecclesiastes, Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon, parts of Proverbs and Job). In this period it was tied in closely to the Torah, but without losing its distinctive lineage. We may see in this identification an effort to magnify the previously humble status of wisdom in Israel’s life, an attempt that was also aided by the mysterious figure of Lady Wisdom. It is astonishing that there is no other personification of such magnitude and depth in the OT as this, and it succeeded in correlating the wisdom heritage most intimately with the Lord. Such also was the insight that the fear of the Lord was the beginning of wisdom, that it led to wisdom (Prov 1:7; 9:10).

In the obscure period of the postexilic age, *in gurgite vasto*, Lady Wisdom claimed to have walked “in the depths of the abyss, in the waves of the sea” (Sir 24:4–5), until she found a resting place in Israel. Any attempt to find her and to identify her is difficult, as we are reminded:

The first man never finished comprehending wisdom,
nor will the last succeed in fathoming her. (Sir 24:28)



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.