
CHAPTER EIGHT

WISE IGNORANCE

The Book of Proverbs

PROBABLY FEW PEOPLE would put the book of Proverbs on their shortlist of favorite spiritual books. At first glance, there does not seem to be anything very spiritual or uplifting about it. On the contrary, it stands out among the biblical books just because it is so down-to-earth, so ordinary. In fact, Proverbs barely made it into the canon for precisely that reason. Among the first-century rabbis who made the final decisions about which books would be included in what Christians now call the Old Testament, there were some who failed to see here any evidence of inspiration. After all, they said, they're just proverbs, just common sense.

It was my students who taught me the spiritual value of this book. I began teaching it out of a sense of obligation, as a requisite inclusion in courses on the biblical wisdom literature. I was always in a hurry to get on to what seemed to me the really interesting wisdom books: Ecclesiastes and Job. Yet at the end of term, my students repeatedly said, "I wish we had spent more time with Proverbs." So I gradually increased the amount of time allotted to that most basic book of Israelite wisdom. And thus I came to understand that my

students liked Proverbs for the very reason I wanted to minimize it: because it is so ordinary. This is a book for unexceptional people trying to live wisely and faithfully in the generally undramatic circumstances of daily life, on the days when water does not pour forth out of rocks and angels do not come to lunch. The Israelite sages are concerned with the same things we worry about, the things people regularly consult their pastors and friends about: how to avoid bitter domestic quarrels, what to tell your kids about sex and about God, what to do when somebody asks you to lend them money, how to handle your own money and your work life, how to cultivate lasting friendships. In short, the sages whose sayings make up Proverbs are interested in the art of living well—with others, with ourselves, with God.

Proverbs is a book to be digested in small bits. Trying to read Proverbs like an airport novel, skimming for plot, is not just heavy but also pointless work. The medieval monks spoke of “chewing” scripture. They said that each word of the Bible is like a grain of spice: you need to hold it in your mouth until it yields its full savor. That is how Proverbs should be read. For this is a book made up entirely of short poems, most of them only a few words long. In Hebrew, the sayings are generally about the length of a modern haiku. Some are popular sayings that have no single author. Others were doubtless the creations of individual poets, most of whose names are now lost to us. But in either case, many of these sayings are not only helpful but also artful. Better, one might say that they are helpful in part because they *are* artful. Here the analogy of the haiku is useful. These poems are designed for the ear and the memory. You can memorize one in a few minutes and carry it around all day long, savoring it. Again, as with haiku, the words are simple. The scenes they sketch are familiar, and they have to be; there is no space here for explanation. But the wisdom preserved is far from obvi-

ous. Indeed, it often challenges our ordinary perceptions of how things really do work in the world, and what it is “practical” to know.

We do not know what schools were like in biblical times, but we might suppose that the sages who finally assembled and edited the book of Proverbs were the senior academicians, the tenured professors in ancient Israel’s equivalent of the Ivy League. And Proverbs is something like their curriculum for a life-long learning program. Like good teachers of every age, they set forth at the outset their own goals for their “students”—namely, us. They did this, of course, in the form of a poem, somewhat more extended than most of the poems in the book:

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David,
king of Israel—

For knowing wisdom and discipline,
for seeing into words of insight.

For gaining discipline for success:
righteousness and justice and equity.

For giving to the naive astuteness,
to youth, knowledge and discretion.

Let the wise hear and learn more,
for seeing into proverb and figure,

the words of the wise and their riddles.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning [or, “the best part”] of knowledge;

wisdom and discipline, fools despise. (1:1-7)

In order to discover the spiritual value of Proverbs, there are several concepts here that need to be chewed: wisdom and knowledge, discipline, fear of the LORD.

“For knowing wisdom and discipline”: the first phrase following the title tells us already that the worldview of this book is fundamentally opposed to the dominant worldview

in our society. The very idea of wisdom, as the Bible understands it, challenges the mind-set of our society and the view of knowledge that all of us have to some extent internalized. For us, knowledge is a form of power. The idea that my power depends on what I know and (the crucial corollary) *what someone else does not* is fundamental to our whole professionally and technologically oriented society. The military-industrial complex is erected on the idea that specialized knowledge is the highest form of power. So the mystique of specialized knowledge informs everything from Scotch ads (What is this drinker's favorite magazine?) to spy novels to college promotional materials. We encourage our kids to go to graduate school so they will know more than somebody else does and, God willing, get a decent job.

Of course, this is a very old idea; it was old even in biblical times. Centuries before the Israelite sages, Egyptian and Mesopotamian teachers were telling their students, "Study hard, learn to write; there is a future for a good scribe." And they were right. Mastery of hieroglyphics or cuneiform was the work of years. With hundreds or thousands of signs to be learned, very few people achieved literacy. In those societies, writing was arguably the most powerful form of technology. It was a necessary tool for anyone who wished to communicate anything beyond their immediate sphere. So masterscribes were the "information managers" of their culture. The best of them might rise to the top of the government or temple hierarchy. Consequently, Egyptian and Mesopotamian scribes tried to keep their students in school (and paying tuition!) by composing literature that praised the good life enjoyed by the scribe:

I have seen how the belabored man is belabored—
thou should set thy heart in pursuit of writing. And
I have observed how one may be rescued from his
duties—behold, there is nothing that surpasses writ-

ing.... I shall make thee love writing more than thy own mother.¹

There is a pronounced contrast between such scribal literature and what we find in Proverbs. The lure that the Israelite sages offer their students has little or nothing to do with personal professional advancement. **Although they speak of "gaining discipline for success," consider how they define success: the establishment of righteousness, justice, and equity. By their reckoning, the one who is wise aims at goodness, not power.**

That motivation distinguishes Israel's sages, not only from their ancient counterparts, but also from modern academicians, of which I am one. "Righteousness and justice and equity"—I am struck by how weird that rationale for an educational program sounds if I try to set it in the context of virtually any contemporary institution. Scholars who populate universities and seminaries all have a great deal of highly specialized knowledge. They have expertise, but most would think it odd to speak of what they know as tending toward "righteousness." The problem with that claim is not that it is pretentious (pretentiousness is acceptable enough in the academy); rather, it represents a mistake in category assignment. Modern scholars are not hired for righteousness' sake. Our graduate training prepares us to think rigorously, creatively; those are the standards by which we learn to value ourselves and our work. Moreover, this perspective is widely shared even in theological academies. I cannot recall the subject of righteousness ever coming up in any job interview in which I have participated, as interviewer or interviewee. And that in itself shows how far we are from the sages' view of education, because righteousness is *all* they are concerned about. **The Bible shows no interest whatsoever in abstract knowledge—that is, in knowledge abstracted from goodness.** It is worth noting that ancient Israel seems to have

invested little intellectual capital in astronomy, architecture, engineering, medicine, the fine arts—areas in which the neighboring empires of Egypt and Mesopotamia excelled. In sum, Israel was not interested in any form of knowledge that is abstracted from the concrete problem of how we may live in kindness and fidelity with our neighbors, live humbly and faithfully in the presence of God.

The fourth-century theologian Augustine of Hippo helps us understand something about the kind of knowledge that tends toward goodness. He makes a distinction between *sapientia* and *scientia*, terms that may be best rendered in English as “wisdom” and “abstract knowledge.” Of *sapientia* Augustine says simply: “True wisdom is such that no evil use can ever be made of it.” *Scientia* is not inherently evil; it is problematic only in that abstract knowledge has no intrinsic relationship with goodness. Although the story may be apocryphal, some claim that when Albert Einstein heard about the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he commented: “It goes to show that you cannot do whatever you want”—and, one might add, “whatever you know how to do.” Inherent to *scientia* is the danger that it can be so easily misdirected to our selfish, short-sighted ends.

But “true wisdom is such that no evil use can ever be made of it.” That is worth our pondering because we, more than any previous generation, are witnessing the evil effects of perverted knowledge, knowledge not essentially connected to goodness. We are seeing those effects manifested, probably for the first time in human history, on a global scale. No other generation has been so successful at using its technological knowledge in order to manipulate the world and satisfy its own appetites. The ecological crisis is essentially a crisis of knowledge run amok. Through us, powerful abstract human knowledge (*scientia*) is operating upon the world, changing it in fundamental ways. We are doing, it seems,

whatever we know how to do, yet our knowledge is, paradoxically, uninformed.

And what should inform our knowledge? If, as Augustine says, the essence of wisdom is that it is incapable of being directed to harmful ends, then perhaps that is because wisdom takes account of its own ignorance. A sage named Agur, one of the very few Israelite sages whose name is known to us, laments:

I am brutish, less than a man;
I don't have the insight of a human being! (30:2)

The exclamation is startling, coming almost at the end of the book of Proverbs—after we have (potentially) digested hundreds of wise sayings and should, it seems, be feeling pretty smart. But one must wonder: is Agur merely a typical insecure academic, always aware that there are a lot of folks out there smarter than he is, and afraid of being caught out? Or is he modeling something about what in fact it means to be a wise person? Maybe Agur—or the ancient editors who put his words near the end of Proverbs—was not willing to let us end our reading without understanding that true wisdom is not really the opposite of ignorance. Rather, wisdom and ignorance are two sides of the same coin. Consider this: none of us can anticipate, or even know in retrospect, more than a fraction of the consequences of our actions. So wisdom must mean acting (or refraining from action) in full acknowledgment of our own ignorance. One modern sage, farmer and plant geneticist Wes Jackson, suggests the following principle as the basis for his “agrarian perspective”:

Since our ignorance (about how we are affecting natural systems) far outweighs our knowledge, let's go with our strong suit and develop an ignorance-based economy.²

Wisdom, then, has an inherent modesty. It does not manipulate the world based on a set of abstract principles that are supposed to be valid because they are “scientific.” Rather, **the wise enter into contemplative relationship with the world: they watch before they act upon the world. Often they watch for a long time. They are looking to see what God has done. Because they take the time to grow in love and respect—the qualities of all healthy relationships—their actions are less likely to be harmful.** In recent generations we humans have greatly increased our technical ability, but our wisdom has not grown in like measure. In Augustine’s terms, *scientia* has vastly outpaced *sapientia*. In the present situation, survival—for our own species and for others—may well depend on *homo sapiens* forswearing the promiscuous use of our minds in the undisciplined search for knowledge.

Three Alien Concepts: Discipline, Obedience, Fear

The concept of discipline is fundamental to what the sages would have us learn. In their vocabulary, the term is frequently paired with wisdom, and both are wholly positive. But this also marks a difference between their educational perspective and our own. For us, discipline is a largely negative concept. The word does not even appear in some contemporary translations of Proverbs.³ “Discipline” sounds antiquated and distinctly unpleasant; it evokes images of detention halls and nuns rapping knuckles with rulers. But the sages view the matter in quite another way, as their saying shows:

One who loves discipline loves knowledge;
and one who hates reproof is brutish. (12:1)

Proverbs is not addressed to people with fragile egos. One of the stock characters in Proverbs is the fool. A fool is someone who refuses correction or reproof because she cannot

seriously entertain the possibility of being wrong. The wise person, on the other hand, actively seeks out discipline, which is never wholly comfortable; but no pain, no gain. A remarkable saying implies that discipline is the most basic form of self-regard:

The one who breaks loose from discipline rejects
his own self,
but one who hears reproof acquires a heart.
The fear of the LORD is discipline, wisdom;
and before glory, meekness. (15:32-33)

What sort of self is it that the sages envision, that we reject when we “break loose from discipline”? The sages subscribe to a dynamic notion of human personhood. The “self” of which they speak is not a static entity, a fixed identity and destiny given at birth. Rather, through discipline, one “*acquires a heart*,” as the Tin Woodman hoped to do. In the metaphorical physiology of the Bible, the heart is the organ of cognition and faith as well as of emotion. It is the thinking, feeling, believing center of the person who is coming into full being before God. Thus the sages see selfhood as something that necessarily develops over time. Shrewd pastoral psychologists that they are, they know that if discipline is not continually cultivated, then the emerging self erodes.

If the sages rejected the static view of the human person held by some of their contemporaries, they would equally reject the “ultra-dynamic” view of personhood that is popular in postmodern culture—that is, the belief that we essentially invent (and reinvent) ourselves. The Israelite sages would view as a sad delusion our contemporary “faith” that we craft an identity out of a certain constellation of tastes and ambitions, as well as clothing, cars, houses, domestic partners, and other props; that all these presumed elements

of the self are infinitely manipulable, and a new "self" can be assembled at will, or at whim.

In contrast to both these notions, the Israelite sages understood that one gains a truly human heart by receiving guidance and accepting correction from others who know us, in a sense, better than we can know ourselves. But how can they know us that well? Because they know God, in whose image we are made. That is why human selfhood is not static: because God is a living God. And because we are made in God's image, we are not "making ourselves up" as we go along. A stable self develops through one means only: the difficult discipline of obedience to those who are ahead of us in our journey toward God.

Like discipline, obedience has been devalued as an educational concept in our culture; we relegate it to the realm of animal training. Yet obedience is quite literally the starting point of the sages' curriculum. The very first word following the opening poem is *shema*: "hear, obey."

Shema, my child, the discipline of your father,
and do not forsake the teaching (*tórah*) of your
mother. (1:8)

The first word arrests attention, for it is the first word of what has long been regarded by Jews as the most important statement in the Bible:

Shema, *Yisra'el*, hear, O Israel, the LORD your God is
one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with
all your heart and with all your self and with all your
power. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

The sages here boldly put the instruction of mother and father under the sacred rubric of Torah, the term applied to the great teaching of Moses from Sinai, which Israel must obey in order to live (Deuteronomy 30:15).

In English as in Hebrew, the word "obedience" denotes acute listening. Our English word derives from the Latin root *audio*: "hear, listen." *Ob-audio* means literally "listen toward"; the preposition *ob-* begets an image of someone bending forward to catch every word of a revered speaker, eager to receive direction—even correction. In the Christian tradition, it is the monastics who can teach us most about the exacting discipline of obedience. They teach out of hard experience. Any honest monastic will admit that the "obedience" vow is the hardest. One gets used to poverty and chastity—those may even be a relief. But for most, obedience remains difficult, and it must be so; for obedience is the anvil on which the Christian self is being forged, shaped, and sometimes hammered into a thing of strength and beauty. So the great monastic theologian Augustine set forth for the monks the truth that is not obvious, that obedience to their superior is an act of kindness to themselves.⁴

The core idea of the monastic life is the same one the sages set forth here: the inner self is made firm, paradoxically enough, through allowing the good judgment of another to override one's own will. That idea holds good for those of us who are not under formal vows of obedience as well. We grow as Christians by listening acutely to others, living and dead, within the community of faith, and letting their authority be a shaping force in our lives. That is what it means to stand within a tradition. I am not sure we acknowledge sufficiently how much trust such acceptance requires. That is why obedience is especially difficult for us, because trust is in short supply in our society and in our church. We speak often of "healthy suspicion"; in contemporary academic circles, suspicion has even been elevated to the status of a "hermeneutic," a basic principle of interpretation. Suspicion can be healthy and is often necessary for correcting the system. But the insight of the sages is that spiritual

growth requires trust above all. Their advice to us is this: find someone further along than you, a mother or father in faith. And when you find someone whose guidance you can accept for at least this stage of your journey toward God—then lean forward, listen acutely, obey.

"The fear of the LORD is discipline, wisdom" (15:33)—here the sages introduce a third concept that is indispensable for them, and difficult for us. The sages of Proverbs do not hesitate to equate "fear of the LORD" with wisdom itself. From the outset they advise:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning (or "the best part") of knowledge; wisdom and discipline, fools despise. (1:7)

This verse, or a variation on it, is repeated over and over. Consistently, Proverbs upholds "fear" as a healthy and necessary disposition toward God. That in itself is to modern readers one of the most offensive things in the Old Testament. Aware of this offense, many recent translations of the Bible speak instead of "reverence for God"—a phrase that has less evident neurotic content. That rendering is not exactly wrong; certainly reverence is part of what the sages mean to commend to us. Yet in avoiding the word "fear," translators are taking the edge off the point that the biblical writers are making. The writers are speaking first of all of our proper gut response to God. Fear is an elemental response; reverence is a head trip. Fear is the unmistakable feeling in our bodies, in our stomachs and our scalp, when we run up hard against the power of God.

From a biblical perspective, there is nothing neurotic about fearing God. The neurotic thing is *not* to be afraid, or to be afraid of the wrong thing. That is why God chooses to be known to us, so that we may stop being afraid of the wrong thing. When God is fully revealed to us and we "get

it," then we experience the conversion of our fear. Probably the most striking biblical witness to this conversion is the account of the crossing of the Red Sea. On the western shore, Israel looked up, and "here is Egypt coming after them, and they were really afraid" (Exodus 14:10). And then, on the far shore, Israel looked again, and this time it saw "Egypt dead, on the edge of the Sea. And Israel saw what the great hand of the LORD had done against Egypt, and the people feared the LORD..." (Exodus 14:31).

The time comes in every life—and more than once—when we are personally confronted with the power that spread out the heavens like a sequined veil, that formed us out of dust and blew breath into our lungs, that led Israel through the Red Sea on dry land and left Pharaoh's whole army floating behind. If we can experience that power close up and *not* be gripped in our guts by the disparity between God and ourselves, then we are in a profound state of spiritual slumber, if not acute mental illness. "Fear of the LORD" is the deeply sane recognition that we are not God.

Notes

1. "The Satire on the Trades" (Egyptian, Middle Kingdom), in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 432.
2. Personal communication. On the agrarian perspective, see Wes Jackson, *Becoming Native to This Place* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), and also the final chapter in this book.
3. The NRSV incorrectly renders the word as "instruction" in Proverbs 1:2 and 1:3.
4. The Rule of St. Augustine, II:7.