OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

"Where Is the One Who Is Wise?"

David Anguish

My search for an attention-capturing comment to begin a sermon on biblical wisdom led me to this statement by humorist Dave Barry:

> Another possible source of guidance for teenagers is television, but television's message has always been that the need for truth, wisdom and world peace pales by comparison with the need for a toothpaste that offers whiter teeth and fresher breath" (Barry, Search).

Barry reminds us that humanity needs profound words of direction that overcome the clamor of the world's trivialities. That need and the longing to see it realized is not new, of course. For example, it's not a reach to think that Alfred Lloyd Tennyson (1809–1892) had something like it in mind when he wrote, "Knowledge comes, but wisdom lingers" (Tennyson, Search).

In light of this, it is not surprising that Scripture speaks often of wisdom or that James would draw on his Jewish heritage to focus on it in a letter on the practicalities of being friends with God. He uses "wisdom" (σοφία, *sophia*; 1.5; 3.13, 15, 17) and "wise" (σοφός, *sophos*; 3.13) five times: in 1.5, it is the gift we should request from God to cope with trials; in 3.13–18, it comes from above (ἄνωθεν, *anōthen*; vv. 15, 17) to produce virtues that lead to "a harvest of righteousness" (v. 18).

Copyright 2024 by David Anguish

The adverb *anōthen* also appears in 1.17 where God is the source of "all generous giving and every perfect gift" (NET); its repetition in chapter 3 suggests that James saw wisdom as God's "chief gift" (Davids 1982, 52). Additionally, the illustrations of the horse, ship, and fire used in 3.1–6 are found in OT and Second Temple Judaism wisdom passages (cf. Ps 32.9; Prov 21.31; 26.3; 30.19; Sir 11.32; 28.14, 18–23; 30.8; 33.2; 4 Macc 7.1–3; Wisd Sol 19.9; *Pss Solo* 12.2–3) (Martin 1988, xc). These allusions suggest that the wisdom theme is woven throughout James's letter; some think it is his main idea.[1]

Since a precise definition of wisdom proves elusive today and often does not align with the Judeo-Christian understanding, we need to determine Scripture's definition before looking at James's teaching about it.

The Problem of Definition

English dictionaries illustrate the difficulty. The first meaning listed at dictionary.com is, "the quality or state of being wise: knowledge of what is true or right coupled with just judgment as to action; sagacity, discernment, or insight." So, we look up "wise" and find multiple meanings: (1) "the power of discerning and judging properly as to what is true or right." (2) "possessed of or characterized by scholarly knowledge or learning; learned, erudite." (3) "having knowledge or information as to facts, circumstances, etc.: *We are wiser for their explanations."* (*Dictionary.com*)

Merriam-Webster's first definition has four parts: (1) "ability to discern inner qualities and relationships: insight." (2) "good sense: judgment." (3) "generally accepted belief." (4) "accumulated philosophical or scientific learning: knowledge." Second and third meanings define it as "a wise attitude, belief, or course of action" and "the teachings of the ancient wise man" (*Merriam-Webster.com*)

Definitions like these date back centuries; for example, as the meaning of the Greek *sophia* evolved, it "concentrated on theoretical knowledge" (Goetzmann 1978, 1027). But the Jewish perspective is more encompassing and practical. As James saw it, for example, wisdom is not "simply a matter of the knowing of facts (theoretical knowledge) or even of know-how (practical knowledge)," but is concerned with speech ethics and humility (McCartney 2009, 286). This follows Jewish precedent.

[1] See Robert W. Wall who writes, "In my view, wisdom is the orienting concern by which all else is understood: after all, James refers to wisdom as the divine 'word of truth,' which is graciously provided to a faithful people to make sense of their trials and to guide them through those trials in order to insure their future destiny in the new creation (cf. Martin, lxxxii–lxxxiv)" (Wall 1997, 552). See also his *Community of the Wise: The Letter of James* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997).

Copyright 2024 by David Anguish

Wisdom in Scripture and Jewish Literature

David Hubbard summarized the Jewish understanding as "intensely practical, not theoretical, … the art of being successful, of forming the correct plan to gain the desired results" (Hubbard 1980, 1650). This reflects the meaning of the Hebrew חָכְמָה (*ḥāḵᵉma*), defined as: (1) "skill in technical matters." (2) "experience, shrewdness." (3) "the worldly wisdom of the [people of the east] and Egypt [1 Kings 4.30]." (4) "the pious wisdom of Israel." (5) "God's wisdom" (HALOT 2000, 314). The practical aspect of *ḥāḵᵉma* is illustrated in Exodus 36.1 where it refers to the "skill" (LXX *sophia*) of Bezalel and Oholiab and other craftsmen in the construction of the sanctuary (cf. Exod 28.3; 31.3, 6; 35.26; etc.). This practical meaning is grounded in wisdom's source and nature.

Wisdom in the most comprehensive sense belongs to God who has the knowledge sufficient to inform every area of life. Daniel 2 illustrates: when the Babylonian wise men with their accumulated knowledge were unable to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dream, Daniel could do so because God revealed his wisdom (Dan 2.20–23). Just how completely God's wisdom informs everything is seen in its connection with the origin and sustaining of creation. Psalm 104.24 summarizes: "O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures." Similarly, Proverbs 8.22–31 personifies Wisdom as existing prior to creation and being the intelligent agent who did the creative work. In addition, wisdom was given as a gift of God's grace (Prov 2.6; 1 Kings 3.5–14).

It is not surprising, then, that wisdom is closely linked to the Spirit of God (cf. Gen 41.38–39; Exod 31.3–4). Indeed, "in some cases wisdom may actually replace the divine Spirit as the agent of activity" (cf. Prov 8.22–31) (Davids 1982, 52). This theme is developed in later Jewish writings where wisdom "takes over more of the realm of God's Spirit," to the point that "Wis. 10 can reinterpret the whole of patriarchal and Mosaic history as wisdom's action" (Davids 1982, 52). These passages are representative:

> Wisdom praises herself,
> and tells of her glory in the midst of her people.
> In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth,
> and in the presence of his hosts she tells of her glory:
> "I came forth from the mouth of the Most High,
> and covered the earth like a mist.
> I dwelt in the highest heavens,
> and my throne was in a pillar of cloud.
> Alone I compassed the vault of heaven

Copyright 2024 by David Anguish

> and traversed the depths of the abyss [ἄβυσσος, *abyssos*]" (Sir 24.1–5 NRSV).[2]
>
> For a holy and disciplined spirit will flee from deceit,
> and will leave foolish thoughts behind,
> and will be ashamed at the approach of unrighteousness.
> For wisdom is a kindly spirit,
> but will not free blasphemers from the guilt of their words;
> because God is witness of their inmost feelings,
> and a true observer of their hearts, and a hearer of their tongues.
> Because the spirit of the Lord has filled the world,
> and that which holds all things together knows what is said,
> therefore those who utter unrighteous things will not escape notice,
> and justice, when it punishes, will not pass them by (Wis 1.5–8 NRSV; cf. 7.22–25).

In practical terms, wisdom was evident among the Israelites when they obeyed God. We see this in Deuteronomy 4.6 where, in the context of instructions to do God's commands (v. 2), Moses tells them to "keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (cf. Ps 111.10; Prov 1.7; 9.10). Later writings reinforce this idea, equating wisdom with the Torah (cf. Sir 24.23–26; Wisd Sol 6.17–20; 2 Macc 1.16–17) to the point that wisdom virtually disappears as a separate category (Davids 1982, 52). As Martin summarizes:

> The single human response that brings wisdom within the reach of attainment is *obedience*. It is those who hearken to Yahweh's law and seek to apply it to the multifarious ways of life who will gain wisdom and know how to walk before Yahweh with humility and devotion, especially in time of testing" (Martin 1988, lxxxix).

James draws on this background. *Sophia* is "from above," a gift given upon request (1.5; 3.15–17). It is spiritual, doing in James what the Spirit does in Paul (3.17; cf. Gal 5.22–23). It is ethical and obedient, displayed in the virtues that flow from it as people are doers of the word (1.18–25; 3.17).

Conclusion

Writing to a Greek church in a city that esteemed *sophia*, Paul echoed Isaiah 19.12 to ask rhetorically, "Where is the one who wise?" (1 Cor 1.20). Scripture answers that the wise people are

[2] Cf. Genesis 1.2's reference to "darkness … over the face of the *deep*" (תְּהוֹם, *t*^{e}*hom*; LXX *abyssos*) and the "the Spirit of God … hovering over the face of the waters."

Copyright 2024 by David Anguish

those who know that God understands what they do not. They therefore trust and obey him. Are you among the wise?

Works Cited

Dave Barry. *Kids Today: They Don't Know Diddly Do*. via Quotation Search. "Wisdom." *The Quotations Page. www.quotationspage.com*. © 1994–2018. Accessed September 2, 2024.

Peter H. Davids. 1982. *The Epistle of James*. The New International Greek Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Dictionary.com. s. v. "wisdom." Accessed September 4, 2024. https://www.dictionary.com/browse/wisdom.

J. Goetzmann. 1978. "σοφία." *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology.* vol 3. ed. Colin Brown. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

David Allan Hubbard. 1980. "Wisdom." *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. vol. 3. ed. J. D. Douglas. Revision ed. N. Hillyer. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

Ludwig Koehler & Walter Baumgartner. (HALOT). 2000. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Accordance electronic edition, version 3.7. 5 vols. Leiden: Brill.

Ralph P. Martin. 1988. *James*. Word Biblical Commentary. vol. 48. eds. David A. Hubbard & Glenn W. Barker. Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher.

Dan G. McCartney. 2009. *James*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary. s.v. "wisdom." Accessed September 4, 2024, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wisdom.

Alfred Lord Tennyson. via Quotation Search. "Wisdom." *The Quotations Page. www.quotationspage.com*. © 1994–2018. Accessed September 2, 2024.

R. W. Wall. 1997. "James, Letter of." *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*. ed. Ralph P. Martin & Peter H. Davids. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. pp. 545–561.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV
(All emphasis in Bible quotations added by the author)
Permission is granted to reprint original materials with the credit line,

"Reprinted from David Anguish, 'Opening the Scriptures,' September 24, 2024"
Feedback is welcome. Direct comments to *david@davidanguish.com*
To receive each new issue of this newsletter in your inbox, click *here*.

Interested in purchasing James resources at a discounted price? Check out AbeBooks.com.
(As an AbeBooks affiliate, I earn from qualified purchases generated from links on my website. There is no extra cost for you. For direct links to books on James and other resources, click here to go to my Affiliate Links page.)

Want to help my writing ministry? Please consider expressing your appreciation by leaving a donation.

Copyright 2024 by David Anguish