OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

He Is Our Wisdom

Background Study

David Anguish

As we continue our preparation to study James's teaching on wisdom, we recall that contemporary definitions of wisdom commonly emphasize accumulated human discovery and knowledge while Scripture's focus is more on wisdom's divine origin, revelation, and ethical practicality. To summarize, wisdom ultimately belongs to God (Dan 2.20–23), we have access to it because of God's grace (Prov 2.6), and it is evident in our lives when we obey God's law (Deut 4.6; Ps 111.10; Prov 1.7; 9.10). Wisdom is so closely connected to God in Jewish understanding that it is personified as the agent of creation (Ps 104.24). Proverbs 8.22–31 is illuminating in this regard, establishing wisdom's association with God (vv. 22–26) and then elaborating on its creative role:

> When he established the heavens, I [wisdom] was there;
> when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
> when he made firm the skies above,
> when he established the fountains of the deep,
> when he assigned to the sea its limit,
> so that the waters might not transgress his command,
> when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
> then I was beside him, like a master workman,
> and I was daily his delight,
> rejoicing before him always,

Copyright 2024 by David Anguish

rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the children of man (Prov 8.27–31).

As we continue our study of James's historical and theological wisdom context, we'll survey the NT's use of wisdom, look more closely at Paul's use of the term in 1 Corinthians, and then think about some ideas relative to choosing the wisdom of Jesus over the world's.

Wisdom in the New Testament

In the NT, the words σοφία (*sophia*, wisdom) and σοφός (*sophos,* wise) are used 51 and 20 times respectively, appearing in the Synoptics, Paul, James, 2 Peter, and Revelation. The Synoptics assume the OT understanding but stress that wisdom is embodied in Jesus. Luke 2.40–52, for example, shows wisdom's connection with the law in his life, highlighting his precocious understanding and answers regarding its teaching (cf. esp. vv. 40, 52). Using a synonymous term, φρόνιμος (*phronimos*; cf. Bauer 2000, 1066), Matthew highlights Jesus's statement that the "wise man" is the one who "hears … and does" his words (Matt 7.24; cf. 10.16; 24.45; 25.2).

Given the close connection between the law, the word, and wisdom/Spirit in Jewish thought, we are not surprised to see a close connection between Jesus and wisdom. Anointed (χρίω, *chriō*) with God's Spirit (Luke 4.18; cf. Isa 11.2; 61.1–2), he is "the Word" who was "with God" (John 1.1–5) before coming to fulfill the law (Matt 5.17–19). Consequently, he is "the one who possesses wisdom or is the mouth of wisdom itself (Lk. 7:35 par. Mt. 11:19; Lk. 11:31 par Mt. 12:42; Lk. 11:49 par. Mt. 23:34; Lk. 10:21, 22 par. Mt. 11:25–30)" (Davids 1982, 53). He is identified with Solomon (Matt 12.42 = Luke 11.31) and pronounces judgment against the self-righteous who ignore the weightier matters of the law (Luke 11.49–54 = Matt 23.34–49; cf. 23.23). This is in line with the connection established between wisdom and justice in the OT and expressed in James (cf. Deut 16.19; 1 Kings 3.28; Ps 37.30; Prov 1.3; Jer 40.4; Jas 1.5, 9–11, 26–27; 2.1–17; 3.13–18; 5.1–11).

Wisdom in 1 Corinthians

Paul uses *sophia* 28 times (cf. Rom 11.33; Eph 1.8, 17; 3.10; Col 1.9, 28; 2.3, 23; 3.16; 4.5); 17 are in 1 Corinthians, 16 are between 1.10 and 3.20 (1.17, 19–22, 24, 30; 2.1, 4–7, 13; 3.19; cf. 12.8). He uses *sophos* 16 times (cf. Rom 1.14, 22; 16.19, 27; Eph 5.15); 11 are in 1 Corinthians, 10 in chapters 1–3 (1.19–20, 25–27; 3.10, 18–20; cf. 6.5).

As he rebukes the Corinthians for their schisms, he contrasts human/worldly wisdom—accumulated knowledge of how the world works—with the wisdom that comes from God (cf. Jas 3.13–18). Paul attributed the Corinthians' problem to reliance on human wisdom in 1.17 — 2.5,

Copyright 2024 by David Anguish

emphasizing that he preached "the word of the cross" (1.17, 19, 20–22; 2.1, 4–5), not the "words of eloquent wisdom" (1.17) which were so important to the Greek-thinking Corinthians.

A related theme in chapters 1 — 4 is human pride. As he called the Corinthians to account for their reliance on human ideas, Paul used καυχάομαι (*kauchaomai*), to boast, five times (1.29, 31; 3.21; 4.7). He also warned them against being "puffed up [φυσιόω, *physioō*] in favor of one against another" (4.6, 18–19), a fault he later showed was exhibited in other ways (5.2; 8.1; 13.4). His point reached its climax in 3.18–20 where he emphasized yet again that "the wisdom of this world is folly [μωρία, *mōria*] with God" (v. 19) (note the repetition of *mōria* in 1.18, 21, 23; 2.14; 3.19).

Understand, Paul was concerned to show the limits of human wisdom; he was not saying that we should eschew all wisdom. He is explicit about this in 2.6–7:

> Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory (cf. 1.21, 24; 2.13; 3.19).

His view of wisdom was the same as that of his Jewish ancestors: wisdom ultimately belongs to God (2.6–7), is discernable to humans by means of grace (2.9–13), and leads to obedience that demonstrates acceptance of "the things of the Spirit of God" (2.14). It is therefore exhibited in lives that are "spiritual" (πνευματικός, *pneumatikos*) (2.14–16).

But, with the blessing of revelation in addition to that which was revealed in the OT (2.6–13), Paul goes beyond his forbears to say that the personification of wisdom is "Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God" (1.30). It is his mind that spiritual people are to make their own (2.16) and he is the one who demonstrates God's superior wisdom (1.24), the one who, as wisdom, brings "righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1.30). Not surprisingly, he is ultimately the person we are to imitate (11.1).

Surrendering to the Wisdom of Jesus

Just as the Jewish understanding of wisdom differed from the Greek view of *sophia* which "concentrated on theoretical knowledge" (Goetzmann 1978, 1027), so Paul's emphasis on "the folly of what we preach" (1.21) accentuates the difference between God's wisdom and human wisdom. This is especially important to remember as we engage with the various views presented as viable ways to make sense of the world and how it works. Think, for example, about modernism and postmodernism. Though subject to legitimate criticisms, both philosophies make commendable points: e.g., modernism's contention that truth can be known and postmodernism's observation that people understand reality in different ways. Of course, neither aligns completely with the pre-modern view that was common in the NT era. But, as Paul showed in 1 Corinthians, that

Copyright 2024 by David Anguish

view also fell short and needed to be subjugated to God's wisdom. We see this emphasized in his declaration that "the rulers of this age" (1 Cor 2.8) had not understood what he preached because the ways of this age had clouded their vision. And even though the saints at Corinth had taken the important step of believing the gospel Paul and the other apostles had preached (1 Cor 15.1–11), the troubles they were experiencing as a church were rooted in the fact that they were still captivated by human wisdom (1 Cor 1.26–29). They had not fully embraced the outlook of the one "who became to us wisdom from God" (1.30) by exemplifying the folly of the cross for the people he called to follow him (cf. Luke 9.23–27). Because the Corinthians continued to look to the wisdom of their world for direction, they did not submit to the wisdom of Jesus. We should reflect on their failure as a cautionary tale for our own walks of faith.

We do so in the understanding that the way of the cross—the wisdom of God—is no easier to accept now than it was then. God's wisdom continues to be obscured by views that make human solutions primary. Consider three proposals that are repeatedly advanced as the solutions to contemporary societal problems: better education; the right application of political power; and being part of the right groups. Recall that the Corinthians had looked to their versions of all three: wisdom according to worldly standards (education); exercising power (politics); giving deference to and seeking a place among those of noble birth (status) (1.26). All have their place but are at best instrumental. True wisdom is found in Jesus who is "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14.6).

Works Cited

Walter Bauer. 2000. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

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

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

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,' October 8, 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