

Two Kinds of Wisdom

*1 Kings 1–14, 2 Chronicles 1–12, Job,
Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

Prophetic Silence

One thing about David's court: It was always full of prophets. The prophet Gad had joined David's outlaw band; Nathan turned up when David settled Jerusalem; David even assigned some of the temple musicians to train in prophetic music (whatever that meant).

When we think of prophets, we may imagine fortune-tellers, or thundering preachers, or wild-eyed desert ascetics. Pagan prophets were all of these, as well as magicians, ecstatic mediums, and plain frauds. A prophet of Yahweh, however, was a little different.

Yahweh was Israel's King, and judges, elders, generals, and human kings were his vice-regents. Their job was to lead the people according to Yahweh's covenant law given to Moses. They couldn't do whatever they wanted; they had to follow the guidelines laid down in the covenant.

In this system, the prophets were Yahweh's official emissaries to the kingdom. The kings and elders were not always gifted in hearing directly from Yahweh; instead, the King gave specific instructions through prophets. For instance, David – who was pretty good at listening to Yahweh by himself – often asked the prophets' advice when making decisions about whether and

how to fight battles, what to do about the temple, and so on.

Besides instructions, the prophets also conveyed Yahweh's praise or rebuke. Praise came when the leaders or people were living up to the covenant; rebuke came when they were not. Nathan brought the good news that David must not build the temple but would have an eternal dynasty. He also had to bring the bad news that David was in hot water for abusing his royal power with adultery and murder. If Israel was a building under construction, David was the foreman and Nathan was the code inspector.

David liked to hear everything Yahweh had to say—even the bad news was better heeded than ignored. So prophets were welcomed at court, and Nathan was a trusted counselor. He and other prophets got David out of more than one political mess because of their wisdom and information from Yahweh.

There were probably other prophets in David's time who lived quietly, as they had during the time of the judges, listening to Yahweh and praying for the nation. In addition, the prophets established themselves as the record-keepers on the kingdom's ups and downs. The Bible mentions "the records of Samuel the seer, the records of Nathan the prophet and the records of Gad the seer" (1 Chronicles 29:29) on David's reign, as well as those of Ahijah, Iddo, Shemaiah, and Isaiah (2 Chronicles 9:29, 12:15, 26:22) on the reigns of later kings. In fact, the Jews call the biblical books of Joshua through 2 Kings "the Former Prophets" because all of those history books were written by prophets as Yahweh's official assessment of how well Israel did or didn't live up to the covenant in each generation.

Certain prophets—Moses, Samuel, Elijah—were later singled out by the Jews as especially great. They were called the *shaluchim*, the "sent ones," because they were Yahweh's special envoys to guide the nation through a transition. Moses presided as Yahweh changed Israel from slaves to servants, and Samuel oversaw the shift from confederacy to monarchy.

But all of the prophetic activity during David's reign echoes against the silence under Solomon. Nathan and Gad died, and they were not replaced. Evidently, Solomon did not care to hear Yahweh's ambassadors assess his rule.

King of Wisdom

Perhaps in the beginning he did not need to. Twenty-year-old Solomon prayed for the wisdom to govern the nation justly, and Yahweh granted the request. Solomon started off as a brilliant judge and administrator. In the international luxury trade, he launched some joint ventures with neighboring states that began to bring huge profits. The temple rose magnificently in seven years, and after it followed thirteen years of construction on an opulent palace. Solomon's court became known throughout the East as a center of "wisdom."

"Wisdom" was the art or skill of sensible living, an understanding of the right goals and the best means of reaching them. Attaining wisdom was the purpose of education throughout the East. Fathers or teachers imparted wisdom to pupils or sons by means of proverbs, pithy sayings that crystallized truth memorably through vivid figures of speech. Archaeologists have unearthed collections of wisdom from Egypt, Babylon, and elsewhere that date from around the time of Solomon.

But Solomon was the master of his day. He wrote three thousand proverbs himself, and collected many more from Israel and the surrounding nations. Learned men would come from all over to hear Solomon's ideas about wise government, family life, and even plants and animals.

Unlike his pagan neighbors, Solomon knew the essence of true wisdom:

The fear of [Yahweh] is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.
(Proverbs 9:10)

This fear was not craven cowering before an angry God, but a realistic awareness that Yahweh was in charge. The right means and ends were those that came from Yahweh and conformed to His moral requirements. Humanity was not the measure. Human reason was not ultimate. Truth was not relative.

These perceptions led Solomon to others, such as the following from Proverbs 11:

When pride comes, then comes disgrace,
but with humility comes wisdom. (verse 2)

Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath,
but righteousness delivers from death. (verse 4)

From this foundation, Solomon accumulated insights into government, parenting, marriage, friendship, work, emotions, and every other arena of daily life. He also wrote 1,005 songs, one of which (Song of Songs) was inspired by Yahweh as His stamp of approval on passionate, erotic love within a committed marriage.

Place me like a seal over your heart,
like a seal on your arm;
for love is as strong as death,
its jealousy unyielding as the grave.
It burns like blazing fire,
like a mighty flame.
Many waters cannot quench love;
rivers cannot wash it away.
If one were to give
all the wealth of his house for love,
it would be utterly scorned. (Song of Songs 8:6-7)

Solomon wrote this poem, perhaps for one of his weddings.¹ It expands on his counsel to a young man in Proverbs 5:18-19:

May your fountain be blessed,
and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.
A loving doe, a graceful deer —
may her breasts satisfy you always,
may you ever be captivated by her love.

Pride and Disgrace

The trouble was, the more rich, powerful, and respected Solomon grew for his wisdom, the more he began to rely on it instead of on its source: his healthy respect for Yahweh. Forgetting the

beginning of wisdom, he soon forgot what he knew about pride, wealth, and love.

It was a clever move on his part to divide Israel into twelve administrative districts for taxation and labor enlistment. In bypassing the tribal boundaries, he weakened the quarrelsome tribal leaders and strengthened his central government. He was shrewd to marry seven hundred royal wives to cement alliances with all of his neighbors, and to make a pharaoh's daughter his queen and build her a splendid palace of her own. It was astute of him to fortify strategic towns on major trade routes and to amass 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horses to protect his country's economic and security interests.

But all of this smart politicking proved to be his undoing. Even the wealth of international trade could not finance Solomon's lavish building projects and defense spending. He had to rely on work gangs conscripted from the common people, on high taxes from the same folk, and on royal bureaucrats to administer the increasingly complex system. Jerusalem was opulent, but Israel was remembering that Samuel had predicted all of this (1 Samuel 8:11-18).

Even more serious, as Solomon blossomed in the international sophisticate set, he was drawn to the exotic gods of his foreign wives. The man who wrote an ardent poem about monogamous love was ensnared by clever alliances and a weakness for romance. "Many roads lead to the divine" became the mentality in cosmopolitan Jerusalem, and why shouldn't the queens of Israel have altars for their gods? Soon children were being sacrificed to Molech on a hill east of the capitol, and all manner of rites were being performed within.

The king's example gave license to the people to dabble in Baal and Ashtoreth worship, spiritism, and whatever else they fancied. Israel was becoming like any other Near Eastern land. Solomon had forgotten what he had prayed when dedicating the temple, the whole reason Yahweh had wanted a glorious building in the first place:

As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people
Israel but has come from a distant land because of your

name—for men will hear of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm—when he comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of you, *so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel*, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name. (1 Kings 8:41-43, emphasis added)

Solomon's temple and kingdom were supposed to be setting an example that would attract the nations to Yahweh, not conforming to those nations' corrupt values.

Yahweh was not about to let Solomon wreck His plan. Because of His promise to David, He did not wrench the whole kingdom out from under Solomon and his heirs. But He did tell Solomon that the realm would be sundered after his death. He also sent a prophet to a man named Jeroboam, the head of Solomon's work gangs in Ephraim, to say that Yahweh was going to put Jeroboam in charge of the northern tribes of Israel. Jeroboam jumped the gun, launched an abortive coup to fulfill the prophecy, and had to spend the last years of Solomon's reign hiding out in Egypt.

Rehoboam and Jeroboam

But after thirty-three golden years under David and forty under Solomon, the flower of the nation shriveled and fell in 931 BC. Solomon's son Rehoboam succeeded him in Jerusalem, and the elders of the people traveled there to renegotiate their covenant with Judah's tribal chief. The leader of this delegation was none other than Jeroboam. Rehoboam had been raised to be a haughty oriental monarch, not Yahweh's vice-regent and the elected leader of the twelve tribes. (Fathering failed again!) The elders could see that there would be nothing but more taxes, forced labor, and bureaucrats from this fool, so they thumbed their noses at him and walked out.

The people of Israel were quick to proclaim Jeroboam king to protect them from Rehoboam (who was prevented from invading them only by another prophet's warning that Yahweh wouldn't

let him win). So now there were two nations with two kings: Judah (which included Simeon and Benjamin) and Israel (which included everybody else). (See map, page 343.)

Now the prophet had warned Jeroboam that his throne was only as secure as his loyalty to Yahweh. He was I Am With You only for those, like Joshua and David, who knew who was really in charge. But Jeroboam was like Saul. Instead of looking at the God who had made him, the son of an obscure widow, king in Israel, he looked at the impossible situation facing him. The people still venerated David and Yahweh, and they had gotten used to going to Jerusalem for the magnificent festivals Solomon had staged. Jeroboam was convinced that if they kept traveling to Jerusalem three times a year, they would soon return their allegiance to Rehoboam. So he devised a solution that seemed astute to human reason but proved foolish in the long run because it bypassed the wisdom from Yahweh.

Jeroboam's scheme was to set up two national cult centers in Bethel and Dan, in the north and south of his kingdom. (See map, page 343.) In each he placed a golden calf—Syrian and Canaanite gods were often depicted standing on calves as symbols of fertility. Thus, Israel's calves with no visible god riding them would represent Yahweh's throne, counterparts to the ark in Jerusalem. Jeroboam handpicked some loyal followers to be priests and scheduled festivals to substitute for the ones in Jerusalem. He dealt ruthlessly with rebel Yahwists but gave free rein to any sort of pagan worship. Jeroboam knew that religion was either the opiate or the amphetamine of the masses, and he wanted Israel addicted to his supply.

The whole contrivance was a mockery of what Yahweh had ordained. It reminded Him of Babel, and He knew who was behind it. He gave Jeroboam one chance to reconsider: He sent a prophet from Judah to denounce the new cult. To show He meant business, He split the altar at Bethel from top to bottom. When Jeroboam tried to assault Yahweh's emissary, He shriveled the king's hand until Jeroboam apologized. (But once again, great authority entailed great responsibility: this prophet lost his life the next day for disobeying one of Yahweh's orders while on an official mission.)

Still Jeroboam persisted in his rebellion, so Yahweh took his eldest son's life and decreed that not one of his other descendants would even receive a decent burial. Israel's spurned Parent had no choice but to play hardball with children who were willing to squander the hope of the human race for the sake of their own power and pleasure.

It was the same with Rehoboam. He kept up the state religion only because it supported his throne. He was glad to let Levites and other Yahweh-lovers flee from the north into his land, but he did nothing to discourage the spread of paganism that had begun in Solomon's time. Orgies and homosexual prostitution were added to child sacrifice. Rehoboam shaped up somewhat in his personal loyalty to Yahweh after Egypt overran Judah and looted Jerusalem. But in all, Rehoboam's C minus grade was not much better than Jeroboam's F. The prophets had gone underground while wisdom reigned in Solomon's court, but they were back in force in the divided kingdom as both halves teetered toward disaster.

Warnings on Wisdom

True wisdom is as much a gift from Yahweh as revelation, but the case of Solomon proves that abused wisdom is disastrous. As wisdom flourished in Judah and Israel for centuries after Solomon, later writers exposed and refuted the most dangerous abuses.

Ecclesiastes. One wise man looked around him at an increasingly secular culture. His people believed in God, of course, but they saw Him as a vague, far-off Creator, uninvolved in their lives. The real world was about getting and spending—eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.

To shake his society to its senses, the wise man wrote a brilliant expression of its philosophy. He called it, "The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem." Here, he said in effect, is the way Solomon would have described life after he was seduced by secular wisdom into making sex, wealth, and power his gods:

"Meaningless! Meaningless!"
says the Teacher.

"Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless." (1:2)

"The fate of the fool [death] will overcome me also.
What then do I gain by being wise?" (2:15)

"Man's fate is like that of the animals . . . man has no
advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless."
(3:19)

This is the tenor of *Ecclesiastes* (the modern title is Latin for "Teacher"). Because death is final and God is uninvolved, life is pointless. It makes no ultimate difference whether we are selfish or generous, kind or wicked. Accumulate toys, do good, or get high—it's all a rat race to avoid facing the fact that we are worth zero.

That is the sensible way to look at things if God is irrelevant. But to the author of *Ecclesiastes*, God is Yahweh: I Am Actively Present. In the last two sentences of his book, the author gives his response to the cold wisdom of a secularized Solomon:

Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the whole duty of man.
For God will bring every deed into judgment,
including every hidden thing,
whether it is good or evil. (12:13-14)

Work and wisdom and honesty are not futile because Yahweh is unfolding a plan in what we do, and death is not the end. The life of obedience outlined by Moses is worth living now and promises a rich future. Pie in the sky when you die? Absolutely. But, contrary to what the world would say, that future pie is worth living for.

Job. Another Israelite was fed up with people who took the teachings of wisdom as iron-clad promises from a legalistic God. Solomon had written "The righteous man is rescued from trouble, and it comes on the wicked instead" (*Proverbs* 11:8), along with many more proverbs in the same vein. Such sayings

were meant to be pithy statements of how the world works in general and in the long run, not universal laws. But many people, who wanted to nail God down and get the rules straight so they would feel secure, took the proverbs as absolutes. The righteous prosper and the wicked suffer — that's God's justice. So if you're suffering, you must be wicked. Right?

Wrong. There is a Snake in the grass. Disgusted with small-minded people who made a mockery of Yahweh, this unknown Israelite told the story of Job, a completely righteous man — so good you could hardly believe it. And as the proverbs promised, he was rich, healthy, and loved. But Satan made the accusation that the legalists hadn't thought of: Job isn't righteous because he loves Yahweh; he's good out of pure self-interest. Virtue pays, the Serpent charged. Yahweh buys loyalty with goodies. If Yahweh were to take away the benefits, Job would spit in His face.

This was a severe allegation. The whole human experiment was designed to demonstrate to the cosmos that Yahweh was a Lover who longed to be freely loved by an uncoerced bride, that He deserved to be trusted even in the dark. So Yahweh took Satan up on his dare.

However, when Job lost his wealth, his family, and his health, he had no idea that he was a living test case that those who love Yahweh do so just because they love Him, not because He buys it. Nor did his friends. They quoted at him all the proverbs about how if he was suffering he must have done something wrong. When Job protested that he hadn't done anything to deserve this treatment, his friends furiously denounced him for calling God unjust. To them, if God is in control, life must always be fair. Everything that happens to you must be a direct result of whether you've been good or not.

In the end, Job silenced his accusers by calling upon God to appear and judge his case. He didn't even really care whether his health recovered, so long as he could have an honest, face-to-face relationship with the real God.

Job's friends expected lightning from Heaven to swallow Job up for such a challenge. And when Yahweh appeared in a mighty storm, His response did flatten Job, but not as his friends expected. In an avalanche of questions, Yahweh demonstrated

that He indeed had both the wisdom to know how to run the world justly and the power to accomplish what He decided. It is not for a divine lack of understanding or ability that life is unfair, Mr. Job. Life is unfair because the Enemy has corrupted it. There is no way to get rid of evil in the world by force without annihilating everybody, and that Yahweh is unwilling to do. He has another plan, and in the meantime, the good guys will suffer right along with the bad guys. Sometimes even more because the Enemy wants to make the good guys bitter against Yahweh, or at least miserable in their faithfulness. But when the wise are confused in their distress, they won't make petty rules about God to rationalize what is happening. They will, like Job in the end, bow in awe and trust at the One whose wisdom, power, and goodness far surpass their wildest imaginations. Job summed up what he had learned as follows:

Then Job replied to [Yahweh]:
 "I know that you can do all things;
 no plan of yours can be thwarted. . . .
 My ears had heard of you
 but now my eyes have seen you." (Job 42:1-2,5)

Job no longer needed answers to his questions. To glimpse Yahweh once was more than enough for a lifetime of faith in the dark.

Several centuries after Solomon, his proverbs and those of other wise men were collected into the book of Proverbs. That book remains an invaluable guide to practical living; wisdom stands alongside revelation as a priceless gift from God. But Ecclesiastes and Job remind us that wisdom must be understood in light of who Yahweh is; the God whose thoughts and ways are so far beyond our minds that they cannot be reduced to legalistic absolutes to make us feel safe; and the God who is right there with us, infusing our every day with purpose. Life is not fair, but it matters deeply because of who its Author is.

NOTE

1. Some scholars think one of Solomon's court poets composed the Song of Songs for one of Solomon's weddings. Our general practice in this book

is to follow traditional beliefs about the authors of books in order not to become mired in scholarly debate. There is wide room for disagreement about authorship when a book doesn't say who wrote it. The Song says it belongs to Solomon, but that could equally mean a dedication. Likewise, Ecclesiastes alludes to Solomon, but never claims him as author.

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Power Encounters

1 Kings 15–2 Kings 12, 2 Chronicles 13–24

Stalemate

Israel and Judah split because petty despots fancied themselves grand monarchs and refused to submit to a Lord who had the whole people's interests at heart. The result was pathetic. For two centuries, Israel and Judah played a triangle game with Syria. Two of the nations would ally against the third until it was defeated. Then the two would turn on each other. When one feared conquest, it would send money to the third to make a treaty, and the cycle would repeat. This went on until Egypt and Assyria grew strong enough to play, too, and between them gobbled the three others up. (See map, page 342.)

In the meantime the game bled the resources—human and financial—of all three players. Judah fared best because its rugged topography made it less accessible, because it had a stable ruling dynasty, and because Yahweh was faithful to His promise to David. Israel was battered by coups and assassinations; in two hundred years it went through twenty kings from nine families, while Judah went through twelve (including one usurping queen) from one family during the same period. At that point, Assyria destroyed Israel but Judah survived.