

What is Wisdom?

The Evidence in the Book of Proverbs¹

HERMANN SPIECKERMANN

Vid den nu avslutade publiceringen av alla textfynd från Qumran har det förvånat många att där fanns så många texter om visheten. Visheten som ett samlat uttryck för människans erfarenheter av livet och Gud har ofta ställts i motsättning till Guds uppenbarelse och frälsningshistoria. Hermann Spieckermann, professor i Gamla testamentets exegetik i Göttingen, som blev hedersdoktor vid Teologiska fakulteten i Lund den 25 maj 2000, visar i denna artikel hur kunskap om människan och världen hör samman med kunskap om Gud i de gammaltestamentliga texterna.

Most affectionately dedicated
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Wisdom and world-order

In 1970, Gerhard von Rad — one of the prominent exponents of a view of the Old Testament known as salvation history — published his work «Weisheit in Israel».² In his late period, he realized that he had underestimated the independent character of sapiential theology and of certain texts of the Psalter. Thus, when he wrote

¹ This essay is based on a lecture read before the Faculty of Theology of the University of Lund on the 25th of May, 2000, when the doctoral degree honoris causa was conferred upon me.

I should like to express my deeply felt gratitude to Dr. Marie-Luise Spieckermann for undertaking the task to transform my complicated German into plain English. The slightly modified German version of this contribution has been published under the title «Was ist Weisheit? Alttestamentliche Einsichten». *Ein Tag in deinen Vorhöfen. Gedenkschrift C. Mahrenholz*, 2000, p. 53–66. The abbreviations used can be found in Siegfried M. Schwertner. *Theologische Realenzyklopädie: Abkürzungsverzeichnis*. W. de Gruyter, Berlin–New York 2nd ed. 1994.

² English translation *Wisdom in Israel*, Abingdon Press. Nashville/New York 1972, 4th ed. 1978.

his work on wisdom in Israel he revised implicitly his previous conception dominated by the idea of salvation history which is central to his Theology of the Old Testament. His study of wisdom could be conceived as the third volume of his theology of the Old Testament. Von Rad, however, does not even hint at the tensions between his comprehensive concept of salvation history and the entirely different approach of sapiential theology. He leaves the traditions side by side, as they can be found in the final shape of the biblical canon without drawing any conclusions concerning the development of theological ideas and literature in the Old Testament.

Regarding von Rad's presentation as the starting point of my own explorations, I should like to present the characteristic features of sapiential theology on the basis of the sayings of the Book of Proverbs. Compared with von Rad I should like to stress more explicitly the original and long preserved independence of wisdom which is presumed to mark the beginning of theological thinking and writing in Israel. Wisdom is a theological approach starting from the multitude of experiences that could be met with in Israel as well as in Egypt or Mesopotamia.

Israel, emerging very late in the history of the Ancient Near East, owes a lot to the ways of wisdom prepared in Mesopotamia and especially in Egypt. Wisdom teaches to transform the multitude of experiences into a knowledge of the world that enables men to live according to rules they have become aware of. Those rules are part of a comprehensive world-order founded by God himself. In realizing the rules of God's world-order men are gaining divine knowledge, because God's way of acting in the world is in harmony with his being. According to the teachers of wisdom, discovering the world means discovering God. Thus, the sages feel at home in the world which implicitly provides its own access to God since God and the world are not totally separate entities but permeate one another. Accordingly, men are encouraged to progress from knowing the world to knowing God and to lead a life which corresponds to the knowledge attained. It is not daring to maintain that this manner of theological thinking based on Ancient Near Eastern sapiential insights is the very nucleus of the Old Testament, together with the world of the cult documented in a few pre-exilic psalms and in ritual texts concerning offerings, only preserved in a much more recent shape of tradition. With regard to sapiential literature, a pre-exilic stock of texts is preserved in the sayings of Prov 10–22.³ But it must be stressed that by no means all the sayings in the composition mentioned derive from pre-exilic times. The composition Prov 10–22 has been extended over the centuries reaching its final shape probably not earlier than the Book of Proverbs in its entirety, namely in the fourth century.

³ Cf. among the works recently published concerning Prov 10–22: Jutta Hausmann, *Studien zum Menschenbild der älteren Weisheit*, FAT 7, J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1995; Ruth Scoralick, *Einzelspruch und Sammlung: Komposition im Buch der Sprichwörter Kapitel 10–15*, BZAW 232, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin — New York 1995; Andreas Scherer, *Das weise Wort und seine Wirkung: Eine Untersuchung zur Komposition und Redaktion von Proverbia 10,1–22,16*, WMANT 83, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1999.

Aristotle and the wise Jew

It deserves notice that around the fourth century the fame of Israel's wisdom had spread to those parts of Asia Minor which were under the influence of Greek culture. The Peripatetic Clearchus of Soloi relates of his teacher Aristotle that he met a Jew from Celesyria, «a Grecian, not only in his language, but in his soul also».⁴ The meeting took place in the years between 348 and 345 when Aristotle was on an educational journey in Asia Minor. According to the report of Clearchus, the Jew was eager to enter into a conversation with Aristotle in order to become acquainted with his sophia, i. e. his knowledge, erudition, prudence, philosophy. While talking with Aristotle that Jew revealed a lot of his own sophia and paideia, i. e. his learning, culture, and accomplishments. Aristotle was impressed by «the great and astonishing endurance and sobriety displayed by this Jew in his manner of life».⁵ This report of Clearchus, so complimentary to the Jew, has been quoted in Josephus' work *Contra Apionem* and was thus handed down to us. It is impossible that Josephus in the first century A. D. could simply have invented that report as its authenticity might have been checked in every major library in those days. If we combine this report with our knowledge of the development of Israelite wisdom it becomes highly probable that the sapiential erudition of the Jew which provoked Aristotle's admiration was based on an earlier composition of the sayings now contained in the Book of Proverbs. No other sapiential text would have been regarded as authoritative in the fourth century B.C.

Wisdom in the Old Kingdom of Egypt

Although the nucleus of the sayings in the Book of Proverbs incorporates pre-exilic material the

⁴ Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 1,180–181 (Flavii Iosephi Opera Bd. V, ed. B. Niese, Verlag, Ort 21955).

⁵ I, 182; English translation by H. St. J. Thackeray, *Josephus*, Vol. 1, LCL, William Heinemann Ltd, London — Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1961, p. 237.

original texts of Israelite wisdom literature seem to have been supplanted in the course of tradition. We are entitled to fill this gap by casting a glance at the Egyptian instructions of the Old Kingdom. It may be assumed that similar texts marked the beginning of Israelite wisdom literature.

Don't be proud of your knowledge,
Consult the ignorant and the wise;
The limits of art are not reached,
No artist's skills are perfect;
Good speech is more hidden than greenstone,
Yet may be found among maids at the
grindstones.⁶

The quoted text belongs to the instruction of Ptahhotep. The collection of maxims dates back to the last third of the third millennium B. C. Though there are only a few manuscripts the dating is fairly certain as the oldest papyrus must have been written shortly after 2000 B. C. It is also corroborated by certain peculiarities of the writing technique employed. Some of the maxims of Ptahhotep were still followed by Coptic monks in the fourth and fifth centuries.⁷ During the late third millennium when the instruction of Ptahhotep was composed everything connected with the name of Israel might have been an idea in God's mind — not more. Nevertheless, the beginnings of Israelite wisdom roughly two thousand years later probably focussed on the same topics as the instruction of Ptahhotep. Those features, however, have been replaced in Israelite wisdom by sayings of a less specific social character. There is now an overwhelming majority of proverbs which distinguish different groups of a contrasting moral and religious character (e. g. the wise and the fool, the righteous and the wicked, the diligent and the sluggard, the rich and the poor).⁸ Con-

sequently, the older sayings pertaining exclusively to a high social class have become rare in the Book of Proverbs in its final shape. We do not have immediate evidence for the redactional work performed in the course of the centuries which, due to autographs, we do have in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Nevertheless, it is beyond doubt that the origins of Israel's wisdom are closely related to those documented in the instruction of Ptahhotep and other Egyptian sapiential texts. They are meant to be a passing-on of the knowledge of a high official, called father, to a gifted disciple, called son. The knowledge transmitted must not be regarded as simple know-how which qualifies someone for a certain occupation. It is, rather, a comprehensive education which affects the disciple in many ways. The instruction pays special attention to the «training» (education/cultivation) of the heart. The heart is able to perceive God's will through the father's instruction. Therefore, sapiential education aims at the de-velopment of a «listening heart».⁹ This metaphor embodies the essence of all sapiential efforts. According to the instruction of Ptahhotep, the «listening heart» becomes aware of a certain behaviour which befits a person's social position. It gains general insights into the order of life, and, moreover, into the order of the world. Both — the personal and the general aspect — depend upon one another.

It goes without saying that a man who is expected to be installed in a high position at the Egyptian court must definitely have good manners. The career may depend upon knowing how to behave:

If you are among guests
At the table of one greater than you,
Take what he gives as it is set before you;
Look at what is before you,
Don't shoot many glances at him,

⁶ Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature Vol I: The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, University of California Press, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1975, 63.

⁷ Cf. Günter Burkard, «Die Lehre des Ptahhotep». *TUAT III/2*, Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, Gütersloh 1991, p. 195–196; Hellmut Brunner, *Alt-ägyptische Weisheit: Lehren für das Leben*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1988, p. 107.

⁸ Cf. Hausmann, *Studien*, p. 9–104.

⁹ Cf. Hellmut Brunner, *Das hörende Herz: Kleine Schriften zur Religions- und Geistesgeschichte Ägyptens*. OBO 80, Universitätsverlag Freiburg/Schweiz, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1988. 3–41.

Molesting him offends the *ka*.¹⁰
 Don't speak to him until he summons,
 One does not know what may displease;
 Speak when he has addressed you,
 Then your words will please the heart ...¹¹

And a man who is to be a high official must
 know how to treat petitioners:

If you are a man who leads,
 Listen calmly to the speech of one who pleads;
 Don't stop him from purging his body
 Of that which he planned to tell.
 A man in distress wants to pour out his heart

More than that his case be won ...¹²

One may wonder whether the advice quoted above is problematic or not. In this context, it is of primary concern that the teachings of Ptahhotep do not convey instruction in the skills for a specific occupation. Rather, a certain conduct is taught being the precondition for the installation in high office. The knowledge which pertains not only to the order of human relations but also to the order of the world prevents disturbances of the established order, caused by thoughtless conduct. It would be too superficial to regard this merely as a strategy to avoid conflict. One has to realize that misconduct affects the rules of living and working together harmoniously, i. e. according to the established divine order. Taking this to heart means to have a *savoir vivre* in a very deep sense. The true master of the art of living has a «trained» (educated, cultivated) heart. His heart is in full command of the interplay between his own way of living and the given order. It is able to unite order, instruction, knowledge and life.

¹⁰ *Ka* is a typical Egyptian notion with many semantic aspects. It can be characterized as the symbol of unceasing vitality (cf. P. Kaplony, «Ka», *LÄ* 3, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1980, col. 275–282; J. Assmann, *TUAT* II/6, p. 834). Klaus Koch describes the term as «Außenseele, welche Gestalt und Erhalt gewährleistet» (*Geschichte der ägyptischen Religion: Von den Pyramiden bis zu den Mysterien der Isis*, W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart–Berlin–Köln 1993, p. 246).

¹¹ Lichtheim, *Literature* I, p. 65.

¹² Lichtheim, *Literature* I, p. 68.

Being truly educated means to have a listening heart open to the counsel of God¹³ and also to words of the maids at the grindstones among whom the treasure of good speech, i. e. the art of knowledge can be found as well as among the sages. The knowledge attained by the wise makes them proud of their rank and unpretentious at the same time. They are aware of being surrounded by a universal order that surpasses the limits of their own understanding considerably. In Egypt, the order is personified by the goddess Maat.¹⁴ Maat, the goddess of wisdom, is the embodiment of good reign, righteousness and truth. We have to use all these terms to denote one and the same phenomenon. The goddess is not symbolised by solemn emblems, but by a feather attached to her head. Order, light as a feather and enduring and reliable at the same time. Order perceived in this way promotes sapiential *savoir vivre*. Masters of sapiential *savoir vivre* are sensitive to God's counsel, devoted to knowledge and, consequently, to good speech. They are lovers of life, lovers of the bearable burden of a well-ordered life.

The Book of Proverbs: experience and knowledge

The features characteristic of the Old-Egyptian instruction of Ptahhotep pertain also to the beginnings of Israelite wisdom, although they are only transmitted in an already reworked form, modified by later sapiential ideas. The poetic form of Old-Israelite wisdom is different from that of the Egyptian instructions. Good speech, highly esteemed by both cultures, takes the shape of isolated sayings constructed according to the rules of parallelismus membrorum and consisting usually of only one poetic line.¹⁵ The

¹³ Cf. Lichtheim, *Literature* I, p. 65.

¹⁴ Cf. Jan Assmann, *Ma'at: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im Alten Ägypten*, C. H. Beck, München 1990.

¹⁵ The parallelismus membrorum as the central form of Hebrew poetry is explained in detail by W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques*, JSOT.S 26, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 2nd 1986, p. 114–159.

parallelismus membrorum meets perfectly the requirements of sapiential sayings. The necessity to formulate in both halves of the line two observations, circumstances, insights or opinions in a certain relation to one another stimulates reflection and produces knowledge. The Hebrew term for such a saying is *māšāl* normally translated as «proverb, saying». Translations like these render the semantic overtones of the term but insufficiently. The Hebrew root *mšl* has the basic meaning «to be resembling, to be like», the nominal equivalent in Accadian *mišlu* means «half».¹⁶ Consequently, the term *māšāl* implies the activity of relating, connecting and comparing what is put together in the two halves of the saying. The question inevitably raised is whether the «equation» set up can be solved or whether it is an «equation with two unknown quantities». What knowledge is hidden and waiting to be found? What problem will the related two halves of the saying confront the hearer with? Those «equations» are possible on the one condition: that all observations and experiences are essentially comparable with one another; this quality enables them to be transformed into knowledge which is useful for a person's own way of living. The sayings in the Book of Proverbs — roughly 600 — are comprehensible to those only who perceive the universal parabolic structure of God's world-order.

Sluggards, fools and scoffers

This way of gathering knowledge is not without the occasional touch of humour:

As a door turns on its hinges,
so does a sluggard on his bed.
(Prov 26,14)

The sages can laugh at the sluggards as their activities or, more precisely, their idleness does not exceed the limits of self-damage. Nevertheless, an air of concern cannot be missed, considering that the idler ignores the manifold invitations to discover the divine order inherent in the world. A relative of the idler, but unlike him

a public menace is the fool. In the sages' opinion, he is the representative of a contrary way of living, even worse: the representative of a disorder hostile to life. Fools do not pay close attention to the divine order. They only want to know their own world, not only destroying themselves eventually but also wreaking havoc upon others. Therefore, the wise give the warning:

Let a man meet a she-bear robbed of her cubs,
rather than a fool in his folly.
(Prov 17,12)

The wise find many ways to characterise the fool. Sometimes, the features described surprise, as in the following saying:

Wisdom is before a man of understanding
but the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth.
(Prov 17,24; cf. 27,20)

The man of understanding is surrounded by wisdom. He does not need to search for it; it is ever present to him because it is present in the world. Wisdom as the ontological foundation of the world is at the same time the basis of the cognitive faculty of every individual prepared to open his heart to wisdom. Contrary to that, the fool's eyes are where nothing can be found, while he is living under the illusion that the remotest places offer the deepest knowledge. The sages regard this as a dangerous excess which shatters every hope of finding true knowledge. Therefore, the judgement on the scoffer — a close friend of the fool — is scathing, emphasized by juxtaposing the scoffer and the man of understanding:

A scoffer seeks wisdom — there is nothing,
but knowledge is easy for a man of understanding.
(Prov 14,6)

Knowledge is not easy for the reason that it is knowledge light! The easiness is due to the harmonious interplay between the divine, given order and the joy of knowledge on the part of the sages. They are encouraged by each new insight into the order, feeling at home in a world in which wisdom is present. God manifests himself

¹⁶ Cf. *HALAT*, p. 611b; *AHW*, p. 661a; *CAD*, M/II p. 126–129.

in the guise of wisdom.¹⁷ Sapiential knowledge of the world goes together with knowledge of God.

Way and righteousness

When the older sapiential texts want to point out this connection they rarely use the words creation and wisdom, but speak of the way and of righteousness. Human ways and God's way, righteousness pursued among men and God's righteousness are in a complex relation with one another. Knowledge of the way and the pursuit of righteousness form the very centre of the theology of wisdom. Righteousness and the way cannot be separated. It would not do to equate righteousness with abstract rules and maxims and the way with proper conduct. Rather both, righteousness and the way, are simultaneously a given order and a task to accomplish. In this interplay, God and man may come very close together or avoid one another.

Two sayings in the Book of Proverbs, which have been deliberately placed side by side, may illustrate the connection between the way and righteousness:

The way of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD,
but he loves him who pursues righteousness.

There is severe discipline for him who forsakes the way;
he who hates reproof will die.
(Prov 15.9–10)

The contrast is marked in very plain terms: abomination and love, pursuit of righteousness and forsaking the way with the consequence of severe discipline and death. When the way and righteousness are at stake, the alternative must be unmistakably clear. The wicked are dangerous because they are firmly convinced of having found the way, often not only one way, but several ways. They misjudge the danger of their chosen ways, leading not to life but to death; or

they intentionally hide the true nature of their ways from men who are searching for the way of life, misleading them and preparing their fall. Therefore, the judgement on the wicked is passed by calling in divine authority: «The way of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD.» Appealing to mere common sense instead would fail, as the danger of the way(s) of the wicked is not necessarily obvious.

In contrast to that, God's love is promised to those who pursue his righteousness. Pursuing righteousness is a variant term for searching the way which is in accord with God's will. Righteousness and the way are closely linked to God himself. Both can be found within the world as they are essentials of the divine order of the world. Being essentials of God's established order they do not need to be created by men themselves. In case they try to establish their own ways, they are suspected of having forsaken God's way first. This is implied in the two sayings quoted above. The vocabulary used is full of emotion, even passion: love and hate. The question of finding the way of life and pursuing righteousness seems to have been hotly debated. It is beyond doubt for the sages that making a good or a bad choice in this respect is a matter of life and death.

Man's heart and God's plan

For this reason, it is small wonder that in many proverbs the sages reflect on how man's way may succeed. The proverbs comprise a wide range of possible solutions to the problem. The sages show complete confidence in God's guidance while they are on the way preordained by God himself, and they do not conceal their concern when they consider the dangers lurking by the wayside and inside those who are determined to find the way of life.

The well-known sayings «Man proposes, God disposes», in Swedish «Män(ni)skan spår och Gud rå», in German «Der Mensch denkt, und Gott lenkt» are variations of the Hebrew prototype

A man's mind plans his way,
and/but the LORD directs his step.
(Prov 16,9)

¹⁷ Von Rad, *Wisdom*, 175–176: «How much man feels at home in the world! Whatever happens to him from that direction simply awakens trust, bestows order and healing.»

Man's mind, literally: man's heart and God, the way and every step — they are related to one another. It is, however, left open how the appropriate correlation is to be established. On one hand, the proverb suggests a possible accord of man's thought about his own way with God's guidance, on the other it hints at a possible tension between them. The lack of precision seems to be intended. It directs our eyes towards the more important issue which is unaffected by a lack of clarity: As long as a man tries to find his way with a «listening heart» he may be confident that each step of his is under God's guidance. This is not regarded as a determination limiting man's options to form his own way of life. Rather, God's guidance is accepted with relief.¹⁸ There is the other one who rules over man's way in a wholesome manner.

The sages are aware of the danger that even the heart — God's special place in men — may be deceived by many false ideas. Concern with respect to this is clearly expressed in a variation of the proverb quoted above:

Many are the plans in the mind (literally: heart) of a man,
but it is the purpose of the LORD that will be established.
(Prov 19,21; cf. 16,2; 21,2)

Here, the potential discrepancy between the many plans of the human mind and the one purpose of God is envisaged. Nevertheless, this variant of the proverb also reflects the relief that all human plans are incapable of crossing God's single plan. He will eventually establish his purpose. The term «purpose» is completely interchangeable with «plan» or «thought» in the same way as the metaphors of «way», «path» and «step» can be exchanged.

¹⁸ Von Rad, *Wisdom*, p. 100: «It is a question not of something which a man does not know, but ought to know and perhaps even could know, but of something which he can never know...What it means for a man is left open. One can almost suppose that in the case of this limitation, where it becomes clear that even in every human plan God still has the last word, the wise men saw, rather, something beneficial.»

Sometimes, there are expressions of deep concern about the interplay between God and man and the way of life which is to result from it. This is attested in another reworked version of the proverb:

A man's steps are ordered by the LORD;
how then can man understand his way?
(Prov 20,24)

In the original Hebrew, the proverb has a balanced structure, but its syntax — like its contents — is distorted. While the belief in God's guidance is affirmed in the first half of the line, the second half contains an uneasy question or even an anxious exclamation. How can man understand his way? Is it at all possible for human beings to understand their way? One should be aware of both aspects: the affirmation of God's guidance, deliberately placed at the beginning of the proverb and the doubt expressed at its end and which, ironically, seems to be the result of the initial affirmation: How much insight into his own way is man granted by that God who orders all his steps? When the proverb speaks of «his way», which way is meant? God's way or man's way, or both ways — in harmonious concord or in dangerous discord? Will all those single steps directed by God add up to form a way? And if that is so, why should the fact remain hidden from the mind of man? The older sapiential texts first and foremost wanted to convince that God makes it easy for man to gain insight into the order of the world and the order of human life and that it is therefore possible to understand the way. The wisdom of the proverbs is ill at ease with the idea that the obscure roads men travel should be identical with God's way. These doubts, commonly regarded as characteristic of the sceptical wisdom of Job or Qoheleth, appear much earlier as part of the wisdom of the proverbs which preceded those books and continued to have an impact. However, it has to be admitted that, in the proverbs, the doubts are mitigated by a profound trust in God's benign guidance which is beyond question, although empirical evidence may be wanting.

Fruit and the tree of life

The sages who watch over the proverbs, teach how to follow the way even if it is obscure because insight is hard to obtain. Much is expected of these wise teachers. A great promise rests upon them and they are in a position of great responsibility. One of the proverbs states:

The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life;
and the wise wins souls.
(Prov 11.30)

I shall not discuss the problems of the textual variants, because the Masoretic text on which my translation is based, does not require emendation. The phrase is extravagant and meant to attract attention. The image that might have been expected is that the righteous man is a tree of life which bears fruit — fruit for others to enjoy and prosper on — or that the righteous man is himself the fruit of the tree of life. In the present case the image takes a different turn. It is the *fruit* of the righteous, which *is a tree of life*. Certain intertextual allusions seem to be intended. A modified version of the image of the tree in Ps 1 «planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season» seems to provide the background of this proverb. The image of the fruit — especially with respect to Ps 1 — precludes the idea of independent action on the part of the righteous. In bearing fruit he obeys a higher order. Another force is at work which makes the inconspicuous fruit be a tree of life. It is beside the point that the tree of life grows out of the fruit first. The fruit *is* a tree of life. The proverb does not intend to oppose the story of the fall of man in Gen 3, but it wants to draw attention to the option offered by the sages: that there is fruit from the tree of life, pleasant, even alluring, but offered by God and not forbidden — in the shape of the wise who, to others, become «catchers of souls», not highwaymen prowling the winding roads of life, but fishers of men. The wise are trees of life, catchers of souls, fishers of men; this implies that they must be righteous, men who are aware of righteousness which is identical with God's benign order.

God and righteousness

The high claim is based on the fact that God prepared the ground himself. The insight of the wise into the order of righteousness, established in the world by God, finds its most intense expression in the following proverb:

He who pursues righteousness and kindness
will find life, righteousness and honour.
(Prov 21,21)

In part, tradition has found fault with that two-fold righteousness and has omitted the word in the second half of the line. From the textual critic's point of view, the omission cannot be justified, but redactional criticism helps to find the right track. In all probability, «righteousness» in the second half of the line results from a reworking of the proverb. When the addition of «righteousness» is cancelled, the proverb's original version is likely to emerge, with its parallelism of three and three words and its pairing of the words «righteousness and kindness» and «life and honour». It would, however, be an error to establish, according to their positions within the line, a relationship between the words of the pairs — that is to couple «righteousness» with «life» and «kindness» with «honour». Both pairs of words in the respective halves of the line refer, each in itself, to the whole of the good, which can afford divine guidance to those who aspire to wisdom: righteousness and kindness. They may find the «treasure»: life and honour.

It must, however, be stressed that the basic structure of the proverb is not determined by the movement of searching and finding. To follow or to pursue something — righteousness and kindness — is possible only, when it is known and when attention is focused closely on it. And what is found — life and honour — is not, in its kind, surprisingly new. The proverb merely promises that the well known divine gifts to human beings coupled as righteousness/kindness and life/honour can be united and make those prosper on their way who have made this treasure of sapiential knowledge the centre of their lives. Kindness (*chæsæd*) in the later wisdom books has an important interpretative function with respect to righteousness. The older wisdom

would probably have spoken of righteousness alone (cf. Prov 15,9). Righteousness, which plays the lead in the first pair of words is paralleled in the second pair by life. Honour (kabôd), too, is a rare word in the older wisdom; it does occur though, but only in the sense of «repute». ¹⁹ In this proverb, however, honour has a fuller sound. It interprets «life» as something not merely synonymous with «existence». «Life», aimed at in this sense, is participation in God's own honour which man receives as a gift. This thought, like the interpretation of righteousness through kindness, originated in the theology of the psalms. ²⁰ It is obvious that both pairs of words try to get to the roots of wise living. They denote the sum of God's gifts to those who are willing to meet the expectations which are implicit in God's promise and claim.

Now, in the revised version of the proverb, the word righteousness has been added and placed right between the words life and honour. Stylistically, this can hardly be called an improvement. The meaning of the proverb, however, has been enriched in a manner which may justly be called a theological sounding of the depths of wisdom. The proverb now says in abbreviated form that righteousness, when sought will be found as righteousness. The tautology — brought about by editorial intervention — is used by the sages to show clearly that the idea of righteousness provides the closest approach possible to the essence of wisdom. Rendering righteousness, as I have done, through the concept of order, is to point out an important aspect. But to stress only this aspect is inadequate, because it does not reveal the full glory of the benign and perfect equilibrium of objects, creatures and actions, which God has established in the world. Righteousness could be interpreted as the mystery of the creation of the world, as the force, through which God effects the harmonious interplay of microcosm and macrocosm. It must, however, be admitted that all these definitions do not reach far beyond that

of order. Moreover, it is not unproblematic to focus attention on the idea of creation which, in the older wisdom of the proverbs, is not expressed verbatim placed in a prominent position.

Righteousness is righteousness: The wise are at their wits' end. Righteousness manifests itself in countless aspects of the world as God's gift and claim. And as a whole it is greater than its parts' sum which can only be imagined. Perhaps the sages could agree to the notion that righteousness does not only come from God, but that, if rightly understood, it is God himself. God as righteousness, who can be encountered and who manifests himself in the world into which he has implanted righteousness as a *ratio essendi*. Within the range of our inquiry into sapiential knowledge it might perhaps be permitted to define righteousness as the manifestation of God in the world. I even dare say: Righteousness is the worldliness of God or the worldly evidence of God's presence. According to the sages, righteousness is as sure a guide to knowledge of God as are salvation history, revelation of God's legal will, cult and prophetic message. The sages do not attempt to walk those ways. The reason for this is not a conscious rejection of salvation history and revelation, cult and prophets, but a conscious preference for the way of wisdom, which leads from knowledge of the world to knowledge of God. The preference is well grounded: in the order of righteousness of the world which is perceived as the way of God in the world. This is the way the wise seek to know in order to join the ways of men to it.

The theology of wisdom should no longer be regarded as a supplementary theological effort enriching the central theological issues of the Pentateuch and the prophetic writings. Rather, it should be regarded as an independent theological approach, probably the first endeavour, Israel undertook in the world of theological reflection.

¹⁹ Cf. Prov 11,16; 15,33; 18,12; 20,3; 26,1.8; 29,23.

²⁰ Cf. Hermann Spieckermann, *Heilsgegenwart: Eine Theologie der Psalmen*, FRLANT 148, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1989, 220–225.

