

## ECHOES OF GOD: JOURNEYING WITH THE WORD OF GOD



*Paulo Freire, Brazilian educator, philosopher and pioneer of critical pedagogy (1921-1997).  
Painting by an anonymous artist.*

### **Week Four: The Wisdom Texts**

Eventually, after years of journeying with God to the Promised Land and through the times of the Kings and the times of exile and return, the people put together their memories and experiences in texts. Among these are collections of popular wisdom. Their writers collected the experiences, of mostly ordinary people, in the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiasticus or Ben Sirach, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, Job and Wisdom. These writings helped the evolving communities to remain open to “*the God*” and faithful to the vocation of being “*the God’s*” liberated people. It’s a body of literature concerned with how to live well and wisely in all circumstances and at all times. Some of this collection comes in the forms of short sayings that even children can learn. Jesus uses these texts and their accessible language to fill out the wisdom of the streets. One of the most famous texts is the story of a just man who suffers for no apparent reason - it is the story of Job. It addresses the common question: why do the good suffer? And that is where we will take our text from now.

**Main Text: Job 29:1-17 - Anticipating the life and ministry of Jesus.**

*Compare Job with Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemene and his friends lack of understanding in Mark 14:32-40*

**1** Job again took up his discourse and said: **2** "O that I were as in the months of old, as in the days when God watched over me; **3** when his lamp shone over my head, and by his light I walked through darkness; **4** when I was in my prime, when the friendship of God was upon my tent; **5** when the Almighty was still with me, when my children were around me; **6** when my steps were washed with milk, and the rock poured out for me streams of oil! **7** When I went out to the gate of the city, when I took my seat in the square, **8** the young men saw me

and withdrew, and the aged rose up and stood; **9** the nobles refrained from talking, and laid their hands on their mouths; **10** the voices of princes were hushed, and their tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths. **11** When the ear heard, it commended me, and when the eye saw, it approved; **12** because I delivered the poor who cried, and the orphan who had no helper. **13** The blessing of the wretched came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. **14** I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban. **15** I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame. **16** I was a father to the needy, and I championed the cause of the stranger. **17** I broke the fangs of the unrighteous, and made them drop their prey from their teeth.  
(New Revised Standard Version)

All the great civilisations of the ancient Near East, Egypt, Assyria and Babylon, had their own Wisdom literature giving guidance on how to live well and act sensibly, but it wasn't obviously religious literature. So the Hebrew people borrowed some of this literature from their neighbours. After all, they did inhabit the same world, and so a lot of practical wisdom was transferable.

So for example, Proverbs 23:1-11 says:

**1** When you sit down to eat with a ruler, observe carefully what is before you, **2** and put a knife to your throat if you have a big appetite. **3** Do not desire the ruler's delicacies, for they are deceptive food. **4** Do not wear yourself out to get rich; be wise enough to desist **5** When your eyes light upon it, it is gone; for suddenly it takes wings to itself, flying like an eagle toward heaven. **6** Do not eat the bread of the stingy; do not desire their delicacies; **7** for like a hair in the throat, so are they. "Eat and drink!" they say to you; but they do not mean it. **8** You will vomit up the little you have eaten, and you will waste your pleasant words. **9** Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, who will only despise the wisdom of your words. **10** Do not remove an ancient landmark or encroach on the fields of orphans, **11** for their redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you.

We can find very similar advice in the Egyptian *Wisdom of Amenemope*, written around 1300-1075 BC. But among the Hebrew people, the basic questions of all serious people about how to live and behave, how to act purposefully but not harmfully, how to find norms to organise their lives in a coherent and wholesome way, and how to pass this wisdom on to the next generation, all found a particular context in their being called by "*the God*" who called them from nobodies to be "*the God's*" people.

Gradually, the best of the tried and tested popular sayings and proverbs were collected in the Book of Proverbs and in Ecclesiasticus, where there are proverbs on issues such as patience, charitable giving, the nature of friendship, freedom, how to relate to others and prudence. They are given a unique framework in the first nine chapters of Proverbs, and finally in the last great text, in the Book of Wisdom itself, collated in the century before the birth of Jesus. Here all wisdom has its origin in the Creator God and leads the one who truly seeks wisdom back to God.

Over time, the Hebrew people began to put all the pieces of their history together. They saw the divine wisdom underpinning the call of Abraham and Sarah, and shaping the covenant with Moses and the liberated slaves. This is expressed beautifully in Psalm 119 where the Law given to Moses and the new people, is seen as true wisdom which enables full, fruitful and joyful lives. So now, the people have a whole framework that could locate the particular wisdom of everyday domestic life within the grandeur of God's creative, saving, and sustaining history.

This comes to a wonderful climax in the first chapter of St. John's Gospel, John 1:1-14, where the opening words evoke the beginning of Creation through God's word, and how in Jesus that Word of God has become flesh in our daily reality. Now at last, all that is real and tangible can become an expression of God's creative wisdom. The wisdom literature takes

its place in the original divine plan in which God clearly desires to come ever closer to Creation, valuing and cherishing all that he has made.

Jesus will famously state this in popular form in a wisdom saying in Luke 12:6-7:

*“Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God’s sight. But even the hairs of your head are counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”*

And so, the popular everyday phrases of the Wisdom Literature take their place in the plan of God’s unfolding Creation. The Hebrew People gradually begin to understand their unique role in “*the God’s*” wisdom “*at play everywhere on his earth, delighting in the children of men.*” Proverbs 8:31.

Perhaps the crowning glory of the Wisdom Literature is the Book of Job told in the form of a dramatic story, where “*the God*” and his servant Satan, at this point a figure who tests people (a sort of quality control person), look down on the good earth and God gives thanks for the particular virtue of his servant Job. Satan asks permission to test Job and the rest of the drama is the unfolding of the terrible suffering of this good man while his friends and neighbours attempt to explain his suffering.

Job is all of us who ask the question: why do the innocent suffer? His three friends give him the traditional answers but in attempting to justify God, they are false to human experience (Job 13:7-8). This is a classic tension we will all meet eventually, between traditional answers and contemporary experience when these don’t quite hold together. This is the tension between pious tradition and personal conscience, which none of us can escape, if we follow the journey of God’s people.

The arguments put forward, were still in use at the time of Jesus. Suffering is a judgment of God on the sinner or the consequence of the sins of others e.g. the fathers or ancestors. Wealth was the reward of goodness, the poor must therefore, be sinners. Jesus would break this open by putting the sinners and the destitute at the heart of his teaching of God’s Kingdom.

In his conscience, Job knows he is innocent so how can he come to terms with the prevailing tradition. Job’s integrity and his simple plea to his friends for them to show his sin: “*Tell me plainly, and I will listen in silence; show me where I have erred*” (Job 6:24) blows away their empty arguments from tradition. Their answers just don’t fit.

Having shown the weakness of human arguments Job challenges God, and God responds. Out of this wonderful argumentative encounter, there emerges a renewed sense of the mystery of divine wisdom throughout the Creation. Job and all of us are invited to enter that mystery for a real encounter with God, but we can never simplify or exhaust its meaning. The answer to innocent suffering is not clear but there is a new depth to the divine human relationship between Job and “*the God*”:

*“I knew you only by hearsay but now, my own eyes have seen you. I retract, and repent in dust and ashes.”* Job 42:5-6.

Job finds new peace by entering into the renewed mystery of “*I am who I am*” – who, just as Moses did, he has encountered in a fresh way. He does this by engaging with friends in honest debate: by holding to the reality of his own experience, and by calling on, and questioning, “*the God*” to whom he is so devoted.

Through this critical process, his own experience is affirmed, previous certainties are blown away and he is invited to walk daily in the presence of the God who comes close. This is a wisdom which has to be waited on and lived out of in hope. But what Job hoped for...

*"I know that my redeemer lives and that at the last he will stand upon the earth, and after my skin has been thus destroyed then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me." (Job 19:25-27) (New Revised Standard Version)*

... this the Gospels bear witness to in Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, our Redeemer.

### **Reflection**

The Wisdom Literature often gives good simple advice for us on our journey through life. But it can also accompany us into the darker places where the tension between religious wisdom and our own experience is not so clear. It doesn't ask us to give up our own position of conscience but it does promise, that if we face the tensions with integrity, we will encounter the living God in the midst of the darkness and confusion.

Can we think of such tensions at present?

Can we make Job's prayer of trust in the text above into our own?



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