CHAPTER 2

THE WISDOM ENTERPRISE

What kind of world hides behind the two biblical books of Proverbs and Qoheleth? This is a question which is at the very heart of the present enquiry. However, it must be made clear from the outset, that in asking this question I am not looking for answers of an historical nature, i.e., how and when these books were born, nor am I principally asking about their Sitz im Leben, i.e., what immediate purpose did they serve the community that produced and used them. Rather, I am enquiring about the kind of people that these books represent, their concerns, aspirations, joys and struggles; about the kind of world in which they belong. In the following chapters I will deal in detail with a number of individual elements of this world and the place of humans in it; at present I wish concentrate on the basic question of what these books are all about. Thus, I will attempt to sketch an elementary framework for looking at these texts, one which will serve as the starting point for the detailed examination found in the later chapters.

What is Wisdom?

The Problem of Defining Wisdom

The question of what our two books are about is closely related to the wider question of what is wisdom, one which has been the subject of a considerable debate. This has been sparked initially by von Rad’s (1953) identification of the Joseph narrative as a wisdom material. Von Rad’s lead in widening the notion of what constitutes wisdom was then followed by a number other scholars, who perceived wisdom influence in a large number of other OT texts from all sections of the Hebrew canon.¹

However, this broad perspective on the wisdom tradition is not without difficulties. When the definition of wisdom is loosened to accommodate a broad variety of material, it becomes virtually meaningless

¹ Extensive bibliographical information can be found in Crenshaw (1969:129).
to speak of wisdom literature as such. This led to criticism of the von Rad’s school of thought from two different directions. On the one hand, Crenshaw (1969), after consideration of the methodological issues, argued for the need to maintain distinction between the ‘classical’ wisdom texts, such as Proverbs and Qoheleth, and the other so called wisdom texts. On the other hand, Whybray (1974) went further, arguing not only that ‘the interests of scholarly investigation are not served by the application of the word “wisdom” to every manifestation to use one’s brains in ancient Israel [sic]’ (p. 3), but also that there is no coherent wisdom phenomenon found in the OT, only a loose intellectual tradition.

While Whybray’s work exposes the difficulties in identifying wisdom material on the grounds of subject, form and vocabulary, it contains certain methodological flaws, notably the disputed texts, such as the Joseph narrative, are considered to be wisdom material from the outset, and, thus, the question whether wisdom can be defined narrowly, or only in broad terms, is prejudged. Further, the loose concept of intellectual tradition that Whybray arrives at is of no more practical use than the watered-down definition of wisdom which he is so critical of. Even though the traditional categories of subject, form and vocabulary, if applied systematically, may not be enough to distinguish the ‘classical’ wisdom texts from other OT material, it is difficult to deny that three books of Proverbs, Job and Qoheleth are distinct from much of the rest of the OT, and yet, similar to each other; the difficulties that these texts pose to the OT theologian due to their lack of interest in Israel as a nation, redemptive activity of God and the cult have already been pointed out in the Introduction and witness to the distinctiveness of these texts.

However, Whybray is, in my view, on the right track when he starts looking at wisdom outwith the confines of a literary genre. I wish to suggest that the central question with respect to wisdom is not one of forms and vocabulary, but rather the question of what wisdom is really about. By this I do not mean simply what type of subjects we find in wisdom literature, but rather what aspirations hide behind the texts and what methodology is used to achieve them. It is these categories that differentiate between a scientist and a philosopher, between a

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2 For a more recent and comprehensive rebuttal of von Rad’s analysis of the Joseph story see also Weeks (1994:92–109).

3 A similar view of wisdom was expressed more recently by Weeks (1999).