Paul S. Fiddes  

This magisterial study tackles a subject of fundamental importance from a highly original perspective. Professor Fiddes observes that we live in a world which is obsessed with information but longs for wisdom, inheritors of a modernist division between subject and object which objectifies the world and then experiences the subject as alienated and isolated from it. ‘Wisdom’ has become a shorthand for a sought-for alternative which would transcend the self as a merely thinking subject and engage the world in a way which was embodied, empathetic, communitarian, and participatory. To this condition, Fiddes suggests, Israelite wisdom literature has much to offer. Unlike the classical Greek tradition, which (he claims) distinguishes *sophia* (wisdom as objectifying knowledge) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom which is able to make everyday moral judgements), Israelite wisdom resists separating the two and makes thinking about the relationship between the self and the observable world central to its project.

This would be a large topic in itself, but Fiddes also seeks to explore what such an approach to wisdom might contribute to the theology of the Trinity. He uses Hebrew wisdom literature as a starting point for developing a Christian wisdom theology which speaks to the anxieties of life in what he calls the ‘late-modern’ (in preference to ‘postmodern’) world. In yet another strand of argument, he connects his interpretation of Israelite wisdom with Christian theology via a number of nineteenth and twentieth century philosophers and theologians who are influentially concerned with the relationship between self and other, wisdom and understanding, and God and creation. This sounds, and is, a complex programme, but the book’s very clear structure makes it easier to navigate. Each chapter approaches its subject through analysis of a number of thinkers on an aspect of the ‘mood of the modern world’, before turning first to the Hebrew Bible and then to the theology of the Trinity.

Two opening chapters establish the book’s agenda. In modern and late-modern scholarship, Fiddes identifies four criticisms of modernism which inform the rest of his argument. Some scholars argue that the self does not and cannot stand apart from the world, but is always already immersed in it. Some are suspicious of claims to objective knowledge and truth which they see as disguised attempts to legitimate self-interest and power. Some emphasize the openness and fluidity of meaning; the possibility of multiple interpretations of everything from a text to the world. Some are sharply aware of the ‘challenge of the sublime’ (or the ‘thrill of the void’): the constant possibility
of nothingness or absence which challenges representation and claims to presence or stability.

Chapter Three explores possible relationships between the self and the other. It takes studies of Job by Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur as a starting point to argue against the modernist concept of the self as a static entity, in favour of the idea that the self has a narrative history which subsists in relationship and interaction with others. On this basis, Fiddes argues that a wisdom theology for today will withstand any pretentions of the self to master or dominate the world or others. Chapter Four, on the elusiveness of wisdom, begins with Hannah Arendt's critique of modern self-alienation from the world and, through a reading of the sentence literature of the Book of Proverbs, argues that 'the wise' of Proverbs aim to steer their way through life by building on experience laced with caution in the face of the world's chronic unpredictability. No-one but God, in the view of the wise, will ever be fully wise, so it behoves human beings to be humble, reverent, and receptive to Wisdom's periodic gift of herself to human beings.

Chapter Five, on the complexity of the world and the extent of wisdom, tackles the relationship between late-modernism and science, arguing that many scientists treat their own grand narratives with caution and are sharply aware of the complexities, instabilities, and uncertainties of the world they study. Israelite wisdom, Fiddes argues, again with reference to Proverbs, is surprisingly close to modern science in the blend of confidence and caution with which it assesses the world. Its vision of the world, moreover, makes a good point of departure for thinking about the Trinity. A triune God who is defined by internal relationships and lives in a communion of love; who chooses to be affected by the world and suffer in sympathy with it; who is co-creative with the world and draws creation into the momentum of divine relationships, has something in common with scientific understandings of uncertainty and the openness of possibility, as well, for instance, as with Derridean semiotics. We cannot engage with such a God, Fiddes argues, and maintain a modernist view of the subject as separable from objects or in a position to understand and dominate them.

Chapter Six seeks to recover the possibility of a reflexive self which, Fiddes acknowledges, may have become rather submerged in the argument of the previous chapters. It argues, based on readings of Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon and with reference to Derrida and Levinas, that both human and divine wisdom can see and observe the world by embracing, without seeking to dominate, it. Chapter Seven moves on to the theology of presence and place. In the contemporary world, Fiddes argues, we struggle with our sense of presence and place in the world. We need to be fully present in it; to be