

## SEEKING LEARNING, AND THE GRACE OF INSIGHTFULNESS: THE ISSUE OF WISDOM IN ORTHODOX TRADITION

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*“Wisdom is better than jewels.  
Anything you could desire would not compare with it”  
(Prov 8:11)*

### *On Being Wise and On Being Clever.*

I wish to talk today about Wisdom, in a two-fold sense: both in its sacred aspect, as spoken about often in the Old Testament and taken to a new and high pitch in the Christian Evangelical and Patristic tradition, and wisdom in the more common and contemporary understanding of that term; wisdom, that is, as an element of culture (a sacred term, certainly, that would almost count even as an enduring religious value in a radically secularized age), one that distinguishes the wise from the merely clever. In considering the wider question of Orthodox Education, or (put more concretely, less abstractly), what would constitute the proper goal of a truly Orthodox curriculum, or the telos of an Orthodox seminary's cultural and intellectual orientation, this issue of the quest for wisdom is surely a central one. Do we find ourselves, in pursuing the path of learning, also rightly footed on the road to enlightenment? These are not simply questions of new age religiosity, but fundamental questions that the Orthodox ascetical tradition has posed throughout the ages. Not only for ourselves do these questions matter; but for others too; those whom in the course of our lives as Orthodox leaders, we ourselves will be called upon to “form” and nurture in the Christian tradition. As leaders and articulators of Orthodoxy we are not going to be called on merely to communicate facts or stand as the arbiter of authenticity in this or that aspect of the

tradition, but rather we will be expected to stand and function as sources of wisdom. Men and women today will, inevitably, look to us as icons of the faith; as paradigms of wisdom. They will expect many and high things from us: which is why the risk of our disappointing the faithful (scandalizing them—not in the sense of being manifested as a public wrong-doer, but more simply [and sadly] as someone who did not shine very brightly as a public witness of Christ) remains an ever present problem in the course of our ministry and Christian lives. We are men and women on display. That is part and parcel of the package: and deep in the core of those proper (and often excessive) expectations that people have about their Christian leaders is an unfocussed desire and quest for wisdom: which they hope that somehow the Christian leader might, and should, embody.

To offer the living wisdom of our faith, in some sense or other, in a very profound sense, means that we ourselves are called to wisdom, and that wisdom is the touchstone of the authenticity of our stories of formation. Will our studies, over which we have spent so much time and anxiety, lead us to wisdom? Or will they merely make us more clever? Can we legislate for the reception of wisdom as easily as we legislate for the reception of learning? Can one major in it? Can one assess whether an essay is worth a B- or an A+? Whether one has passed an exam with distinction, or just scraped through a degree course miserably? Surely, such forms of assessment are part and parcel of the academic life. We may not like them, but the spurs of assessment and testing actually measure, and in some degree stimulate, the evidently quantifiable process of the acquisition of learning. Skinner taught us that. In some parts of the academic world today, Skinner's reductionist approach to the learning process as the attainment of learning goals has wreaked havoc with the older notion of learning as the acquisition of a broader culture, but while those of us who have served as academics in England in the 90s may wince at the very mention of his name, he certainly "wasn't all wrong," as they say. The pursuit of learning, therefore, is unarguably quantifiable. It is measured by the extent

of our reading, the depth of our perceptiveness, the shared exercises of learned communication, open-minded discussion, testing of ideas, things that seminary life constantly puts in our way; and also in the honest seeking of illumination in the many instances life throws at us where we ponder what the right answer may actually be. God save us from self-styled learned people who are not open, at all stages of life, to the voice of the other whom God may send to teach them. The truly learned are life-long learners. The truly open-minded are those who love to find out, and love to share what they know to be of value. God has set within the deep springs of human nature's inbuilt curiosity (never more obvious than in the wondering delight of the small child) a primal stimulus for our race to seek the truth, and to find delight within it, and within the search for it. Truth heals and charms and soothes the heart and soul in ways that make its apologia self-evident. Not all appreciate this power of learnedness in the same way: and there are many degrees of commitment that each of us may be called to and many styles of learnedness. We are drawn, rightly, by the desire for different things that all taken together go to build up the diverse charisms of Christ's servants. The quest for learning is not merely to be understood as a lifelong academic career—by no means. But the love for learning is essential in a Christian leader, and this is one of the reasons we set a certain bar of learning across the gateway to the priesthood and other official ministries in the Church. The unlettered may have immense gifts to offer the ongoing life of the Church, but in its wisdom the Christian tradition has generally insisted that its priesthood ought to be represented by the learned. Having said this I am sure that many of you are thinking, perhaps: Well what about the way Orthodoxy has always gloried in a priesthood that often represented the simple village priest, as distinct from the well-educated minister of other Christian traditions? To that one must make answer that even the simplest village priest was always supposed to be carefully trained in a literary and liturgical tradition that usually far exceeded the educational level of his pastoral charges. And that generally applied, at least up to the present era;

when it has once again become a critical matter to make sure that the clerical leader of a flock has a comparable intellectual foundation to that of the parish he is meant to teach and lead.

But if the pursuit of learning is quantifiable, and its progressive acquisition can be mapped out in sensible ways that accumulate to a rounded curriculum, such that at the end of a given course of studies one can rightly say that a man or woman who has passed through this gate must perforce, be a learned enough person to represent the Christian tradition to others; what can one say of the tradition of wisdom? Does it follow that the acquisition of a degree in theology makes one automatically a wise soul? Does it follow that a life of struggling to acquire learning will normally make one wise? If that were so, why is it that we find within the ranks of theologians, for example, such eminent examples of the radical foolishness of clever people? Why can we find so many examples in life where learnedness clearly does not equate to wisdom? Who could ever have imagined, for example, that so many politicians who have devoted their lives and considerable intellectual energies to policy studies could have made such a dog's breakfast of Iraq? I am not here debating the wisdom or morality of the Iraq invasion, I am solely thinking about the efforts to reconstruct the national infrastructure, that have (more than anything since the Vietnam era) brought America's once shining reputation as a righteous superpower down into the dust of ridicule and scorn, not merely among its enemies, but now generally among its international friends.

Let us come closer to home. Why is it that so much of the work of great learning and perceptiveness that has gone on in recent decades about New Testament interpretation, has degenerated into the kind of material now represented by the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus, where scholars can laboriously analyze the sayings of the Lord and conclude (apparently in all seriousness) that it represents a primary witness to "social conditions in Galilee in the first century," or that Jesus was clearly a "Mediterranean Jewish peasant," to cite two recent testimonies from the school? How is it that such immense labor has thrown out such a little squeak on a phe-

nomenon of such magnitude? And why is it that all the christological presumptions inherent in this philosophy have been reduced to such startlingly censored parameters: such that it is more or less presumed from the outset now that anyone with a fideist position cannot engage in historical study of "Christian Origins"? Will our age of religious discourse, I wonder, be marvelled at retrospectively as the story of incessant inventions of the latest 'isms' marking the increasing fragmentation of the study of Christianity and other faiths in the institutions of higher learning? I raise this interesting and critical question, to provide another exemplum for my wider question today: Have the learned proved themselves to be wise?

My talk this afternoon is a simple one concerned with a rich, ancient, and complicated matter. The quest for wisdom. This is a central element in the Scripture and patristic tradition and, I suggest, is something that ought to be very much at the forefront of our minds and hearts as Orthodox, especially for those of us who are entrusted with the task of forming others. God is calling us to learnedness in a place such as this, and through the seminary leaders, is assessing our progress in learning as a critical matter of our fidelity of response to his vocational call. This, I would suggest, is something so self-evident, it could hardly be disputed. So I want to move on today to reiterate that God is equally calling each of us to Wisdom. Something that we would presumably assent to, but something that we may have not spent a hundredth of the time trying to assess, because this advance day by day, in the riches of wisdom, is not so easily measurable as our simply academic, or intellectual, progress, and requires more subtle labour than the mere (albeit laborious) acquisition of intellectual facility. Can we set ourselves on a course of acquiring God's wisdom, as easily as we can acquiring learning and culture? If so, how?

This question I feel to be an intriguing, as well as an important one. And so I would like to look briefly now at strands of the Christian wisdom tradition as exemplified in the Holy Scriptures and the fathers. I can hardly claim that this talk is doing more than feather the cymbal of a most profound question: but at least it brings it into

the open. We can hardly have terminal seminary examinations in the "Acquisition of Wisdom" (more's the pity), but even so it ought to be a question close to the heart of us all. It is, in a certain sense, the mark and measure of our success, as men and women of faith, and certainly as ministers of the Gospel of Christ, who is Wisdom Incarnate.

*Notes on the Ancient and Biblical Concepts of Wisdom.*

Egyptian *Sebayit*, or teachings, resembles the old testament proverb literature extensively. The literary remains of the Egyptian wisdom tradition stretch over a period of three millennia from the *Instructions of Hor Dedef* and the *Teachings of Amen Em Het*, down to the Ptolemaic period. There are many point of contact. There are, for example, the well-known direct literary parallels (or shall we just say borrowings?) between the *Egyptian Wisdom of Amen Em Ope* and Proverbs 17 and 24. Egyptian Wisdom-reflection influenced some of the continuing structures of Israelite reflection. The Egyptian tradition follows set literary forms: basically a teacher transmits to a son-disciple certain instructions on right behavior. Its intellectual point is that Divine Order (*Maat*) is a truth established by the gods for the world and is preserved by the deities. Humanity's conduct is commanded to come into alignment with *Maat*. This is the issue of discovering the divine will, which is justice and truth on earth, and conforming oneself to it in obedience.

In the Old Testament tradition wisdom is a diverse and unorganised concept in the older texts. In an introduction to the genre, the Old Testament scholar Roland Murphy says of it, accurately, but perhaps not very helpfully:

The concept of wisdom is elusive because it is exceedingly complex. It can stand for the skill of a craftsman, the wisdom of the king's advisor, an astute old woman's wit, but also has intensely religious aspects. Wisdom is somehow divine (Prov 8, Sir 24). These many faces of wisdom cannot be captured in any logical schema.<sup>1</sup>

1 "Wisdom Literature," in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Chapman, 1974), 492.

Israelite tradition, of course, increasingly brings to bear the important insight that the divine order symbolised by Wisdom, is something that comes from the single true God, who cares for his elect nation and wishes to train them in justice. From this deep spring of Israelite monotheism grew the ever-deepening sense that Wisdom was one of the most refined ways a human might commune with God. It thus grew up, late in the Israelite tradition in this sense to be sure, alongside the cultic avenues to covenant fidelity, and alongside a pattern of the observance of the Torah. Late Israelite Wisdom literature<sup>2</sup> is composed of three great strands that uniquely characterise it as having emerged from generic Near Eastern Wisdom tropes, and assumed a distinctive ethos of its own. The first of those was Wisdom as a form of the refined following of the Law; the second was Wisdom as a refined habit of reflection on moral rectitude and social behaviour; the third was a growing sense that Wisdom was like a mystical gift of the Lord God—a restless challenge to the elect (like the setting up of the tabernacle in the wilderness) a presence of the divine (the unspeakable *Shekinah*) among a people who, although they had the gift of the immanent presence, did not wholly orientate themselves to it. Some did, and those became great in the sight of God, and were the bearers of the covenant through history. It is this sense of Wisdom as the *Shekinah* which is celebrated in that famous text of Sirach 24, which became the literary prototype of the Prologue of the Gospel of St John.

In that inspired moment the Christian tradition learned that the *Sophia* of God, the *Hokhma* that cast the shadow of the divine *Shekinah* on earth, was the divine *Logos*, which had become flesh and dwelt among his people in the person of Jesus. What an extraordinary use of inter-religious insight that accumulated here to evangelical wisdom! So much so that the Apostle in Colossians

2 It is only in the very late period that Wisdom is associated with God himself, as an attribute of the deity (e.g., Job 12:12; Wis 9:9). See. G. Noth. *Vetus Testamentum*. Supplementa 3.

could simply sum up the entire tradition in one sentence, saying: "In Christ are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."<sup>3</sup>

The Old Testament writers had already understood that this divine wisdom that illuminated a chosen soul was not merely a matter that could be accumulated at will. It was a mysterious gift from God alone.<sup>4</sup> Solomon, of whom it is said that God gave him immeasurable wisdom and insight, and a largeness of mind that exceeded the sands of the seashore,<sup>5</sup> received this gift as a grace because he had prized it and sensing his lack, had called to God for it, valuing it over all other things:

And so God answered Solomon, "Because this was in your heart, and you have not asked possessions, wealth, honor, or the life of those who hate you, and have not even asked long life, but have asked wisdom and knowledge for yourself that you may rule my people over whom I have made you king, wisdom and knowledge are granted to you. I will also give you riches, possessions, and honor, such as none of the kings had who were before you, and none after you shall have the like."<sup>6</sup>

It is a text that surely illuminates Jesus' enigmatic words about seeking first the Kingdom of God, while all other manner of things unsought will be added on in the train.<sup>7</sup> Such is the mystery, and the judgment, implied in the concept of Wisdom as a divine charism that has to be sought for earnestly before God graces a soul with it. This very idea is inimical to most of society, and certainly a hostile concept to secular educational establishments who would have no place for it in their scheme of human advancement. But suffering Job, world weary as he was, knew that while his counselors were clever, they lacked the piercing insight of the knowledge of the true ways of God, and therefore, of the true meanings of the inner springs of this world. This is why he said: "But where shall

3 Col 2:3.

4 Dt 34:9; Sir 1:5-8; Sir 6:37.

5 1 Kg 4:29.

6 1 Chr 1:11.

7 Mt 6:33.



wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? Man does not know the way to it, and it is not found in the land of the living.”<sup>8</sup> “So, Whence comes wisdom? And where is the place of understanding? It is hid from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air. Abaddon and Death say, ‘We have heard a rumor of it with our ears.’ But only God understands the way to it, and he knows its place.”<sup>9</sup> It is a gift, like other charisms, that is deeply necessary for the leaders of God’s people, but will not be given unless it is sought after. As the author of Proverbs says:

My Child, if you make your ear attentive to wisdom, inclining your heart to understanding; yes, if you cry out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God. For it is the Lord who gives wisdom.<sup>10</sup>

It is a text that surely underlies the Lord’s mysterious utterance about the need to seek for hidden treasure in a field if one wishes to find the Kingdom.<sup>11</sup>

To command someone to seek after wisdom is thus a paradoxical task. Not as easy as it sounds; for it is a circular mystery. To seek it one must have it already; as Proverbs goes on to say: “Get wisdom; get insight. Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you. And the beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom.”<sup>12</sup> Yet the scripture is also equally clear that God does not begrudge this mysterious Wisdom, in fact is more than eager to bestow it on those who truly desire it. As Daniel the prophet says: “He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; he reveals deep and mysterious things.”<sup>13</sup> And the Book of Wisdom teaches, almost, that it is merely a matter of supplication: “Wisdom is radiant and unfading, and she is easily

8 Job 28:12–13.

9 Job 28:20–23.

10 Prov 2:22.

11 Mt 13:44.

12 Prov 4:5–7.

13 Dan 2:21–22.

discerned by those who love her, and is found by those who seek her."<sup>14</sup> And again: "Therefore I prayed, and understanding was given me; I called upon God, and the spirit of wisdom came to me."<sup>15</sup> The gift, therefore, is ready to be given. But there is clearly here the underlying implication that it will only be given to the assiduous; and that the assiduous are already those who possess the intimation of divine wisdom and eagerly desire more. The heart is needed. The heart here has to be a hunter as Ben Sirach says: "Blessed is one who meditates on wisdom and who reasons intelligently. One who intellectually reflects on the ways of wisdom will also ponder her secrets. Pursue wisdom like a hunter, and lie in wait on her paths."<sup>16</sup> In Isaiah's teaching, as it was with Solomon so will it be for the Chosen One of God: wisdom will be gifted as a mighty grace, a charism of consecration from the hand of God alone: "And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord."<sup>17</sup> The Apostle Paul knew from personal experience how far apart were the concepts of what was commonly considered to be appropriate wisdom, and what was the actual wisdom of God. This is why he contrasted, so dramatically, the wisdom of the world with the wisdom God crucified in Jesus.<sup>18</sup> It was in the same spirit that the Lord himself wryly commented on how few accepted the gift of wisdom when it was offered to them in his own time. Not because they rejected the idea as such, rather because they had been wholly misguided as to where wisdom was to be found, and by whom it would be given. This is why he said to his disciples: "The Queen of the South will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here."<sup>19</sup>

The later Fathers added many clarifying insights to this basic

14 Wis 6:12.

15 Wis 7:7.

16 Sir 14:20–22.

17 Is 11:2.

18 1 Cor 1:17–21; 1 Cor 2:7–10.

19 Mt 12:42.

theology of judgment and grace: that is the need to receive wisdom from the “laying on” of the hand of God, and the bar to wisdom that consists in that it is only given to the one who seeks it truly, and wisely, and passionately. They particularly spoke of the need to discern the deep-seated principles of Logos in the material world, so as to clarify and refine one’s concept of God. The ascetical writers speak incessantly of the ongoing struggle to keep the eye of the heart clear so that one could not be led astray by that catastrophic dimness that has mistaken human wisdom for divine insight. Eli contrasting with Samuel is the example of it. The Russian fathers introduced the rather frightening word *prelest* into the discussion, as an explanation of why so many virtuous and chosen souls can often go off the rails, or at least “go off a little” from the early freshness and vigor that once characterized their spiritual ascent.

Relentless assiduity in seeking the wisdom of the Lord, alongside the learnedness required of his ministers, is the charge and invitation we are given. We spend much more time worrying about and defending our hard won acquisition of learning; and this is no small thing. But to add grace on to grace, fullness onto fullness, we who are called to represent Christ’s *pleroma* to his Church, are especially summoned to a life of wisdom. It is not the same as cleverness. It is discerned only from humility, and often from the kind of lifestyle as a Christian minister that the world would see as wasted potential. But above all it is gained from relentless pursuit of the Lord of Wisdom. The heart as the hunter, as Ben Sirach described it, and as Origen wrote about so eloquently in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. Seek the consecrating wisdom of God, be obsessed with it. Study it more than your irregular verbs. “It is far better than jewels. Anything you could desire would not compare with it,” as the author of Proverbs tells us.

### *Conclusions*

Well, it might be wise of me to sum up before I conclude, and so I shall try to put it all in a nutshell. Few are those who actually seek, in the course, of life, to become learned. You all here today, are

among an élite; a blessed but small number; whom I encourage to carry on with your *podvig*—the long road to acquire learning for the sake of Christ and his Church, through trials and difficulties that only those who take up the academic path can truly appreciate. Few are those who seek this path, but it is crucial for the health of the Church, and a critical attribute for its future leaders. Fewer still, however, are those who seek after wisdom, heart and soul, with all the passion of their spirit—which is the only way they will be likely to be gifted with it in any way above the norm, for a well educated person. The wisdom I have been speaking of, that charisma that God graces to his leaders, to make their ministry shine, and their understanding of the ways of the Lord penetrate, is something that is only graced to those who seek after it with passion and perseverance. All I wish to say to you today, in essence is: seek after it, desire it, bore the Lord with your prayers for it. It will change your life. It will change the lives of all around you. It will transfigure your ministry.

So, to end, my prayer for all of you today is that of Jesus Ben Sirach: “May the Lord grant you wisdom in your heart to judge his people in righteousness, so that their prosperity may not vanish, and that their glory may endure throughout their generations.”<sup>20</sup> And the blessing I have for you today is that of the Apostle in the Letter to the Ephesians:

I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of Glory, may give you all a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ.<sup>21</sup>

20 Sir 45:26.

21 Eph 1:16–20.