

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scripture* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_scripture-01.php

Scripture

THE QUARTERLY OF THE CATHOLIC BIBLICAL ASSOCIATION

VOLUME XIX

OCTOBER 1967

No 48

THE DIMENSIONS OF SALVATION HISTORY IN THE WISDOM BOOKS

None of us is rash enough to contest the unity of the Bible. Some, however, may confess to a little embarrassment about tracing this unity through every book in the Bible. With others such admission is not quite so open, emerging only from the way they handle the Good Book, or in the case of specialists who tell others how to read it or teach others to read it, uneasiness is patent in the schemes they suggest for reading. Look at some such schemes for reading or teaching, and you will find quite often that the Wisdom books have fallen foul of the writer's difficulty in tracing out some unified pattern. He seems unhappy at finding this type of writing within the covers of the sacred text, and he feels himself forced into one of several equally unsatisfying stratagems.

He may leave these books out altogether, and hope none of his readers concludes that he opined the Holy Spirit would have done better not to have inspired them. Or he may in an aside adopt a jocular tone and quote for his readers' diversion some of the quaintest proverbial parts of, say, *Proverbs*:

A worthy wife is the crown of her husband,
but a disgraceful one is like rot in his bones.
Better a dish of herbs where love is
than a fatted ox and hatred with it.
It is better to dwell in a corner of the housetop
than in a roomy house with a quarrelsome woman.
The door turns on its hinges,
the sluggard, on his bed.¹

It is a pity minds coming expectant to God's word are left wondering why such a large part of it should be a write-off. It is also a pity writers of such schemes did not plot out a pattern along the lines of salvation history that would not only make the Bible—all the Bible, Wisdom books included—full of meaning, but would also make it full of the right meaning because illustrating the Bible's unity as the Book of the People of God on their way to fulfilment at the term of this salvation history. This goes for honest readers and teachers of honest little

¹ 12, 4; 15, 17; 21, 9; 26, 14.

readers alike; reading the Bible to see salvation history on the move is not only the simplest procedure for them (salvation-history-is-dead prophets notwithstanding) but it probably comes closest to the secret of a Christian unity in interpreting and linking both testaments.

THE WISDOM BOOKS AND SALVATION HISTORY.

And, of course, since the Council no one is going to find this point of view of salvation history foreign to his thinking, now that we have all been located so clearly in the stream of salvation history thanks to the conciliar documents. Even beforehand we would have been unable to counter the truth that this after all is the scheme the Bible itself suggests for reading. Gerhard von Rad² and others have helped us notice that when the Bible pauses to distil its message, it does so by a recital of salvation history, the working out of God's plan for His People:

"When your son asks you what these ordinances, statutes and decrees mean which the Lord, our God, has enjoined on you, you shall say to your son, 'We were once slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with his strong hand and wrought before our eyes signs and wonders, great and dire, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and his whole house. He brought us from there to lead us into the land he promised on oath to our fathers, and to give it to us. Therefore, the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes in fear of the Lord, our God, that we may always have as prosperous and happy a life as we have today.'"

Such is the Bible's way at Dt. 6,20-24; so also at Dt. 26,5-9, Jos. 24,2-13, Ps. 136 and elsewhere. It even has God deliver the message in His own words (Dt. 4,32-40, for instance) and again it is a message of salvation in action.

It is also true, however, that many of the scholars who help us to pick out this central thread in the Bible volunteer the advice that if you are interested in salvation history, you stand little chance of finding it in the Wisdom books. Some say that such a notion lies outside the field of vision of these books; others speak of the "omissions in the Wisdom literature" the same effect.³

We had better see, then, if it is possible to salvage the unity of the Bible by relating the Wisdom books to the thread of unity the Bible wants for itself, or if we have to abandon such a meaningful thread (and these books with it) for a lesser one in obedience to such weighty opinions. At once we can say it *is* possible, if only by the simple logic that as the Bible in its entirety is the Book of the People of God for the

² Cf. the introduction to his commentary, *Genesis* (Eng. trans. London, 1963²), pp. 14-16.

³ Cf. G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London, 1952), p. 104; G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology I* (Eng. trans. Edinburgh-London, 1962), pp. 446, 449f; Roland E. Murphy, *Introduction to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Collegeville, 1965), pp. 35f.

benefit of that People on their pilgrimage towards perfection, and as the Wisdom books have made a special contribution to the pilgrim People, then clearly they loom large in salvation history. Admittedly, this is to take a novel view of salvation history. Still, the Germans have given us the term, *Heilsgeschichte*, and it is von Rad himself, in his excellent commentary on *Genesis* (Eng. trans., London, pp. 31, 32), who has drawn our attention to the fact that *Geschichte* (as distinct from *Historie*) denotes the past in the making rather than the past in the writing—a distinction our *history* leaves us to make. And the Wisdom books are very much aware of their part in salvation history in the making; the wisdom they impart not only covers every aspect of the good life but is in fact identified (at least in the insight of *Sirach*) with Israel's own Torah:

If you desire wisdom, keep the commandments,
and the Lord will bestow her upon you.
All wisdom is fear of the Lord;
perfect wisdom is the fulfilment of the Law.
All this [about wisdom] is true of the book of the Most High's covenant,
the law which Moses commanded us
as an inheritance for the community of Jacob.⁴

If a progressive revelation to the People of God extending from the practical details of the good life at court to the sublime vision of immortality is not the stuff of salvation history, what is?

But let us take the more familiar, subjective angle and see if the Wisdom books are relevant to a scheme of salvation history in the manner of *Deuteronomy's* cultic credo (6,20–24): salvation history in the writing. Again it is clear they are relevant. Perhaps not all these books can be shown, as can *Wisdom*, to devote more than half their length to a telescoped history of Israel from creation to the Exodus on the theme of God's special liberality to His People, concluding:

For every way, O Lord! you magnified and glorified your people;
unfailing, you stood by them in every time and circumstance.⁵

Perhaps only *Sirach* has those seven chapters of theatre (44–50) calling on stage hero after hero to witness to the same special divine gift, wisdom. But all the Wisdom books without exception are much taken up with the theme of God's saving intervention in history right from the dawn of creation up to the present condition of nature; the man of wisdom can read this pattern of divine activity, whereas he has nothing but scorn for the idolator to whom material creation is a puzzle.

⁴ 1, 26; 19, 20; 24, 23.

⁵ 19, 22.

THE TERMS OF SALVATION HISTORY IN THE WISDOM BOOKS.

No apparent difficulty, then, in relating this sapiential literature of the Bible to a thread of salvation history and so retain its unity. Why the rejection of this relation at the hands of certain scholars? Because of the dimensions of salvation history as the sapiential writers see it. To a proud photographer working with a conventional camera it comes as a disturbing surprise to see what results can be got by the man with a wide-angle lens; until he gets such a lens, he may prefer to forget such a thing exists and continue to believe his own camera sees all there is to see. Likewise, if your favourite outline of salvation history opens with the words, "My father was a wandering Aramean who went down to Egypt . . ." (Dt. 26,5), you may prefer not to gaze backwards to where the author of *Proverbs* would have you look for this same opening:

When he established the heavens I was there,
 when he marked out the vault over the face of the deep;
 When he made firm the skies above,
 when he fixed fast the foundations of the earth;
 When he set for the sea its limit,
 so that the waters should not transgress his command;
 Then was I beside him as his craftsman,
 and I was his delight day by day.⁶

And if you respect the dimensions of similar cultic credos from the Bible's historical books, you are probably unprepared to share the penetrating vision of Wisdom in the direction of salvation history's goal, immortality for the just.

So when you get down to it, the trouble lies not with the Wisdom books but with the individual's vision of salvation history: where place its two terms? We can begin at the beginning, with the *terminus a quo*. What does the Bible itself say? It depends. You can make it begin at the twelfth chapter of *Genesis*, and speak (in good company) of "the promise to the fathers, the cornerstone of salvation history"⁷ What about those first eleven chapters? Well, of course, you will hear by way of explanation a lot about the Document Hypothesis and how these chapters are the work of a later editor with an eye for loose ends. But that will not do; we must make the Bible as it stands. And when we do, we see that there are those who find the opening of salvation history right at the opening of those chapters; *Sirach* goes back further than Noah to find the first hero for his cast, and *Proverbs* has been seen to begin with "In the beginning God created."

Have they any right for reading salvation history in an account that

⁶ 8, 27-30.

⁷ So W. L. Moran, *Adnotationes in Libri Deuteronomii capita selecta* (1965—unpublished).

within a couple of chapters bids fair to become perdition history? Père Dubarle thinks they have; he sees these chapters as not merely an *histoire des origines* but also as *une histoire du salut*.⁸ Better still, we have St. Paul's word for it. You recall his hymn on Christ's role in creation in the epistle to the Colossians:

He is the image of the invisible God,
the first born of every creature.
For in him were created all things
in the heavens and on the earth,
things visible and invisible,
whether Thrones, or Dominations, or Principalities, or Powers.
All things have been created
through and unto him,
and he is before all creatures,
and in him all things hold together.⁹

Recognise the idiom of *Proverbs*? Where *Proverbs* speaks of Wisdom's presence at the dawn of creation, St. Paul is speaking of Christ's role there. For W. D. Davies it is a clear case of identification¹⁰; apropos of the dimensions of salvation history Stanislas Lyonnet encourages us to share St. Paul's appreciation of the wide horizons of the Wisdom writers and his intuition that a fuller reading of the writers allows us to conceive of Christ's salvific role even at the first moments of history¹¹. In other words, we have St. Paul's guarantee that in opening human history and salvation history simultaneously the Wisdom books see things aright.

Little wonder, then, if Père Dubarle's insights have recently encouraged Luis Alonso Schökel¹² and others to recognise in those early chapters of *Genesis* the imprint of Wisdom writers' techniques (as Gerstenberger sees them at work in another key chapter in salvation history, the Decalogue). These writers, with their largeness of vision, would naturally be felt to be the ones to dictate the manner of recording the initial stages of salvation history.

THE TERMINUS AD QUEM.

In the better-known essays on salvation history within the pages of the Bible, or at any rate the Old Testament, little attention is given to the final goal awaiting the pilgrim people. And, of course, it was a fulfilment hidden from the writers of the historical books; even St. Paul in his itemised lecture on salvation history to the Jews of Pisidian Antioch

⁸ A.-M. Dubarle, *Le peche originel dans l'Ecriture* (Paris, *Lectio Divina* 20, 1958 [ET *The Biblical Doctrine of Original Sin*, London, 1964]), p. 39.

⁹ I, 15-17.

¹⁰ *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London, 1948), pp. 149f.

¹¹ *Saint Paul et le Gnosticisme* (unpublished paper), pp. 4-8.

¹² "Sapiential and Covenant themes", *Theology Digest* 13 (1965) 3-10.

(Acts 13,16-41) elected not to carry his hearers' vision ahead to that glorious goal. The Wisdom writers, however, fret under this particular handicap and in their fretting they eventually break through its limitations; and perhaps it is also their unorthodox attention to this term of salvation history that earns them further displeasure from some scholars.

The fact is that they would not be Wisdom writers if they did not explore this area. The five books of sapiential literature in our Bible betray the fact that Israel tested with increasing insistence the validity of this lore of wisdom which she had adopted from neighbours in the Near East; the talisman applied in every case to the sages, the professional wise men, was Israel's own Riddle of the Sphinx—retribution. The pat rejoinder was still respectable when the editor of *Proverbs* compiled his work: good men prosper, evil men do not prosper. *Job* is already in full cry against any such facile equation; the facts are clearly against it, even if the answer is out of sight. In *Ecclesiastes* Qoheleth still has not found the answer; for himself this failure gives rise to his personal philosophy of the futility of all things, but with the glimmerings of intuition he is prepared to hazard an opinion about the direction whither the answer can be sought:

Because the sentence against evildoers is not promptly executed, therefore the hearts of men are filled with the desire to commit evil—because the sinner does evil a hundred times and survives. Though indeed I know that it shall be well with those who fear God, for their reverence towards him; and that it shall not be well with the wicked man, and he shall not prolong his shadowy days, for his lack of reverence towards God.¹³

With the book of *Wisdom* this intuition has become clear revelation: salvation history leads on to the goal of immortality—so the riddle is solved.

But the souls of the just are in the hand of God,
and no torment shall touch them.
For if before men, indeed, they be punished,
yet is their hope full of immortality.
They shall judge nations and rule over peoples,
and the Lord shall be their King forever.
Those who trust in him shall understand truth,
and the faithful shall abide with him in love;
because grace and mercy are with his chosen ones.¹⁴

Such then is the sweep of salvation history—from the dawn of creation to the consummation of immortal life. All thanks to the Lord of history for such an inspiring, consoling revelation from the pages of the Wisdom books:

¹³ 8, 11-13.

¹⁴ 3, 1.4. 8-9.

THE SECOND DIMENSION OF SALVATION HISTORY.

Perhaps some readers will need convincing that *Wisdom's* words on immortality do in fact bear on the salvation history of the People of God. For they are couched in very general, all-embracing terms without explicit mention of a Chosen People. As we might expect, certain scholars have felt the difficulty before us; for them the Wisdom literature is unaware of the concept of an elected people. As before, such objections encourage us to examine our presuppositions about salvation history—in particular, its second dimension. How extensive is the stream of salvation history? Who are those who will reach its glorious fulfilment?

First of all, it is simply wrong to say that the Wisdom literature does not consider the notion of an elected people. There is probably no more itemised account of the Chosen People's progress under the guidance of a provident Father than those seven chapters in *Sirach* already referred to. *Wisdom* for more than half its length repeats this study of the pilgrim People.

In all fairness, however, it must be admitted that the concept of the elected people undergoes a transformation in the process. Read *Wisdom's* final ten chapters in some translations and you will be unaware of the transformation; you read of Cain and Abraham and the Egyptians where the author's Greek has "the unjust man" and "the just man" and "your enemies". Done out of deference to modern usage, it is said, or to assist those unfamiliar with Hebrew history. But it succeeds in obscuring the transformation that is the fruit of the author's widening vision of the membership of the People of God—not in terms of Israelites but in terms of the just. Israel, to be sure, has a place within this larger people, but it is limited and specific: as a means of transmitting the Torah to all mankind.

For those deserved to be deprived of light and imprisoned by darkness,
who had kept your sons confined
through whom the imperishable light of the Law was to be given to the world.¹⁶

And we saw that those who reached the goal of immortal life were called not Israelites but the just, sharing in the same anonymity as St. John's "great multitude which no man could number, out of all nations and tribes and peoples and tongues" (Rev. 7,9).

In other words, we must adjust our notion of the dimensions of salvation history in grateful response to the intuitions of the Wisdom writers.

While doing so, we could take account of another feature of the sapiential literature that causes discomfort to certain scholars. They are

¹⁶ 18, 4.

worried by the fact that in these books the concepts of election, deliverance and covenant (basic to the cultic credos, as also of course to salvation history) receive less attention than material creation and the beauties of nature¹⁶. Whether or not there is in fact such disproportion, it is true—and the Wisdom writers boast of it—that for them material creation is a textbook for reading salvation history. It had to be, particularly in the early stages of Israel's experimentation with the sapiential form and mentality of the Near East when the artists were confined within the limiting canons of the genre and not permitted the later luxury of surveying all history in one great sweep. For the editor of *Proverbs* the notion of salvation history emerges only as God's lordship of nature, and even this he borrowed from a foreign philosopher:

The pronouncement of mortal man: "I am not God;
I am not God, that I should prevail.
Why, I am the most stupid of men,
and have not even human intelligence;
Neither have I learned wisdom,
nor have I the knowledge of the Holy One.
Who has gone up to heaven and come down again—
who has cupped the winds in his hands?
Who has bound up the waters in a cloak—
who has marked out all the ends of the earth?
What is his name, what is his son's name,
if you know it?"¹⁷

Wisdom gives them facility in reading nature aright, and hence their affinity with the story of the world's genesis. Hence, too, their scorn for the idolator's misreading nature:

For all men were by nature foolish who were in ignorance of God,
and who from the good things did not succeed in knowing him who is,
and from studying the works did not discern the artisan.
For if they so far succeeded in knowledge
that they could speculate about the world,
how did they not more quickly find its Lord?¹⁸

Taken in isolation, these and other passages may be expressing only a general notion of divine providence. I prefer to read them in the light of the great expanse of that first, linear dimension that the Wisdom writers give to salvation history, reaching back to the first act of material creation. Then these words seem to give extension also to salvation history's second dimension, the dimension of breadth; they seem to suggest not only that all the just are caught up in the progress of salvation history but also in some way material creation too. Fantastic? Remember St. Paul's way of telling the Colossians of Christ's

¹⁶ Von Rad, *Theology*, p. 449.

¹⁷ 30, 1-4.

¹⁸ *Wis* 13, 1.9.

role in creation as "the first born of every creature", by referring them to *Proverb's* words about creation. And remember it was St. Paul, not Teilhard de Chardin (though it could have been), who told the Romans about redemption's effect on creation, too:

For the eager longing of creation awaits the revelation of the sons of God. For creation was made subject to vanity—not by its own will but by reason of him who made it subject—in hope, because creation itself will be delivered from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the sons of God. For we know that all creation groans and travails in pain until now. (8, 19–22).

We have no need of scholars to tell us the Apostle is here calling upon the idiom of the Wisdom writers (though we do in fact have Père Lyonnet's word for it). At any rate, this awareness of the extended second dimension of salvation history in the Wisdom writers enables us to see more than beautiful natural description in passages like this from *Sirach*:

Behold the rainbow! Then bless its Maker,
 for majestic indeed is its splendour;
 It vaults the heavens with its glory,
 this bow bent by the hands of God.
 His power marks out the path for the lightning,
 and speeds the arrows of his judgment to their goal.
 Then the storehouse of the storm clouds is opened,
 and like the vultures the clouds hurry forth.
 He sprinkles the snow like fluttering birds;
 it comes to settle like swarms of locusts.
 He freezes over every body of water,
 and clothes each pool with a coat of mail.¹⁹

A THIRD DIMENSION?

Of course, any one cultic credo would have a clear superiority over any one such passage as a piece of salvation history, whether you want the accent on salvation or on history. Still, it is in such passages that salvation history in the Wisdom books seems to take on a third dimension, lending a depth to it that is not found elsewhere. I refer to the literary artistry with which the Wisdom writers communicated their vision to the people they served. In the case of the later books, *Sirach* and *Wisdom*, the contribution is clear: salvation history both in the making (wisdom in this guise came all the more acceptable to a fortunate people) and in the writing (witness those sweeping summaries of Israel's history) benefited from these writers' freedom from formal restrictions, not to mention the poetic intuition of a high order that distinguishes *Wisdom* in particular. But even with the earliest sapiential writers there is a literary talent that can throw salvation history into

¹⁹ 43, 11–14. 17.20.

relief in a way unknown to the prose of the historical books—in other words, an added dimension. While the Hebrew proverb that is the basic element of the sapiential genre is extremely terse, circumscribed and limiting, if also incisive and arresting, these men are capable of slipping its limitations and of delivering their message about the Lord of history and of nature in lines of considerable beauty, like these from Qoheleth:

Remember your Creator in the days of your youth,
 before the evil days come;
 Before the sun is darkened,
 and the light, and the moon, and the stars,
 while the clouds return after the rain.
 When the doors to the street are shut,
 and the sound of the mill is low;
 When one waits for the chirp of a bird,
 but all the daughters of song are suppressed;
 Before man goes to his lasting home,
 and mourners go about the streets;
 Before the silver cord is snapped
 and the golden bowl is broken,
 And the pitcher is shattered at the spring,
 and the broken pulley falls into the well,
 And the dust returns to the earth as it once was,
 and the life breath returns to God who gave it.²⁰

With artistry of such high calibre before us in the Wisdom books, searching out salvation history there along the Bible's chosen thread of unity become not only simple but pleasurable. Enlightening, too; for this chain of divine favours is seen there to have an extended linear dimension, and to embrace as its beneficiaries not only an expanding People of God but all material creation as well. To these two dimensions is added that of depth, for the texture of salvation history in the Bible is nowhere as rich as in the lyrical accents of these masters of Wisdom.

ROBERT C. HILL, C.F.C.

Strathfield, Australia

²⁰ *Eccl* 12, 1-2.4-7.