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CHAPTER

11 Wisdom in the New Testament

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Abstract

Wisdom, in the New Testament, has made several shifts. As a genre, it has gained clear apocalyptic overtones, unsurprising when Wisdom herself was always located with God and served to reveal God to his people. But more importantly, the New Testament teaches us that wisdom is to be found in the crucified Christ, and that he is the ultimate arbiter of the wisdom of God. He reveals the ways of God to us in his humility and his submission to God, and he teaches his followers what it means to obey and worship God “in Spirit and in truth.” How believers respond to the mystery of Christ crucified and his demands on their lives reveals their growth in wisdom.

Keywords: [wisdom](#), [sophia](#), [apocalyptic](#), [revelation](#), [pre-existence](#), [worship](#), [obedience](#)

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WISDOM is not an obvious genre in the New Testament. For one reason, in the Second Temple period, Wisdom Literature gained apocalyptic overtones. Whereas early Wisdom Literature appeared to concern itself with issues of this earthly life, by the Wisdom of Solomon and 1 Enoch we have a clear concern with eschatological judgment and hints of an eternal life, at least for the righteous. Also, Wisdom is personified in the Hebrew Bible, a character who works alongside YHWH in creation and to teach Israel the way of God, almost a semi-divine character (Proverbs 8). While some see her suggesting a separate deity, James Dunn (1989, 176) argues that she remains a *personification* of an aspect of God, such as his involvement with his creation, but never a separate character. Wisdom teaches and trains, disciplines and corrects the righteous as they walk in obedience before God, a personification depicting God’s work in the world.

In the New Testament, in places such as the Synoptics or Colossians, Jesus appears to take on some of the aspects of personified Wisdom. James, meanwhile, is the clearest example of Wisdom Literature we see in

the New Testament. One can find interest in the ideas around “wisdom” clustered in certain books, particularly Matthew, 1 Corinthians, and Colossians.¹ But a study like this is interested in more than just the appearance of wisdom-related terms. The reader needs to be sensitive to the themes and echoes of wisdom in the New Testament. In this essay, we will explore the way wisdom appears in the various New Testament texts, and see how the New Testament authors use wisdom to shape Christian community.

11.1 Synoptic Gospels

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For reasons of space, this essay will deal with the final form of these three Gospels, but mention must inevitably be made to Q. Much scholarship (see, particularly, Kloppenborg 1987) has focused on sorting sapiential versus apocalyptic layers in Q, a misguided question, given the far greater consensus that Wisdom and apocalyptic are not two contrasting traditions that can be separated, but two closely interrelated traditions (see, e.g., Rowland 2017, 134, citing Stone 1976). Horsley and Tiller (2012, 163–164) critique this scholarly tendency, which viewed the sapiential elements as more primitive layers in Gospel construction, with apocalyptic sayings added later. This dichotomy, however, between Wisdom and apocalyptic, whether in sayings or in theology, has largely been abandoned. Since Q scholarship is dominated by this older perspective, it seems of greater value to examine the Synoptic Gospels in their final form. For simplicity’s sake, we will mostly deal with the texts that refer to wisdom explicitly.

The gospel of Mark does not unambiguously deal with wisdom concepts. The only clear reference to “wisdom” comes in Mark 6:2 (par. Matt 13:54), when Jesus amazes his audience at the synagogue in Nazareth who then ask, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom (σοφία) that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!”² Because his family was familiar to them and he had grown up there, the wisdom Jesus showed when teaching was dismissed by his audience who chose to reject him. This rejection of God’s wisdom revealed in Jesus is a common theme throughout the Synoptics.

But alongside others’ rejection of Jesus, Mark highlights Jesus’s secrecy about his identity. Grant Macaskill (2017, 65) notes how Mark’s “Messianic secret” and the explanation of the parable of the sower in Mark 4 echo the language of wisdom and mystery from the Qumran scroll 4QInstruction. The way that the term μυστήριον functions in Mark, and particularly the way that Jesus calls his followers to understand what those outside their community cannot, parallel the ways the Persian loanword *rāz* occurs in the Scrolls to indicate “a body of wisdom that has been revealed specifically to the community and that is constitutive of their special identity as ‘the wise.’” When the mystery has been revealed to a community by divine disclosure, that community also gains the responsibility to guard and pass it on to others within the community. When Jesus observes in Mark 4:11 (par. Luke 8:10; Matt. 13:11), “To you has been given the secret (τὸ μυστήριον) of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables” and then quotes Isa 6:9–10, he makes clear that his disciples form a community that is being granted a wisdom that not everyone is willing or able to receive. The parables are intended, according to Mark, both to teach *and* obscure. While many of us may be inclined to hear “mystery” language and think of apocalyptic and revelation, Macaskill’s reference to 4QInstruction helps us see how inner-community understanding of a revealed mystery can be a sign of wisdom teaching. Jesus teaches those with ears to hear how to be his community of wisdom.

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This inner-community nature of understanding can also be seen in the saying found in Luke 10:21 (par. Matt 11:25), when Jesus prays, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.” Leslie Baynes (2017, 21) notes, “Revelation of secrets or mysteries is the heart of the apocalyptic endeavor, and typically they are divulged only to those deemed wise. Wisdom is elusive; it must be sought; it is a gift from God, and only a few will receive it” (cf. 2 Bar. 48:3; Wis 6:22). The placement of Luke’s saying, however, adds a humorous note: the disciples return from their ministry thrilled with the

power that they were able to exercise, assuming they have indeed progressed in status, but Jesus calls them “νηπίους” (“infants”). In doing so, Jesus subverts the expectations regarding progress in esoteric knowledge. The community is the location of wisdom, but Jesus reveals that those who are weak are the truly wise. And those who think they are wise outside of the community remain blind.

From the outset, Luke makes clear Jesus’s right and qualification to create such an inner community. Luke twice refers to Jesus’s wisdom in his childhood, framing the temple incident (Luke 2:41–50). Luke 2:40, which concludes the infancy narratives and introduces the child Jesus, observes, “the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom (πληρούμενον σοφία); and the favor of God was upon him.” Then, in Luke 2:52, which concludes the temple narrative wherein Jesus sat among the teachers and learned, Luke again writes, “And Jesus increased in wisdom (προέκοπτεν [ἐν τῇ] σοφία) and in years, and in divine and human favor.” The summary of Jesus’s childhood is his growth in wisdom tied to divine favor, framing an episode in which Jesus reveals his knowledge of the law. This concurs with “the Jewish view that wisdom is closely associated with knowledge of the law” (NIDNTTE 2014, 4:335). Jesus’s wisdom revealed itself in his youthful desire to be at the temple and learn the law from its experts.

Of the synoptics, Matthew bears the strongest sapiential imprint, which is best seen by comparing its shared tradition with Luke. For instance, when Luke 7:35 states, “Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children (καὶ ἐδικαιώθη ἡ σοφία ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν τέκνων αὐτῆς),” Matt 11:19b concludes, “Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds (καὶ ἐδικαιώθη ἡ σοφία ἀπὸ τῶν ἔργων αὐτῆς).” Luke depicts John and Jesus as children of wisdom who, despite rejection by those around them, will be vindicated as wise. This vindication will also, by default, reveal the folly of those who reject them. In contrast, in Matthew, Jesus is closely related to Wisdom itself. It is Jesus’s own deeds under suspicion, and Jesus’s own vindication will be brought through the realization of the wisdom of his action. Contextually, he has just condemned several cities for their failure to see his deeds as his vindication: “Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent” (11:20). Those who fail to recognize the wisdom of his deeds face condemnation.

p. 176 Moreover, Matthew reveals an even stronger Wisdom connection in Jesus’s call in 11:29–30: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in ὁ heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” This is a clear echo of Sirach 51 and the search for and celebration of Wisdom found there. The sage encourages his readers, “Put your neck under her [Wisdom’s] yoke, and let your souls receive instruction; it is to be found close by. See with your own eyes that I have labored but little and found for myself much serenity” (51:26–27). Instead of encouraging people to take on the yoke of Wisdom, Jesus instead usurps her place by offering his own teaching that brings life. Both teachers begin with a call to “draw near” (Matt 11:28, δεῦτε πρὸς με; Sir 51:23, ἐγγίσατε πρὸς με) and issue the call to rest within a yoke, but whereas Sirach points to Wisdom, Jesus calls people to himself.

This same variation of Wisdom’s role happens in the woe passages in Luke 11 and Matthew 23. In the Lukan version, Jesus warns: “Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send (διὰ τοῦτο καὶ ἡ σοφία τοῦ θεοῦ εἶπεν ἀποστελῶ) them prophets and apostles . . .’” (Luke 11:49–50). In Matthew, however, Jesus himself does the sending: “Therefore I send you (διὰ τοῦτο ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ ἀποστέλλω) prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth” (Matt 23:34–35a). Matthew also changes Wisdom’s future promise to Jesus’s present action: Jesus has the authority to declare such an event and condemnation. “A saying of Wisdom has become a saying of Jesus” (Burnett and Bennema 2013, 998). This warning is similar to the one issued in Luke 11:31 (par. Matt 12:42), again for the people’s failure to recognize Jesus as more than simply “wise.” In Luke 21:15 we can finally see the Lukan Jesus acting in this manner, for he promises his disciples that when the trials of the end come, “I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.” Thus, it is not only Matthew who presents Jesus

as acting as the Wisdom of God would be expected to act. Jesus teaches in line with Wisdom traditions, but more than simply as a Wisdom teacher: he acts as Wisdom herself.

The way that Jesus seems to take on the character of Wisdom has led many to speculate about a Wisdom Christology. Matthew's Jesus makes the claims of Wisdom for himself, calling others to his yoke and teaching the way of life as he presents the Law anew (see Lillie 1989, 136). Karen Jobes (2000, 226–227) notes that in the quest to pair Jesus with Sophia, some have “regendered” Jesus as the female “Sophia,” with “Jesus as the incarnate Wisdom–Sophia of God that was presented to show the feminine principle of God as an acceptable complement to the masculine metaphors of son and king.” She argues, however, that this does disservice to the truth of the incarnation, unintentionally undermining the *humanity* of Jesus. Rather than a Sophia Christology, it is more appropriate to speak of Christ as the revelation of God and thus the revelation of the *wisdom* of God. Throughout Scripture, wisdom is how God interacts with his creation, teaching them who God is and how they should live, so it is not surprising that “the self-revelation of God in Jesus” would include God's wisdom (Boerman 2017, 9). Jesus is God, therefore the one who reveals the wisdom of God.

p. 177 In the Synoptics, Jesus's teaching is the way of wisdom, hidden from those who think they are wise apart from Jesus. But Helmut Koester (1990, 160) warns that while the forms of Jesus's teaching in the Synoptics fit a wisdom genre, “[t]he behavior ↴ which Jesus requests is a demonstration of the kingdom's presence, i.e., of a society which is governed by new principles of ethics. This not only ascribes a kerygmatic quality to the ethical demands of Jesus, it presents Jesus as a prophet rather than a teacher of wisdom.” Jesus's teaching is best categorized, therefore, as both prophetic and sapiential: “it shares wisdom's basic task: the interpretation of human existence as lived out in the intense historicity of everyday life,” but is also a prophetic social critique with content “quite unconventional by wisdom standards” (Patterson 1993, 206–207). The one who “hears these words of [Jesus] and puts them into practice is like a wise man (φρόνιμος) who built his house on the rock” (Matt 7:24). Wisdom is revealed by Jesus, but it subsequently must be embodied by those who *live* accordingly in the Christian communities. Intellectual assent alone has no place in Jesus's paradigm. As the ultimate revelation of God's wisdom, the responsibility to pay heed and obey his warnings falls to his hearers to be people with “ears to hear” and obey, just as with the prophets before.

11.2 John

John's presentation of Jesus is not centered on Jesus as a wisdom teacher. The language of “wisdom” (σοφία, etc.) does not appear at all in this Gospel. The prologue, however, has strong overtones of Wisdom Literature, such that Raymond Brown (1964, cxxv) went so far as to argue that “in John, Jesus is personified Wisdom.” While Brown's comment is an overstatement, the presence of wisdom overtones should not be ignored merely because the vocabulary does not appear. The lack of wisdom terminology is not a problem if the language and imagery borrow from Wisdom Literature.

Regarding the prologue, likely itself an independent hymn incorporated into the Gospel (see Witherington 1994, 283), the use of λόγος is proposed as an alternative title for Wisdom, linking Jesus to a pre-existent Sophia. The prologue is clearly influenced by Proverbs 8 and Genesis 1, the former an exposition of the latter but adding Wisdom as an active agent in the creation narrative. Elizabeth Johnson (2002, 96–97) argues:

The Prologue to [John's] Gospel, which more than any other scriptural text influences the subsequent development of Christology, actually presents the prehistory of Jesus as the story of Sophia: present “in the beginning,” an active agent in creation, descending from heaven to pitch a tent among the people, rejected by some, giving life to those who seek, a radiant light that darkness cannot overcome.

Additionally, Wisdom cannot be overcome by darkness, just as the darkness could not quell the *λόγος*. In Jewish tradition, “God’s ‘Word’ and ‘Wisdom’ are sometimes linked,” observes Larry Hurtado (2003, 366), thus the speculation that the *λόγος* in John 1:1–18 is reflective of the Jewish tradition of personified Wisdom is reasonable.

p. 178 Nevertheless, John seems to be going out of his way to show Jesus as *more than* Wisdom. For example, the early Jewish *Similitudes of Enoch* 42:2 expands Wisdom’s story in a way highly reminiscent of the *λόγος* in John: “Wisdom went out in order to dwell among the sons of men, but did not find a dwelling; wisdom returned to her place and took her seat in the midst of the angels.” Experiencing rejection from her own people, Wisdom returned to God. John’s prologue, in contrast, observes, “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him” (John 1:10–11). Jesus *stayed*, however, and “to all who received him, who believed in his name, [Jesus] gave power to become children of God” (1:12). This contrast should lead us to be cautious of mere equation, because John advances the description in new ways (contra Kling 2013). Jesus proves more effective than Wisdom was, able to abide rejection and remain to bring about transformation.

More importantly, “the stark statement in John 1:1, ‘the Word was God,’ takes us noticeably beyond Wisdom tradition . . . [A]s Dodd observed, the evidence indicates that in this Jewish Wisdom tradition, a statement such as ‘Wisdom was God’ was apparently ‘unthinkable’” (Hurtado 2003, 367). Ben Witherington (1994, 287) concurs about the shocking import of John 1:1: “the whole of this Gospel must be read in light of this very first verse for it means the deeds and words of Jesus are the deeds and words of a divine being, and not a created supernatural being either, for he existed prior to all of creation.” The Gospel of John thus emphasizes the divinity of the Son from the very beginning. The prologue also serves to introduce key terms for the Gospel such as “light” and “life,” which remain after the emphasis on the *λόγος* disappears.

In John’s Gospel, we see Jesus teach in expanded forms, such as in the Tabernacles discourse, and these blocks have extended Wisdom references. Much like the contrast above with the *Similitudes*, in John 7:28–29 Jesus depicts himself as having been sent by God. Catherine Cory (1997, 100–101) observes that the next step of the discourse also has Wisdom overtones:

Concerning where he is going, the Johannine Jesus announces, “You will seek me, but you will not find me” (John 7:34)—another allusion to the Wisdom/Sophia traditions. This “seeking and not finding” motif runs through the whole of the Tabernacles discourse and plays a significant role in the Johannine presentation of Jesus as personified Wisdom.

Wisdom controls access to herself and does not let herself be found by the unworthy. In much the same way, John plays with the image that the Jewish leaders “sought” Jesus in order to kill him, but they were unsuccessful until Jesus allowed them to find him (see Newton 2012).

p. 179 Like in the Synoptics, although Jesus takes up the ideas of Wisdom and light and revelation, he is more than Wisdom or Logos. Jesus is the fulfillment of the festivals, of shepherding imagery (cf. Ps 23), as well as of wisdom teaching. Imagery of seeking and finding, descending and ascending, revealing and concealing, these help us to draw on ↪ all possible resources to understand who Jesus is. But resonance points us to see how he is *more than* any of the allusions. Everything given to reveal God could be seen to culminate in Jesus, without him being limited to any one of the images. Like Wisdom, he required pursuit and was found by those he deemed worthy, and he also dealt with rejection from those who ought to learn from him. John’s Jesus is more than one aspect or revelation of God. He was both “with God” and he “was God,” and he called people to himself as “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

11.3 Paul

In the New Testament, the σοφία word group is most prominent in 1 Corinthians 1–4, where variants occur twenty-six times, the highest concentration in the New Testament. The conceptual world of Wisdom, however, is most prominent in the epistles to the Colossians and Ephesians, particularly the creation hymn in Colossians 1. While other letters also refer to wisdom or wisdom themes, these will be the focus of our exploration in Paul, who sees wisdom inextricably tied up with the crucified and resurrected Christ.

Before turning to the main epistles, some see the Philippian hymn as echoing language of personified Wisdom. There is a significant linguistic parallel between Wis 7:26, wherein Wisdom is described as εἰκὼν τῆς ἀγαθότητος αὐτοῦ (“an image of his goodness”), and Phil 2:6, that Jesus was ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ (“in the form of God”). “The designation of Christ as being ‘in the form of God’ and ‘being equal to God’ (Phil 2:6) draws upon the thought of Wisdom being near to God, sharing in God’s nature and existing before creation” (Schnabel 1993, 970). While there may be echoes, this sort of equation falls into danger of parallelomania, for nowhere is Wisdom *equated* with God the way that Paul equates Jesus with God in this hymn (see Fee 2000, 266).

First Corinthians begins with a lengthy exposition wherein Paul seeks to overturn the church’s preoccupation with worldly power and wisdom and dispel their penchant for factions. Rather than expressing loyalty to any one leader on the basis of how well they “perform” on worldly standards, such as speech or wealth, Paul warns them that they fail to understand God’s wisdom so long as they hold to those metrics. The wisdom of God uses the weak to perform great deeds, the poor to display God’s wealth, the things not well known to make God’s name known, and the cross as the ultimate power and wisdom of God. While it may seem odd that he argues against factions with an exposition on the wisdom of God, John Polhill (1983, 325) observes, “The key to Paul’s interplay between these twin themes of faction and wisdom is his conviction that the Spirit unites (see chap. 12). Where the Spirit of God is present, who alone reveals the divine wisdom, there can be no factions.” Wisdom comes from God and brings unity of purpose and identity in the crucified Christ. Paul juxtaposes the worldly wisdom of the Corinthians with the wisdom of God: their ongoing sinfulness and fighting reveals that they are celebrating a worldly perspective.

p. 180 Paul, however, ministers from a godly perspective, taking “care to perform his ministry in accordance with the divine reversal of values. Therefore, he is not concerned to appear impressive (2:1–5)” (Grindheim 2002, 693). Rather, he cautions the Corinthians that they need to participate in the reversal: “Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise” (1 Cor 3:18). Wisdom cannot be attained by those who continue to value worldly markers of status, wealth, beauty, or rhetorical brilliance. In contrast, those who are wise will not fight for status or preeminence but seek the unity and holiness of the body (individual and communal), serving one another as the Spirit guides. Paul thus gives the church a litmus test for wisdom: where there is factionalism, pride, and fights for status, God’s wisdom is absent. Instead, the church is to look to the *crucified* Christ for their understanding of wisdom: “Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1:24), whose humility and crucifixion redefined wisdom for humanity.

Moreover, wisdom comes as a gift of revelation by the Spirit to those who understand that God works through weakness and humility (also the theme of the end of 2 Corinthians). “In response to the congregation’s apparent assumption that wisdom is a human characteristic or possession, . . . [Paul’s] proclamation is itself the *revealed* wisdom of God (2:10)” (Johnson 1993, 276). Paul consistently focuses on the cross and on Christ crucified as revealing the power and wisdom of God, something they could not discern on their own. Wisdom can only come by revelation from God. Matthew Goff (2017, 180–181) observes a similar teaching style in a Qumran text: “Like the *mebin* of 4QInstruction, the Corinthians are students whose spiritual progress depends upon their comprehension of the mysteries conveyed to them by

their teacher Paul” who brings to them “the revelation of heavenly knowledge.” Revelation is required, without which wisdom cannot be obtained. But submission to the correct teacher is also required, an instructor who can explain the revelation received. Even while Paul begins his epistle in celebration of the gifting and revelation that the Corinthians have received from the Spirit, he is clear that they misunderstand that revelation and therefore require his instruction to bring clarity and unity. The mystery of God, the wisdom of God, is revealed in Christ crucified, but true wisdom does not just know the mystery, it requires a similarly shaped life in Christ’s followers. Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner (2010, 95) warn that “Christians in all walks of life must live in ways that are consistent with” this message. One’s acceptance of wisdom is revealed by living a cruciform life in service of others.

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With its grand hymn of creation (1:15–20), Colossians celebrates Christ in language reminiscent of Wisdom in Proverbs 8 and other creation hymns. “There is no passage in the New Testament, apart from the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel and Heb. 1:3, whose roots can be traced so clearly to Jewish Wisdom literature as the hymn in Col. 1:15–20” (Schweizer 1982, 246). The debate focuses on verse 15: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως) is clearly reminiscent of earlier Wisdom hymns, pairing together images of Wisdom’s preeminence in creation from Proverbs 8 with her emanation from God from Wisdom 7, wherein the line from 7:21 is again particularly apt, that Wisdom is the “image of his goodness” (εἰκὼν τῆς ἀγαθότητος αὐτοῦ). John Anthony Dunne (2011, 5), however, warns that divergence in language should make us wary of overstating connections: “One area of particular dissimilarity arises from one of the key terms of the hymn, πρωτότοκος. This is especially so because Wisdom (i.e., ‘Lady Sophia’) is never called πρωτότοκος, since the term implies firstborn son.” Although Wisdom may assert preeminence in creation, she always remains an image, a reflection, a mirror, a first-of-creation. Similarly, Paul’s view of how Christ participates in mediating creation—originating and sustaining—surpasses any of the descriptions given of Wisdom’s participation (see Fee 2000; Dunne 2011). This does not “preclude the idea that Wisdom traditions have influenced the composition of the ‘hymn,’ especially as it relates to Christ’s involvement in creation” (Dunne 2011, 7), it merely urges caution against importing Wisdom ideas without allowing Paul to take them in unexpected directions. Paul echoes Wisdom language, but he *surpasses* it in his description of Christ, as he includes also Davidic and regal imagery (Dunne 2011, 8). To limit Christ in the Colossian hymn to a personification of Wisdom is to limit Paul’s Christology.

However, Colossians itself is an example of New Testament sapiential, or paraenetic, literature (see van Broekhoven 1996, 44–46, for a summary of research). One place this has taken research is the implications of wisdom readings of the household codes of Colossians (and Ephesians). Andrew Lincoln (1999, 93) asks, “Does the household code of Colossians have anything in common with the Christ-hymn?” Indeed, against the “other-worldly and ascetic wisdom” that the Colossians are celebrating, Paul “sets his own version of apostolic Christian wisdom” (Lincoln 1999, 103). Paul sets forth a coherent philosophy that includes how to live together as a Christian community. Christ is head of the body, the Church, and he is also “Lord of the household . . . the place in which the consequences of Christ’s lordship are made most visible to the surrounding world” (Lincoln 1999, 106). How Christ reigns in the household illustrates how Christ is also Lord of the cosmos, the polis. The cosmic Lordship of the Christ-hymn is made practical in the wisdom of how believers live with one another.

When Ephesians adopts the household code from Colossians, the author makes this Lordship even more explicit. Rather than remaining with the traditional teaching regarding households, Ephesians blends wisdom and apocalyptic traditions through the mystery at the heart of the household. “In Ephesians, . . . mysteries are part of cosmology and the point of departure for reflecting on everything. In the same way that 4QInstruction is described as a sapiential document motivated by an apocalyptic worldview, so too one might say the same of Ephesians 5:21–6:9” (Wold 2017, 232). The mystery of Christ’s Lordship and union with the Church is the apocalyptic reality to which the household is but a reflection. Therefore Lincoln

(1999, 108) concludes, “Having a Lord in heaven does not direct attention away from the earthly. Rather it is meant to provide the motivation for taking earthly relationships with all seriousness and living distinctively within them.” Both Colossians and Ephesians take seriously the Lordship of Christ and, in their own ways, strive to teach the converts the implications of this cosmic Lordship in their daily relationships.

p. 182 Paul sought to shape his communities in line with the revealed wisdom of Christ. Always the Gospel is at the heart of his teaching, and this upends any ideas people may import. The mystery people long sought access to has been revealed in Christ. The foolishness of the cross teaches us the wisdom of God, and the subsequent cosmic Lordship of Christ transforms the daily lives of those who encounter him.

11.4 The Rest of the New Testament

Wisdom ideas and style continue to be influential in other New Testament books. Allusions are probable in Hebrews, the epistle of James is the most evident example of a Wisdom text in the New Testament, the binary vision of 1 John echoes Wisdom’s two ways, and Revelation presents us with revealed wisdom in apocalyptic form. In these books, the focus is on Wisdom Literature’s ideological influence.

Hurtado (2003, 366 n. 31) observes that there is a likely allusion to Wis 7:25 in Heb 1:3, but as with the Philippians 2 debate, the strength of Hebrews’ equation of Jesus as embodying the “imprint” (χαρακτήρ) of God is unmatched by Wisdom’s description as an “emanation” (ἀπόρροια) in the older text. The warnings against apostasy throughout the sermon, however, compare to the warnings of punishment to those who go astray in other Wisdom judgments. The idea that unfaithfulness to covenant life leads to punishment would be familiar to readers of contemporary Wisdom Literature.

James is universally recognized as the New Testament’s Wisdom epistle, even while there are debates about its apocalyptic elements (see, e.g., Penner 1996; Kamell 2017). Again, if these two genres are not taken to be oppositional, then the debate is simply one of balance. Ever since Martin Dibelius (1975) labelled it as “paraenesis,” James has remained categorized as Wisdom. One of James’s key claims is that wisdom is ἄνωθεν, “from above,” in stark contrast to that which is earthly. Language of “above” and “coming from above” indicate divine origin (Moo 1985, 133), providing a cosmological contrast to what is earthly and lacking the divine perspective. Wisdom comes from God alone and provides the ability to live according to God’s way. Wisdom thus also acts as the intermediary between God and humanity, teaching much as Lady Wisdom does in earlier Wisdom texts. She reveals the truth about the κόσμος so that God’s people can discern reality and live according to God’s ways rather than according to their own limited vision (see Kamell 2017). James is at home in Wisdom Literature, focusing on practical themes of wealth and poverty, human mercy and divine mercy, pride and envy, and trust in God. The wise person will worship God alone, rather than being torn by their desires and worldly values, and this will be revealed in the peaceful nature of their relationships.

p. 183 First John shows a bias toward a Wisdom theme that developed into its own tradition of the Two Ways (see, e.g., Didache). The dichotomy between righteousness and sinfulness is even starker than in James, and 1 John cycles around the necessity of loving one’s neighbor (practically) to be able to love God. To obey God’s law involves love, not mere rote actions. Bennie Reynolds (2017, 344) claims that “the Jewish, apocalyptic character of 1–3 John—and especially 1 John—can be illuminated by comparing their binary oppositions with similar examples found in Jewish texts from Hellenistic times,” such as in the Epistle of Enoch, the Wisdom conclusion to the apocalyptic text. The duality of 1 John also matches that of Wisdom writings such as Proverbs or Sirach, where one is either righteous or wicked as shown by one’s deeds, but the cosmic scope has been amplified. This epistle of John teaches its hearers that they will reveal whether they love God (or not) in their choices to (or not to) love their neighbor and obey the commands of God.

Finally, the ultimate apocalyptic text of the New Testament, Revelation, also has strong Wisdom elements. Loren Stuckenbruck (2017, 358–359) calls Revelation “a Disclosure of Wisdom,” and argues that an:

overview of “wisdom” in the Apocalypse demonstrates that, although the term occurs only four times, its significance is interwoven with the message of the book as a whole. To proclaim wisdom among the features of the Lamb (5:12) and of God (7:12) is to locate the true perception of things in a faith-based reality that contrasts with the world that the recipients of the revelation are presumed to experience. This reality expresses itself in a worship and devotion that does not falter when confronted by a system thoroughly caught up in a web of deception.

This wisdom “embraces reality as a whole,” and calls for the reader to engage in “a process of active discernment” (359). As in Wisdom Literature, merely gaining revelation is not enough. Readers are called to understand “the true nature of the situation, . . . heeding the prophetic *demand* for an appropriate response” (Bauckham 1986, 94). Revelation upends worldly notions of power with the wisdom of the crucified lamb (5:6, 9, 12), which leads to worship of the Lamb rather than the powers that contend against him. In chapter 7, wisdom is again linked to correct worship. But the uses in 13:18 and 17:9 “challenge the audience to gain insight” regarding their own context (Stuckenbruck 2017, 352). In Revelation, therefore, wisdom functions both to instruct right worship but also to provoke the reader to engage in their own pursuit of wisdom. In this way, then, wisdom functions to transform people’s perspective such that it also transforms how they live and worship.

Thus, throughout the conclusion of the New Testament, wisdom continues to function both as a genre and as a theme. When it is a genre, we still see overlaps with apocalyptic revelation, but focused on the practical nature of wisdom shaping the daily lives of average people in their relationships at home, church, and work. As a theme, it is often tied with worship and a true picture of reality, in contrast to the “cleverly devised myths” (σοφοισμένοις μύθοις; 2 Pet 1:16) of sinful people. Wisdom leads to single-minded, faithful worship of God that is lived out in one’s peaceable relations.

11.5 Conclusion

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In conclusion, given the way discussions have often progressed particularly in Gospel studies, we need to be wary of making a strong distinction between apocalyptic literature and Wisdom Literature. “Modern scholarship has barely faced up to the problem of the interface between apocalypticism and wisdom. This question is reaching some urgency in New Testament Studies, which have begun to flounder on the old paradigm with its watertight compartments and the presumed opposition of apocalyptic and wisdom” (Scott 1993, 245). To continue to function as if these are two opposed genres will continue to lead New Testament studies astray.

Secondly, the link between wisdom and right worship should continue to gain focus. Stuckenbruck’s article on Revelation provides a vision of the relationship between wisdom and worship and practical life, but this connection is not limited to that book. The Epistle of James, 1 Corinthians, Jesus’s saying in Matt 11:19b that “wisdom is vindicated by her deeds,” or the more parabolic statement in Matt 12:33 that “a tree is recognized by its fruit,” all bear witness to the link between wisdom and life. Wisdom comes from God alone, and it teaches God’s people how to live such that they can worship him in truth and deed. Wisdom inverts the worldly categories of class, status, wealth, and power, pointing instead to a crucified Lord (cf. 1 Corinthians, but also the Gospels), who is now in charge of the entire cosmos (see Colossians, Revelation). Wisdom is hidden from those who presume to be able to evaluate using worldly categories, but she is given to those whom the world has rejected, much as the world rejected the Savior who embodied God’s wisdom to his world. Wisdom can no longer be discussed apart from the Crucified Lamb.

Wisdom has never been humanity's to own, but is given by God and thus leads to worship of God. But worship of God, according to New Testament Wisdom teaching, means that God's people become shaped in alignment with the crucified Christ, serving one another in humility and unity. Ultimately, David Ford (2003, 4–5) is correct when he observes that wisdom “asks not only about meaning, interpretation, and truth but also, inextricably, about living life before God now and about how lives and communities are shaped in line with who God is and with God's purposes for the future. In short, it is about lived meaning directed towards the kingdom of God.” Wisdom is the lived faithfulness of the people of God, revealed to and empowered in them by the Spirit. How God's people respond to Christ's calls for obedience reveal whether they participate in the Wisdom of God.

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Notes

- 1 "The noun σοφία occurs c. 50x in the NT, incl. 17x occurrences in 1 Corinthians (relative to book length, it is esp. freq. in Colossians, 6x). The adj. σοφός is found 20x, incl. 11x in 1 Corinthians and 4x in Romans, while the negative ἄσοφος only

in Eph 5:15 (contrasted with σοφός)” (*NIDNTTE*, 4:334). While helpful data, to look only at these instances would be to commit the world-concept fallacy.

- 2 The NRSV is used for all biblical citations in this essay.