

JESUS AND WISDOM: CONVERGENCES AND CHALLENGES

Any list of major topics in Jesus research between 1965 and 1985 would have to include the following: the criteria for isolating the authentic teachings of Jesus, the legal and moral responsibility for Jesus' death, the resurrection texts and the events behind them, the political involvement and strategy of Jesus, Jesus as a storyteller and skillful communicator, and the Jewishness of Jesus and his place within Judaism. These matters continue to be discussed and debated. But over the last ten years another set of concerns has emerged: Jesus' mode of teaching, the earliest stratum of Q, Jesus as a Cynic, how Jesus understood the kingdom of God, and the development of Christology. These topics have usually been pursued separately and with more interest in getting the details correct or making inflated claims about their relevance for Christian origins than in seeing the larger theological picture.

In this presentation I will first suggest that these five trends in recent Jesus research converge on the theme of "Jesus and Wisdom." Then I will reflect on the challenges and opportunities that these trends and the overall theme pose for theologians. My task is constructive rather than critical. In other words, I am concerned more with what these movements in Jesus research can contribute positively to a Wisdom Christology than with criticizing their methods or taking issue with questionable claims made by some of their proponents.

FIVE TRENDS IN JESUS RECENT RESEARCH

Jesus' Mode of Teaching. All the sources that we have for Jesus' teachings in the Synoptic tradition (as well as the *Gospel of Thomas*) present him as a teacher in the wisdom tradition.¹ The Synoptic Jesus uses the familiar Hebrew poetic device of parallelism, both synonymous (Mark 3:24-25) and antithetical (Matt 12:35). He quotes folk proverbs such as "no one can serve two masters" (Matt 6:22). He compares the kingdom of God to a treasure, a merchant, and a net (Matt 13:44-50). He asks rhetorical questions (Mark 2:19) and even im-

¹Leo G. Perdue, "The Wisdom Sayings of Jesus," *Forum* 2/3 (1986) 3-35; Alan P. Winton, *The Proverbs of Jesus: Issues of History and Rhetoric* (Sheffield UK: JSOT Press, 1990). For recent research on wisdom literature, see Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1990); John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue, eds., *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990); Leo G. Perdue et al., eds., *In Search of Wisdom* (Louisville: Westminster-Knox, 1993).

possible questions (Matt 6:27). He gives admonitions (Luke 12:15). And he sprinkles his teachings with beatitudes: "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it" (Luke 11:28).

Although the teachings of the Synoptic Jesus follow the conventional formal patterns of wisdom teachers, there is to Jesus' wisdom an element of paradox and challenge. He calls the poor "blessed" (Luke 6:20). He promises that those who want to save their lives will lose them (Mark 8:35), and claims that the last will be first and the first will be last (Matt 20:16). These aphorisms challenge the conventional assumptions and values of most people. The Jesus of the Synoptic tradition is a wisdom teacher, albeit a paradoxical and challenging one.

Q Research. Among those who study the Q source—the hypothetical collection of Jesus' sayings used independently by Matthew and Luke—there is growing conviction that the earliest stratum was sapiential in orientation and that the second stratum was apocalyptic.² The early sapiential stratum took the form of wisdom instructions—like those in Proverbs 1–9 and 22–24, Sirach, and various extracanonical Jewish and Egyptian works. The sage gives instructions about what is to be done and what is to be avoided.

The content of Jesus' wisdom instructions in Q is best preserved in Luke's Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20–49) and in various passages throughout Luke 9–14. The topics include true blessedness, love of enemies, avoiding hypocrisy, the relation between words and actions, the simple lifestyle, confidence in God's care, dealing with anxiety, the kingdom of God, and the true followers of Jesus. Thus the earliest stratum in the earliest "written" source that we have for Jesus' teaching is a wisdom instruction.

Jesus the Cynic. This seems to be an unlikely combination at first sight. But there are some good reasons for saying that the Jesus of the earliest stratum of Q may have appeared to some as a Cynic philosopher.³ First, there are common themes: voluntary poverty and begging, severance of family ties, the renunciation of needs, and carefree and fearless attitudes toward life. Moreover, Jesus and Cynic philosophers went from place to place, analyzing people's behavior and confronting them with symbolic actions and paradoxical or ironic speech. They were like the Hebrew prophets or social critics today. Cynic philosophers were a common sight in the Greco-Roman world, including Palestine. Their lifestyle

²John S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); Roland A. Piper, *Wisdom in the Q-Tradition: The Aphoristic Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Arland D. Jacobson, *The First Gospel: An Introduction to Q* (Sonoma CA: Polebridge, 1992); Burton L. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q & Christian Origins* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993).

³F. Gerald Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992); John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991); Leif E. Vaage, *Galilean Upstarts: Jesus' First Followers according to Q* (Valley Forge PA: Trinity, 1994).

was at least analogous to that of the itinerant radicals of the Jesus movement. The point is not so much that Jesus actually was a Cynic philosopher but rather that his lifestyle and teaching (or the traditions about them) led to the perception of him as being like a Cynic philosopher.

Kingdom of God. Since Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, the apocalyptic or eschatological nature of the kingdom of God has been a pivotal factor in Jesus research. According to this thesis, Jesus joined the Jewish apocalyptists in proclaiming a future and imminent kingdom of God, with cosmic dimensions, marking the end of the world as we know it.

But the wisdom stratum of Q compares the kingdom to a mustard seed and yeast (Luke 13:18-21), to something already present. And many Synoptic texts speak about entering the kingdom as a present reality (see Matt 5:20; 7:21; 18:3; 19:23; etc.). And there are several Gospel sayings with good claims to authenticity that imply the presence or inauguration of God's kingdom: "The kingdom of God is in the midst of you" (Luke 11:20; see 17:21; Matt 11:12).

Several New Testament scholars have recently challenged the apocalyptic interpretation of Jesus' understanding of the kingdom. On the basis of targumic texts Bruce Chilton argues that the kingdom of God was simply a way of talking about the presence or power of God now.⁴ Those such as Burton Mack, who contend that Jesus looked like a Cynic philosopher, understand God's kingdom as the sphere in human nature or history that transcends human kings and empires.⁵ Marcus Borg regards the kingdom of God as Jesus' alternative paradigm to those of the quietist apocalyptists and the violent revolutionaries. According to Borg, Jesus' paradigm of holiness stressed compassion, inclusiveness, and peace in the face of a society headed toward the catastrophe of A.D. 70.⁶

There is surely an inaugurated or present aspect to Jesus' teaching about God's kingdom. And so living in God's kingdom now demands wisdom and guidance from Jesus the sage (identified by Christians as the revealer sent from God). If there is merit to the attempts at "de-eschatologizing" Jesus' understanding of the kingdom, then Jesus' wisdom instructions take on even greater importance for both historians and believers.

Early Christology. If Jesus used the conventions of wisdom teachers, if the earliest source for his teaching was a set of wisdom instructions, if he looked to some of his contemporaries like a wisdom teacher and even a philosopher, and if the major thrust of his teaching was how to act in the presence of God's kingdom, then it is not surprising that an early (if not the earliest) way of understanding Jesus was as the Wisdom of God.⁷

⁴*God in Strength: Jesus' Announcement of the Kingdom* (Sheffield UK: JSOT Press, 1987).

⁵See *The Lost Gospel*.

⁶*Jesus: A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

⁷J. D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins*

In the Synoptic tradition it is possible to chart the development from sayings that present Jesus as a messenger of Wisdom (Luke 7:35; 11:49-50) to those in which Jesus takes on the persona of Wisdom (Luke 13:34/Matt 23:37; Luke 10:22/Matt 11:27).⁸ Some of the earliest Christian hymns celebrated Jesus as the Wisdom of God after the pattern of the figure of Wisdom in Proverbs 8, Sirach 24, and Wisdom 7. Thus Jesus is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Col 1:15-20). He is "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word" (Heb 1:3). And of course, the most famous Wisdom hymn of all is the Prologue to John's Gospel (1:1-18).⁹ The Word was in the beginning with God, just as Wisdom was. The Word had a role in creation, just as Wisdom did. The Word entered the history of God's people, just as Wisdom did. The Prologue, however, goes beyond the Wisdom tradition in asserting that in Jesus Wisdom took human form: "The Word became flesh and lived among us" (1:14).

FIVE CHALLENGES FOR THEOLOGY TODAY

In reporting on five trends in recent Jesus research I have tried to show a convergence on the theme of Jesus and Wisdom. By way of conclusion I will raise five questions that this convergence poses for theologians today.

Theological Language. What kind of statement are we as theologians making when we use wisdom language to affirm that Christ was "in the beginning" or "before all things?" Is it an empirical and historical statement? Or is it a mythological or theological statement?

Jesus' Preexistence. The earliest Christian hymns celebrate Jesus as the Wisdom of God after the pattern of Proverbs 8, Sirach 24, and Wisdom 7. They

of the *Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980); Ben C. Witherington, *Jesus the Sage* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); W. Gray, "Wisdom Christology in the New Testament: Its Scope and Relevance," *Theology* 89 (1986) 448-59; PHEME PERKINS, "Jesus: God's Wisdom," *Word and World* 7 (1987) 273-80.

⁸For Wisdom in Matthew, see M. Jack Suggs, *Wisdom, Christology, and Law in Matthew's Gospel* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1970); Fred W. Burnett, *The Testament of Jesus-Sophia: A Redaction-Critical Study of the Eschatological Discourse in Matthew* (Washington DC: University Press of America, 1981); Celia Deutsch, *Hidden Wisdom and the Easy Yoke: Wisdom, Torah and Discipleship in Matthew 11.25-30* (Sheffield UK: JSOT Press, 1987); Miriam Perlewitz, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Wilmington DE: Glazier, 1988); Samuel Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher: Didactic Authority and Transmission in Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism and the Matthean Community* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994).

⁹For Wisdom in John, see Martin Scott, *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus* (Sheffield UK: JSOT Press, 1992); Michael E. Willett, *Wisdom Christology in the Fourth Gospel* (San Francisco: Mellen, 1992).

affirm Jesus' existence before creation. But did it really happen that way? Or was preexistence part of talking about Jesus as the Wisdom of God?¹⁰

The Maleness of Jesus. The person of Wisdom (*hokma* in Hebrew, *sophia* in Greek, both feminine in gender) has feminine characteristics. The ease with which early Christians could apply feminine images to the male Jesus is striking. This suggests that Christ the Wisdom of God includes male and female aspects of humanity and so represents both genders in a theological sense.¹¹ And so can Jesus as Wisdom help us to move beyond androcentricism in Christology and theology? Can we freely emphasize in our christological reflections the feminine characteristics of Wisdom (nurture, compassion, etc.)?

Interreligious Dialogue. Can the wisdom of Jesus the sage be a starting point for discussion between Christians and representatives of other religions? To most Christians Jesus is more than a wise teacher. But he is that at least. The wisdom of Jesus the sage can make all people think about their deepest values and re-examine their assumptions about life.

The Cross. According to Paul (1 Cor 1:24) the cross is "the power of God and the wisdom of God." In any authentic Christian wisdom there must be room for the cross as the ultimate criterion. Paul appealed to the symbol of the cross to correct the exaggerated claims of some Christians at Corinth. And the cross has been a restraint upon enthusiasts and gnostics from antiquity to the present.¹² Does not the cross force us to reevaluate all human claims to wisdom? Does not the cross summon us to try to understand the logic of a God whose "foolishness is wiser than human wisdom" (1 Cor 1:25)?

Recent trends in Jesus research—Jesus' mode of teaching, Q research, Jesus the Cynic, the kingdom of God, and early Christology—show a remarkable convergence around the theme of "Jesus and Wisdom." This convergence in turn raises anew some interesting challenges for theologians today about theological language, Jesus' preexistence, the maleness of Jesus, interreligious dialogue, and the cross. Jesus and Wisdom is a rich theme for New Testament scholars and theologians alike.

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¹⁰Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Born Before All Time? The Dispute over Christ's Origin* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

¹¹Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Jesus, the Wisdom of God: A Biblical Basis for Non-Androcentric Christology," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 61 (1985) 261-94; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

¹²George W. MacRae, *Studies in the New Testament and Gnosticism* (Wilmington DE: Glazier, 1987) 251-62.