WISDOM: PLAYING BEFORE GOD

Synopsis

Wisdom is originally founded on the preservation of social continuity without change. But because experience is not permanent or continuous, a more subtle conception of wisdom emerges, of wisdom as a potential, an ability to deal with the kind of situation that may occur. Thus, the particular regulations of the law become internalized as a respect for principles and consistency; and the collection of particular facts external to the individual that we call knowledge is subordinated to an attitude or sense of balance in the mind of the wise man. This attitude, however, opens out into the community: in Proverbs 7-9, it is folly who says egocentrically that 'bread eaten in secret is pleasant'. In Proverbs 8, the vision of wisdom as a female child playing before God reveals to us another characteristic of wisdom: it is a spontaneous and unselfconscious expression of energy for its own sake, a complete integrity of thinking and acting, of the means and the end.

Program Lecture Outline: Key Facts

1. The original sense of wisdom is bound up with the idea of a social contract: it is embodied in institutions, which are more continuous than the individual and to which the individual must be assimilated.

2. The preservation of custom and tradition by institutions is not enough, however, when change occurs after all, particularly when such repeated and violent reversals happen as are suggested by the U-shaped diagram of the history of Israel.

3. A deeper sense of wisdom therefore emerges out of crisis: the particular commandments of the law, which were intended to preserve social continuity, become internalized as the potential of the wise individual to deal with types and universals, the balance of mind that can deal with the type of thing that may happen. This attitude respects principles and consistency without the reverence of superstition for the static and unchanging.

4. Similarly, wisdom becomes seen as superior to knowledge: the collection of particular facts about objective nature becomes subordinated to the insight that knows what to do with them.
5. Despite its transforming effect on custom and tradition, it becomes clear that wisdom is essentially a preservation of the community. The tendency to exalt the interests of the ego is rather the distinguishing characteristic of wisdom's opposite, folly, imaged as a harlot in chapters 7-9 of the Book of Proverbs.

6. Wisdom, by contrast, is portrayed as a female child playing before God. The word 'playing' suggests energy expended spontaneously and for its own sake. This profound description of wisdom implies the recovery of an unselfconscious integrity of thinking and action, of the means and the end.

Biblical Passages Cited

Proverbs 8:1-4. 'She crieth at the gates'.
Proverbs 8:12. 'I wisdom dwell with prudence, and find out knowledge of witty inventions'. Wisdom and knowledge.
Proverbs 8:14-16. 'Counsel is mine... By me kings reign, and princes decree justice'. Wisdom and justice.
Proverbs 9:1. The seven pillars of wisdom.
Proverbs 9:2-5. 'Come, eat of my bread': the communal meal.
Proverbs 9:13-18. 'Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant'. Folly and self-centeredness.
Proverbs 8:22-31. Wisdom as a girl child playing before God.

The Teacher's Perspective

Nothing else suggests more strongly that wisdom deserves a place in the Biblical tradition than the fact that the greatest, most pervasive and recurring Christian heresy, that of Gnosticism, is highly involved in a particular conception of wisdom. 'Gnosis' in fact means 'knowledge', and the Christian Gnostics were interested in replacing the revelation of the gospel, which depends upon what the New Testament calls 'faith', with a gnosis that depended upon an individual experience of illumination.

Gnosticism is far from being simply a Christian phenomenon: on the contrary, it has shown an ability to combine with an astonishing number of alternate and excluded traditions, including Judaism, neoPlatonism, Cabbalism, alchemy, astrology and the occult tradition that was called Hermeticism. This produced an enormous complex of underground literature whose bizarreness is in general exceeded only by its dullness, in signi-
significant contrast to the literary vitality of the Biblical mainstream. The dullness is no
doubt connected with its tendency to a particular brand of intellectual error, the very
misconception of wisdom as a kind of 'secret knowledge' that the Bible designates as folly,
a misconception usually accompanied by a dualistic mode of thinking and a consequent
weakness for abstraction and allegory.

And yet, for several reasons, a series about 'The Bible and Literature' is not justified
in ignoring Gnosticism totally. For one thing, the Gnostic tradition is by no means always
spiritually bankrupt: when modern thinkers like Carl Jung have attempted to revive
aspects of it, it is because Gnosticism has tended to preserve elements that have fallen
partially out of Christianity under the influence of institutional legalism. In particular,
these include the emphasis on an individual spiritual experience rather than on the passive
reception of a body of beliefs and a new legal code, and a willingness to read the Bible
symbolically as well as historically. For another thing, the half-submerged tradition
blended of elements of Gnosticism, Caballism, Neoplatonism and Hermeticism has been a
very great influence on English poetry, and on the Romantic tradition especially, in
English poetry, from Blake to Yeats; in particular on the Romantics' tendency to shift
perception of the deity from the transcendent to the immanent: the central study of this
subject is M.H. Abrams' Natural Supernaturalism. (For study of these phenomena in their
original Renaissance setting, see the various books by Frances Yates). Finally—and this is
what makes the matter immediately relevant to this program—the central figure of
Gnosticism is the female figure of wisdom, called by it the Sophia (see W.F. Albright's
From Stone Age to Christianity, chapter VI).

According to tradition, the first Gnostic was Simon Magus. Simon does not appear
as such in the New Testament (Acts 8), but rather as giving us the name 'simony' for the
trafficking in spiritual powers (see Joyce's story 'The Sisters'). Nevertheless, the sect that
grew up around him identified him with Zeus because of the resemblance of the Sophia's
emanating from God to Athene's springing from the forehead of Zeus, and he was said to
go around with a consort significantly named Helen, who was the Sophia trapped in a
material body, and whom he had come to rescue. One can see resemblances here to the
legend of Faustus, who in Goethe's and Marlow's versions is also associated with the Greek
Helen; and we can also observe at this point how the figure of folly as a harlot begins to
merge with the figure of the Great Whore: see programs 5 and 6.

Another place where the female figure of wisdom from Proverbs 8-9 has been
adapted is the body of Jewish visionary and speculative interpretation called the Caballa. Here, she is called the Shekhinah, the female principle of Adam Kadmon, the universal man who falls and is fragmented, driving his emanation into exile (see again M.H. Abrams, op. cit.). The word 'emanation' here suggests Blake, who drew freely upon these traditions to expand imaginatively the dryly doctrinal and historical reduction of the gospel: he alludes indirectly to the Caballa in the introduction to Part 2 of Jerusalem, titled 'To the Jews'. But Blake was aware of the reductionism latent in most such 'secret wisdom' as well, as he makes clear in his criticism of Boehme and Swedenborg in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell; and by the female 'emanation' he means the total product of a person's creative acts. The class may compare this to Shelley's idea of the 'epipsyche', the 'soul out of my soul' in Epipsychidion: here, as the Greek work 'epipsyche' suggests, the dominant influence was rather neo-Platonism, and the epipsyche is the product of the power to love; but this is really only a difference in emphasis. In Blake's Milton, the two aspects are combined, as Milton descends into the fallen world to retrieve his sixfold emanation Ololon, who is at once the form of his imaginative vision and his spiritual bride, sixfold to represent Milton's three wives and three daughters.

As for the Bible itself, the great poem on wisdom in Proverbs 8-9 is said to have strong Canaanite affinities: Wisdom is what is technically called a 'hypostasis', or projected manifestation of a god, and is said to be related to the word or breath of power and command that is a common feature in Semitic mythologies. When this came into contact with the Greek idea of the Logos, some complication was obviously inevitable, and Philo Judaeus (see program 1) takes care of it by making Wisdom the mother of the Logos. The 'seven pillars of wisdom' made familiar through T.E. Lawrence (9:1) are cosmological, the seven pillars that are the foundations of the firmament. The wisdom figure is not confined to the Book of Proverbs either: another beautiful poem by and about her is Ecclesiasticus (Ben Sirach) 24, which contains the phrase 'as a plane tree by the water' used by Robert Lowell as the title of a poem mentioned in program 5. The class may also take a look at the poem on wisdom in Job 28 and perhaps at the entirety of the Wisdom of Solomon (of Book of Wisdom): in both of these works, wisdom is beginning to pass over into the prophetic and apocalyptic mode. The Wisdom of Solomon, from its powerful beginning ('God made not death', 1:13) to its unforgettable end (the transformation of the elements) is a remarkable book, whether or not it merits W.F. Albright's epithet 'proto-Gnostic', which is doubtful. Its framework is a symbolic interpretation of the Exodus in which wisdom, again appearing as 'the breath of the power of God, and a pure influence flowing from the glory of the Almighty' (7:25), acts as the instrument of God from the
Creation through all Old Testament history (compare Proverbs 3:19-20). The slaughter of the Egyptian firstborn is also described in terms of the word of God (Logos): 'For while all things were in quiet silence, and that night was in the midst of her swift course, Thine Almighty word leaped down from heaven out of thy royal throne, as a fierce man of war into the midst of a land of destruction, And brought thine unfeigned commandment as a sharp sword, and standing up filled all things with death; and it touched the heavens, but it stood upon the earth' (18:14-16). Because of the Exodus-Gospel parallel discussed in program 12, this can be read as a type of the Nativity story in Matthew, Luke and Revelation 12. Like the latter, it is completely mythological: the class may compare it to the opening of the Fourth Gospel.

For a contribution to the discussion of true wisdom as the spirit of play, see Johan Huizinga's Homo Ludens; also Joseph Campbell's The Masks of God, Volume One, Introduction. For New Testament polemics about the wrong kind of wisdom, the class may look at I Corinthians 1 and 2, and Jesus' insistence that wisdom is a child (Matthew 11:25, 18:1-6 and 19:13-14). The Epistles of John make angry but unspecific reference to a proto-Gnostic heresy that scholars generally call Docetism.

Supplementary Reading

1. Biblical Passages
   
   Ecclesiasticus 24. Poem on wisdom: 'as a plane tree by the water'.
   Wisdom 7:25. Wisdom as 'the breath of the power of God'.
   Proverbs 3:19-20. 'Thine Almighty word leaped down from heaven': type of the Nativity.
   1 Corinthians 1,2. False wisdom.
   Matthew 11:25. 'Thou has hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes'.
   Matthew 18:1-6. 'Except ye be converted, and become as little children...'
   Matthew 19:13-14. 'Suffer little children'.

2. Corresponding Passages in The Great Code
   
   Chapter Five. Typology II.
   pp. 121-25. Wisdom.
3. Other


*The Masks of God, Volume One, Primitive Mythology*, Joseph Campbell,
Viking, 1959.

**Suggested Essay or Discussion Questions**

1. Discuss Yeats' *Lapis Lazuli* in light of this program, particularly the idea of wisdom as the ability to be in harmony with the rhythm of change in time, the images of the sages, and the theme of 'gaiety'.

2. Discuss the interchanging of wisdom and folly in passages from Thomas Lovell Beddoes' *Death's Jest Book*, or in Yeats' poem *A Prayer for Old Age*.

3. Discuss the following passage from Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in relation to the popular notion of wisdom as the tried and tested way of society: 'I then asked Ezekiel why he eat dung, & lay so long on his right and his left side? he answered, the desire of raising other men into a perception of the infinite'. In this work also appears the proverb: 'Energy is eternal delight': what might this have to do with play? Can Ezekiel's symbolic actions then be considered a kind of play? If so, might the symbolism of literature in general be considered a kind of play, and in what manner?