

The Book of Wisdom as a Biblical Approach to Natural Law

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That there is a crisis in moral wisdom today is beyond doubt. During a crisis the believer always has something to rely on—faith—for Bible, tradition, and church have seen crises come and go. Biblical theology, for example, works by reflection on pressing problems with scriptural eyes. But the sources from which to draw one's own answers are not always the ones most immediately helpful for others, a point to be kept in mind by those who would reach out to persons without faith during the present crisis in moral wisdom. It is a point often made in Maritain's *Moral Philosophy*,¹ and, in fact, the need for a source other than faith is one of the central reasons for the regular appeal to nature by philosophers in the Christian tradition. The ideal of "natural law" expresses a hope for objectivity and universality in morals.

Does biblical theology ever make such an appeal? Another way to raise the question is to ask whether there is a biblical version of natural law. Except for the famous (and hotly debated) case of *Romans*, chapter 2, the very suggestion of a "biblical philosophy" seems to be a contradiction in terms, or perhaps just a poorly phrased attempt to speak of the valid approaches that go under the name of "religious philosophy." Yet there is an entire part of the Bible that is quite philosophical: the books that constitute sapiential literature,

¹Jacques Maritain, *Moral Philosophy: An Historical and Critical Survey of the Great Systems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), e.g. pp. 458–462.

some of which do not even mention God or the faith of Israel, but argue entirely from common sense and the store of human experience. One of them, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, appeals in my judgment to a type of natural law argument.

Since the Enlightenment, theories of natural law have tended to take their point of departure from abstract visions of the nature of the human being, usually expressed in rights-claims.² Even the most formalistic systems of ethics, e.g., Kant's deontology, hold that objectivity can be provided for ethics by recourse to the natural structures of reason as regulative for human conduct, while less formalistic systems have tried to appeal by various strategies to nature as normative. However, these latter systems sometimes find their way blocked by G. E. Moore and the accusation of the naturalistic fallacy.

By contrast, earlier versions of natural law theory tended to give greater prominence to the religious origins of natural law rather than to abstract pictures of human nature. Whether we consider the Stoic originators of natural law theory or its Christian advocates, God is regarded as the author of all nature, including the human, and thus there is a divine source for the universality and teleology of moral claims. Even so, the type of demonstrations they offer tend to accentuate the discovery of natural norms by inspection of the patterns of fulfillment or frustration of human desires rather than to emphasize expressions of divine will. In fact, right relation to God is often subsumed under the general heading of justice rather than considered to be the well-spring of morality, even though the divine origin of human nature (and of all nature) remains the ultimate guarantee of moral objectivity in these systems.

In contrast to predominantly philosophical theories of natural law, biblical forays like that of St. Paul in *Romans* take a different starting-point, the accessibility of knowledge of God to human beings and an appreciation of the destiny God has planned for human nature. They then work toward the articulation of a morality appropriate to human nature so conceived. Instead of treating suitable worship of the true god as a subset of justice-relationships, biblical ethics tends to see this duty as the primary obligation from which all the rest derive.

²There is an astute analysis of this phenomenon in 'Nonsense upon Stilts': *Bentham, Burke and Marx on the Rights of Man*, ed. with introductory and concluding essays by Jeremy Waldron (London and New York: Methuen, 1987).

Yet these texts still do seem to me to operate within the natural law tradition in that they insist upon reflection on human nature in due course for proper expression of the balance of this religiously based morality.³

The contention of the present article is that there is a certain form of natural law argumentation that is helpful in answering a rather different question, one in which biblical scholars have more interest, the very unity of the book of *Wisdom*. This book is a Greek language portion of inter-testamental biblical literature and has been generally recognized to contain a fair amount of Hellenistic thinking as well as a share of wisdom literature native to the Hebrew Bible.⁴ There are a number of fine studies on the likely sources in Greek philosophy for specific passages⁵ and on the structure of the book,⁶ but none to my knowledge that focus on the type of argument-pattern to help establish the book's unity.

From the perspective of the development of Israel's scriptures, what is new and significant about the *Wisdom of Solomon* is a theological development of a classical position within Israel's thinking. It is often said in the Psalms and elsewhere that all nations should believe and praise God from his works, and there are a number of condemnations of idolatry (e.g., in *Isaiah*). In *Wisdom* the author develops the universalist argument a bit further, maintaining, that from nature even the pagans ought to worship this God, and that they are culpable for failing to do so.⁷

³In his article on "Old Testament Ethics" in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), pp. 433–437, Henry McKeating observes that Old Testament literature draws no sharp distinction between ethics and religion, between right moral conduct and right religious conduct. But to my mind it is worth investigating whether this is just an "indiscriminate mixture of commands on moral and religious matters" (p. 433) or whether it would not be better to say that biblical writers tend to incorporate morality within the confines of religion and religious duties.

⁴See especially Maurice Gilbert, S.J., *La Critique des dieux dans le Livre de la Sagesse* (Sg 13–15) (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1973).

⁵For instance, James M. Reese, *Hellenistic Influence on the Book of Wisdom and Its Consequences*. *Analecta Biblica* 41. (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1969).

⁶Dieter Georgi, "Der vorpaulinische Hymnus Phil 2,6–11" in *Zeit und Geschichte Dankgabe an Rudolph Bultmann zum 80. Geburtstag*, ed. E. Dinkler (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1964), pp. 263–293; and George Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism*. *Harvard Theological Studies* 26. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972).

⁷See Gilbert, pp. 48–49 on the possible meanings for *physis* within *Wisdom*.

But the problem of understanding the book of *Wisdom* as a whole remains. It is here that mindfulness of the patterns of thought typical of natural law can help us to understand better the flow of thought and the internal logic of the book of *Wisdom*. Moreover, perhaps we can better see its usefulness for the present moral crisis, especially when we want to speak from faith to those who do not share our faith.

The Problem of the Unity of the Book

One aspect of the project of showing that *The Wisdom of Solomon* offers a religious understanding of natural law involves demonstrating that the book, in fact, contains a sustained, unified argument and is not just a patchwork of discrete parts.⁸ Its main sections are three: 1) a vindication of some unnamed people who have been persecuted for their righteous Torah observance by the gifts of immortality (*athanasia*) and incorruptibility (*aphtharsia*) (chapters 1–6); 2) Solomon's address to the kings of the earth on the nature of Wisdom (chapters 6–10); and 3) an interpretation of some events recognizable from the Exodus story (chapters 11–19). It is not immediately obvious how these three rather different topics are related to one another.

My contention is that there is a distinctive pattern of argument common to all three sections. Displaying the structure of this reasoning both helps to make the case for holding the book to be a unity with a consistent inner logic and teaches a useful way to make a natural law ethic. The basic argument here proceeds from the link between recognition of the one true God and observance of authentic morality. Conversely, the book of *Wisdom* regularly connects a faulty idea of God with unacceptable moral behavior and its invariable punishment. Still, the pattern of argument is more sophisticated than the simple law of retribution (the correlation of acts and consequences) operating, for instance, in *Genesis* prior to the flood story, or earlier in wisdom literature (especially as *Proverbs*, *Job*, *Qoheleth*, and *Sirach* debate the right approach to the theodicy question). It is different precisely by virtue of

⁸In his review of the literature in the Anchor Bible volume on *The Wisdom of Solomon* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1979) David Winston notes (pp. 9–14) that early modern biblical scholarship tended to find “a confusing disarray of units” and then proceeded to “carve up the book” in support of a theory of compound authorship. Among more recent commentators Reese has argued for the book's unity from the recurrence of certain terminology and the presence of such rhetorical devices as the *inclusio*.

the extension of an insight voiced only occasionally elsewhere in the Bible (e.g., *Psalms* 115:4–8; 135:13–18; *Isaiah* 40:18–20; 44:9–20) that not just Israel but all nations should be able to recognize the one true God from his works, and that all other worship is culpable idolatry (*Wisdom* 13:1–15:17). As wrongdoing this activity will invariably bring its just return upon any practitioners, in a way appropriate to the deed, even if this requires retribution beyond the grave.

The argument common to all three parts of the book⁹ has three basic parts: a) recognition of the true God is a mark of wisdom; b) getting the knowledge of God right will bring knowledge of authentic morality; and c) moral living, even in the face of persecution, will bring a reward (conceived as incorruption, immortality, life). Relying on a strong sense of the consequences inherent in one's action, the author illustrates various failures to respect these conditions by some imaginative story-telling. Chapters 2–4, for instance, portray former persecutors in the after-life as now under the judgment of those they oppressed; the story illustrates the downfall of those whose haughty and imperious behavior had stemmed from their arrogance toward the true God and the elevation of those who had humbly recognized the true God even though it meant persecution. Chapters 11–12 and 16–19 consist mainly of an historical retelling of the story of the plagues mentioned in *Exodus*, with a certain stress placed on seeing how the very same natural element brings a curse on Egypt and a blessing on Israel. The vindication thus worked is parallel to the delivery of the group in the early chapters, but this time it takes place for the people as a whole and occurs in this life. Even so, the author preserves an eschatological focus on eternal life by symbolic uses of “manna,” “land,” and “peace” to discuss the incorruptibility and immortality of the “life” which God wants to bestow on the faithful.

In addition to these moral lessons, there is a strong moral psychology operating throughout. For instance, in the section on the critique of the gods (chapters 13–15) the author satirizes the notion of polytheism by picturing craftsmen at work on their idols. Any plurality of gods (especially when they are idols made by human hands, but even when it is various forces of nature that are worshipped) brings morality into contempt. The artisans know the artificiality of these gods, and their

⁹My point is not that this argument-pattern is the only one operative in the book, but simply a concentration on the recurrence of this particular pattern as a helpful tool to understand the whole.

own fearless conduct brings disrespect for any moral claims associated with the gods they have made as merely the imposition of the will and power of some upon others. As a point of moral psychology, it is the equivalent of what any high-school teacher knows about giving a mixed message. Students can be brought to accept the content of a moral claim, but they put a tremendous value on consistency, whether in seeing that the teacher follow his own rules or in apprehending that the message is coherent. To take a contemporary moral issue as an example, the current campaign to make condoms available in school health offices quickly runs afoul of this sort of mixed message when proponents tell their charges that they should not be sexually active, but, if they are, they should know how to protect themselves. What gets communicated in a mixed message is precisely a sense of something mixed up and confused, and thus something one can ignore.

The lively presence of practical moral psychology within the whole tradition of wisdom literature (for instance, the juxtaposition of the charms of Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly in *Proverbs* 1–9) thus finds a ready home in *The Wisdom of Solomon*. Here it serves to support the basic argument about the need for worshipping the true God and living a life consistent with that worship. That this argument-type recurs in various forms chapter after chapter seems to me an extremely potent reason for holding for the unity of the book.

The Recurrent Argument-Pattern

If the analysis I have attempted elsewhere¹⁰ bears out the claim that this is a recurrent argument-pattern unifying the book, it seems to be legitimate to argue that this pattern represents a specifically biblical approach to natural law thinking. Clearly, there are broader and narrower views of what natural law is, ranging from attempts such as those by Grisez, Finnis, and Boyle to derive precepts from self-evident basic human goods, through the virtue-ethics approach of MacIntyre, Hauerwas, and Pincoffs, who want to argue from the narrational unity of the self as a source of moral character, to the

¹⁰A careful analysis of the reasoning used, section by section, is beyond the scope of this paper, but I have tried to make this sort of study in my S.T.L. thesis at the Weston School of Theology, *A Biblical Vision of Natural Law in The Book of Wisdom* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992). Let me here express my gratitude to Richard Clifford, S.J. for his inspiring direction.

more traditional views of Aquinas who unite precept and virtue by a philosophy of nature and a telic analysis of human perfection.

What is required for an approach to be included in the scope of the natural law tradition is a basic respect for nature as the source of law for human conduct. The form taken here uses a decidedly more pro-active god than, say, the Stoic orderer of the universe or the Deist god of the founders of the American Republic. Yet it is still very much an attempt to relate three crucial terms: God, nature, and human nature. Though a biblical book, *Wisdom* takes the source of our moral knowledge to be natural rather than dependent on specific revelation, for instance, the divine gift of the decalogue. It is not as heavily charged as other sources of ethical teaching in the Old Testament with the specific covenant-history of Israel. In fact, it prefers to allude to important biblical figures as types rather than to refer to them by name. At *Wisdom* 10:4, for instance, we might recognize the story of Noah, but the figure is a sort of “everyman,” designed to convince the reader as a “likely story” rather than as an accurate retelling of the story in *Genesis*. *The Wisdom of Solomon* stands, rather, in the universalist tradition of *Isaiah* 44.

If this book were a philosophical tome strictly speaking, the strategy we might expect would be to argue for the natural knowledge of God by moving, for instance, from effect back to cause. That is the procedure often adopted later in the history of natural theology, but it is not generally the case here. Perhaps the fact that there were few or no atheists in the ancient world explains the lack of felt need to prove the existence of God (see, for instance, *Wisdom* 9:13–16). The burden falls instead on discerning the true God and on establishing the right relationship to this God.

Likewise, Solomon’s prayer (chapters 7–8) is both an actual prayer (directed to God, asking for the spirit of Wisdom) and an example of how to pray directed to his fellow kings, urging that no king can escape death. We are all mortal, all in need of wisdom, and we must all pray for wisdom with the same sort of humility Solomon is here embodying. For any king there is a special need to establish the right relationship with God because so much of the welfare of his country depends on his conduct. Solomon’s long praises of the spirit of Wisdom is tightly connected to the basic argument pattern, for his listing of the gifts which this spirit brings is as much an incentive to other kings to behave and share in these same gifts as it is an act of right relationship to God, whose praises are sung by the very act of recounting these gifts.

We could just as easily consider the prolonged account of nature's decisive interventions during the Exodus (*Exodus* 11–19). The events are presented without emphasis on Moses or the covenant relationship. Rather, the whole stress is on the complicity of nature in saving those who have acted on the morality that follows from worship of the true god and in punishing those who have acted arrogantly and oppressively out of their defiance of the true god. The fancy footwork it takes to correlate each plague with a blessing worked through the same element of nature shows a tremendous confidence in the natural order to teach morality by drawing out the consequences of one's pattern of action. All the while the author keeps returning to the basic culpability argument. People should have known better, hence they are culpable. There is personal moral responsibility for living according to the ways pleasing to God, and it is within the scope of humankind to recognize divine sovereignty.

The Current Crisis in Moral Wisdom

One lesson I think we can draw from the discovery of a certain natural law argument within a biblical text is that there is an advantage, and perhaps even a certain necessity, in rooting natural law arguments in a religious framework. It may not be possible to presume that those whom we are trying to convince on some topic in morals share the precise tenets of our faith, any more than Solomon can presume that the other kings are observers of revealed Torah. Yet he manifests a confidence that they will be able to understand and recognize the truth of being humble before God, whoever God is, once they admit that they have the limitations any human being has. He can summon them to pray for the gift of Wisdom, and he expects that this will make them well-disposed to learn what God is trying to teach them through the natural order even where there has been no special revelation.

Whether one needs to advert to God in laying out an ethics or working out ethical problems is a question of enormous importance, and one on which I can foresee many good reasons supporting both sides. Some argue persuasively that there cannot in principle be any difference between religious and non-religious ethics in regard to content, for what ethics concerns is our common human nature; the turn in much of recent theology toward anthropology (such as in Karl Rahner) reflects and confirms this line of argument. Others point to the problems of objectivity and motivation. Even if they do not go

so far as Sartre to suggest that in the absence of God everything is permitted, and nothing required or forbidden, they raise questions about how any ethical claim could be regarded as genuinely normative if human reason is its whole source. At most, any such claim would be culturally and temporally relative, the best a given individual in a given culture can recommend for advantageous personal and social relations. As such it is only admonition and exhortation. What we need, if we are to have anything genuinely normative, is a source beyond human reason, namely God. Religious ethics is then different in kind from any non-religious version by being normative and not merely suggestive. Going this route, however, makes it hard to see how the non-religious person would look upon religious ethics as making claims interesting to anyone outside the fold.

What seems most attractive to me about the former alternative is how well designed it is for keeping open the discussion between those whose beliefs differ. It keeps the focus on nature and human nature, reserving the question about the reason why nature and human nature are the way they are for discussion some other time. This interest in what is accessible to human reason in general is clearly among the reasons why "natural law" arguments have been a mainstay of Catholic moral theology and why this tradition has such a respectable place in the entire history of moral thinking.

The particular approach to natural law discoverable in the book of *Wisdom* reminds us that it is sometimes culturally important to return the discussion to the question about the hand that guides nature and human purposes, especially when human power and rational autonomy make us forgetful of natural creaturely dependence and when that forgetfulness allows moral discourse to disintegrate into irreconcilable opinions. Nature can, in some ages and cultures, serve as plinth for ethical discourse sufficient for grasping what is normative (short of recourse to questions about ultimate reality), but when the idea of nature is redefined in terms of utter pliability as the technological perspective culturally prominent today tends to do, it cannot easily fill the role of a plinth. To restore the reverence needed for treating nature as normative, there may be need to return the general discussion to the question of how one is related to ultimate reality, or more simply, to get people to focus on whether they are related to God aright. The more complicated ethical questions that depend on seeing nature aright will follow.

Whether because of the technological power we so easily command, the therapeutic mentality which reduces the search for truth about the

nature of things to restoring an equilibrium that is out of balance, or the depths to which the rhetoric of individualism has penetrated our entire way of thinking,¹¹ it is hard to make a natural law case today. We cherish the hope that this kind of argument could settle some of our problems, but the assumptions it makes about human purposes and destiny are simply not widely shared. On the contrary, the confidence which our magnificent technological developments have given for the achievement of individual self-sufficiency and for the realization of “self-actualizing” ends has cast a shadow over claims that there is any natural destiny common to all humanity. Likewise, the communitarian notion of ordered liberty as part of the necessarily social nature of human beings is under tremendous strain. When these assumptions are shared, they do not always have to be stated, but when they are not shared, we either have to decide on a strategy of starting over with a lower common denominator that is shared, or we have to devise a strategy that will set about restoring the context in which the teleology of human nature will again be appreciated.¹²

How effective is natural law argumentation that disregards or de-emphasizes any theological perspective? As philosophers we want to say that if there is a good argument, it ought to be compelling just as it is and apart from whether there is a divine basis. But I wonder if that is not to take philosophical argument in a vacuum. Natural law thinking, in particular, seems to require some rather sizable cultural assumptions, so that a culture that has truly made certain kinds of progress could assume things for moral argument which a regressive

¹¹There is a fine analysis of this trend in Mary Ann Glendon’s, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York: Macmillan, 1991).

¹²The components of an effective strategy will necessarily be numerous. Without developing the point, let me simply suggest that an extremely important aspect of bringing people to grasp nature-arguments will be cultivating habits of contemplation. Given the dominance of technology even in our everyday epistemology (both the pragmatist thesis that things are “true” because they “work” and the nominalist propensity to treat all concepts as the products of our own minds, constructed for some purpose and alterable at need), there are special difficulties for seeing anything “natural” as “normative.”

A limited amount of experience in teaching grade-school religion leads me to believe that schools which have a greater focus on art, on appreciating really beautiful things, tends to foster this sort of contemplation. Whatever the method, the goal must be to encourage receptivity and alertness to the contours of being, that is, a sensitivity to divine providence and stirrings of grace as well as a humility before the forms and limits of nature (one’s own nature, human nature in general, and the nature of which we are stewards). There will then be much encouragement to the active and constructive side of the mind.

culture is unable to presume and which must be re-stated and argued for quite explicitly. In our own day, the attempt to do ethics without reference to God has produced manifold diversity, both in the academy and in the marketplace. There are occasional atheists and agnostics who defend what the strongest theists hold in morality (for instance, Max Hentoff or Baruch Brody), and some have even been led to faith. But the general state of moral discussion is in a state of crisis, and I think the solution will have to be a culture-wide religious renewal.

The value of story-telling is incalculable, if we choose to employ this strategy. It has always been a central piece of Christian evangelization, and I suspect that its strategic function has much to do with the approach we are pondering in the book of *Wisdom*. Philosophers, of course, want argument-trails, not beautiful tales, but ordinary moral discourse often works more effectively when we do not shy away from stories. Admittedly, the “whole story” has to rest ultimately on solid argument, but sometimes it is precisely a story which spurs interest in the question we want to raise.

At the beginning of *Wisdom*, it is precisely the story about vindication in the after-life that links this book most directly to the rest of the Wisdom literature tradition. The debate between the optimistic expectations of *Proverbs* and *Sirach* that virtue will be rewarded in this life and the pessimistic (or at least agnostic) interpretations of *Job* and *Ecclesiastes*, which point out that the unjust often prosper at the expense of the just, here finds biblical resolution in the necessity of an after-life to ensure the justice of God toward all parties. The argument is not rehearsed here, but only a story about a reversal of victim and oppressor in the after-life is provided; yet the allusions to earlier parts of the Wisdom literature tradition assure us that this book is a deliberate participation in that long-standing debate as well as an exhortation to those outside the debate who are simply looking for wisdom. The stories, then, focus our attention on the argument for moral responsibility (the connection of acts and consequences that flow from one’s stance toward God) with the added motivation that comes from divine assurance about rewards and punishments. Here too is a lesson to be learned as we ponder strategy for the current crisis in moral wisdom.