



A SCIENCE & RELIGION COMMENTARY

1 KINGS 4:29-34

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29 God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore,**30** so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. **31** He was wiser than anyone else, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, children of Mahol; his fame spread throughout all the surrounding nations. **32** He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. **33** He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish. **34** People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom. (NRSV)

Among the many impressive characteristics of the Old Testament are the varieties of literature found within the sacred text: narrative history, law, poetry, prophetic utterances. All figure prominently in the Hebrew canon. In recent decades there has been a resurgence of interest in segments of the Old Testament known as the wisdom tradition. Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, portions of the Psalms focus on the relationship between God, virtue, and the sacred task of living life in the most fitting or appropriate manner.

Although wisdom literature derives from a number of sources, no figure is more associated with the Biblical wisdom tradition than King Solomon, the successor to King David. Upon elevation to the kingship and being offered by God the gift of his heart's desire, Solomon prays for wisdom. The Books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations are all associated by tradition with stages of Solomon's life.

1 Kings 4:29-34 provides a synopsis of Solomon's reputed wisdom. Figuring significantly are expected items such as proverbs, songs, and advice to the powerful, both domestic and foreign. Prominently included (and to our modern ears surprisingly), however, is Solomon's ability to speak of the natural world. He spoke of the majestic -- the cedars of Lebanon (the sequoia of the Middle East) -- and the minute -- hyssop plants that sprout from cracks in the mortar holding brick walls together. The implications are clear: nothing in the plant or animal realm lies outside the realm of wisdom, and close attention to the details of nature is a notable virtue.

Whatever empiricism lies embedded here is nascent and subservient to the purposes of wisdom. Wisdom is intimately related to the divine, and one might ask what cedars and hyssop have to do with illuminating the divine. Is there a form of natural theology here? Not to any significant degree, and certainly not to the extent attempted in the British scientific tradition of the 18th and 19th centuries nor to the extent envisioned by the patron of the famous Gifford Lectures in Scotland (established by Adam Lord Gifford in 1887 to "promote and diffuse the study of Natural Theology . . .").

What we do find in wisdom literature are two uses of the natural world. In Proverbs, for example, the natural world illustrates the ways of wisdom. Ants teach industry (Pr. 6:6), badgers exemplify subtle strength (Pr. 30:26), lions boldness (Pr. 28:1), and so forth. It challenges human wisdom to perceive the ways of the natural world. At times this approaches a naïve moralism, but there is a recognition that the wisdom manifest in nature goes beyond human ability to comprehend fully, leaving one in the realm of wonder at the wisdom manifest in God's works (Pr. 30:18).

The book of Job approaches the natural world with a different intent -- to place humanity properly within the created world. When God

ultimately speaks out of the whirlwind to Job and his debaters, it is to invoke those aspects of the natural world which are beyond human knowledge and which do not serve humans ends. As Bill McKibben points out in *The Comforting Whirlwind*, Job 38-42 uses the creaturely oddities of the world to cut humans down to size and remind us that it's not all about us.

Preaching Suggestions

I Kings 4:29-34 is a provocative text on the nature of wisdom. Knowledge of the natural world – in modern terms, scientific investigation – is a fundamental part of a life of wisdom. Humans court disaster when they act without intimate knowledge of the way the world works. This text properly elevates knowledge of nature, both practical and academic, and combats anti-intellectual strands within Christian circles and also values the knowledge of those whose life and work keeps them intimately connected to nature.