

THE OLD TESTAMENT:
AN INTRODUCTION

Volume 3
Psalms and Wisdom

Paul Nadim Tarazi

ST VLADIMIR'S SEMINARY PRESS
Crestwood, NY 10707-1699
1996

The Function of Wisdom Literature

The “third scripture” is, or at least should be, a “thorn in the flesh” of Christendom, especially as it developed in Western Europe and North America. The increasing stress on the biblical notion of “chosenness,” coupled with the “Greek versus barbarian” terminology and the understanding that the Roman empire was its own self-sufficient universe eventually produced the monstrous notion of *natio Christiana* (the Christian “nation”) during the Middle Ages—and European Christendom came to perceive itself as a universal norm. Hence the Crusades; the pogroms against Jew, Muslim, and any kind of “infidel”; the Inquisition; the intolerance of contemporary fundamentalists toward anyone who does not share their views; and the end-of-the-world timetables set by so many Christians of all kinds warning that their savior is going to take care of them and damn those who disagree with them.

Wisdom literature tempers the idea of “chosenness” that gave rise to such terrible consequences, by reminding us that others are as much God’s creation as we are. Our own chosenness consists in the fact that we shall be held accountable for living our lives according to every iota of the *entire* scripture: first, second, third, and also the fourth (the New Testament). This is why the liturgical life of both Judaism and Christianity is structured around readings of scripture. The readings in the synagogues of nascent Judaism were three: one from the Law, another from the Prophets, and the third from the Writings. The early church added readings from the New Testament. The readings in our own services also follow a certain order: first the Old Testament, then the “Apostle,” and finally the “Gospel.” This means that one is to follow a path

that culminates with Jesus Christ himself. However, it does not mean that once the level of the Gospels is attained, the Christian may forego the "Apostle" and the Old Testament: they are all, and all together, the *one* Word of God.¹ Within the realm of the Old Testament itself, there is a gradation from the Writings, to the Prophets, and then to the Law. This is still witnessed to by the church's liturgical calendar, which stipulates that the Writings are to be read more frequently during Great Lent, because that is considered a period for instruction of catechumens, culminating in baptism at Easter. It is, by the way, an indication that wisdom literature was part of the larger corpus referred to as *anaginoskomena*, i.e., "things to be read," or "good for reading," and thus edifying material. Edifying in which sense? As an introduction to the Law that it introduces as the true wisdom for wisdom seekers. The Prophets, the second step in this introduction to the Law as the expression of God's will, warn us of the danger of utter destruction by *God himself* of whoever does not keep that Law.

We contemporary Christians living in the "West," who virtually control the fate of our planet, have largely forgotten that the *ketubim* (Writings), which include mainly the wisdom books, are an integral part of our Bible. As a result our viewpoint is often an "unbiblical," individually-based outlook on what "life" is all about. But if we would only take seriously the wisdom of the Biblical wisdom literature, our world—the good world created by the wisdom of the God of the *torah* (Law) and the *nebi'im* (Prophets)—would become itself and in itself a foretaste of what God's rule and kingdom are and will be. In that case the real challenge will be to realize that it is we ourselves, not the "outsiders," who must change. After all, it is to *us*, not the "outsiders," that *our* Lord is saying:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those

1. See further on this matter my chapter on the authority of the Old Testament.

who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Mt 5:43-48)

If the texts appropriate for catechumens are first and foremost the wisdom writings, how much more appropriate are they for those who are neither Christians nor even catechumens? With such people the language of wisdom is our *sole* bridge of communication and must remain so until they have acknowledged that true wisdom lies in the Law of the Lord. Only then are we allowed to begin using the language of the *torah* and the *nebi'im*. Too often we do the opposite: we condemn "outsiders" on the basis of the latter texts while we do not bother applying even one iota of the *ketubim* to ourselves—assuming we even bother to read them! Unless we Christians give heed to the teachings of the wisdom writings, we are bound to find a rude awakening in God's kingdom which is as much communal as the world is, since both are God's. If we did take heed, we would find that we have more cause to condemn ourselves rather than the outsiders, whom we would come to see as members with us of God's community.