

## Metaphor and Mystery. Biblical Wisdom in a Late-Modern World

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### 1. *The world as a book*

Nature is a book to be read. This idea is rooted in:

- (1) The Jewish-Christian tradition – creation of the world by the word, so that the world speaks of its creator: Psalm 19.
- (2) Modern semiotics (the study of signs). The whole world is a network of signs and signifiers: the ‘text’ is not limited to what is written down (Jacques Derrida).

There is a potential *clash* between these two views of the world as book. Can signs point to *God*, or only to other signs? This is one theme of the lecture.

But modern views of the world as text are also in *agreement* with the ancient view of wisdom: meaning is elusive. Prov. 30:18-19.

Wisdom literature presents wisdom as an *object* to be explored, and as a *personification* (Lady Wisdom) to be met on the path of life.

As object, wisdom is hidden because of its sheer extent and complexity. It can never be fully fathomed. So wisdom is at hand, and yet cannot be fully possessed.

### 2. *The unfathomable creation*

Wisdom as an object to be surveyed is associated with the three dimensions of the world: height, breadth, depth. Job 28:20-22

Wisdom is as hard to grasp as the three dimensions are. Prov. 30:3-4.

Further, the complexity of the world consists not just in its three dimensions, but in the multiplicity of the items that lie within them.

Prov. 16:4, Ben Sirach 1:1-10, Psalm 139:17-18.

But without hiddenness there can be no discovery. The hiddenness of the world as a stimulus to interpretation is the second theme of the lecture.

### 3. *Bringing a hidden order to light*

Individual items within the dimensions of the world can be interpreted in a way that applies to human life. The wise men and the prophets both use object lessons from nature:

- (1) The object lesson of the wise. The stress is on regularity: a simile assumes a hidden order and unity in things which is being brought to light. Proverbs 17:14, 20:2, 27:15, 30:15-16

But there is also the shock of the new (putting things together in new ways).

- (2) The object lesson of the prophets. The stress is on novelty. There is particular truth (history) rather than general truths of the wise. Amos 7-8; Hosea 5:12.

Yet there is a common technique – ‘what do you see?’

Every metaphor is an act of concealment, leading to new discovery.

The act of discovery itself adds a further hiddenness to the world: Proverbs 25:2-3

### 4. *Hiddenness and interpretation in modern thought*

Reasons for hiddenness of meaning in the world:

- (1) The complexity of the world.
- (2) The relation between text and author. In any written text the human author is present in a strange way – absent and present – authorial intentions are hidden in the text. Meaning depends on the text itself, and on what readers bring to it.

So God is a hidden presence in the world: divine intentions are hidden in the signs.

The mystery of the world is amplified by the mystery of persons who interpret it.

(3) The nature of a sign as temporary and fugitive – emptying itself out, about to vanish away

Two questions: (a) How can the human self be prevented from disappearing?

(b) How can an elusive world of fragile signs witness to God as author of the signs?

These questions may be approached by way of another trail from the wise: the capacity of a simile/metaphor to disturb.

### 5. *Disruption and empathy*

Unexpected correspondences between the natural world and human experience create a 'gap' in interpretation that demands to be filled.

This calls for empathy and involvement of the whole person – so creating deeper participation in the world, in other persons, and finally in God as mystery.

Jesus uses surprising images like this: empathy is required to see the Kingdom of God.

Consequences:

(1) Participation in the triune God (as final author) enables us to interpret the signs.

(2) The human self as a sign shares in God's act of self-communication.

So the self vanishes for the sake of the other, and possesses itself even as it loses itself ('the one who loses his life will gain it').

(3) Signs point to God by drawing us into participation in God.

### 6. *Trinity and disturbance*

To think of the persons in God as 'relationships' is a surprising and disturbing metaphor, which creates empathy.

This also requires other images: for example, interweaving (*perichoresis*), dance, flow.

God is eternally committed to signs and text.

### 7. *Sign and reference to the world*

What is the relation between different systems of signs – and especially between the 'world of the text' and the 'world as text'? Does a written text refer to a world outside itself?

If human interpreters participate in God's movements, then their words must refer to the created world.

Written texts point to the world *as it might be* (Paul Ricoeur) – the possible precedes the actual, because we participate in a God of possibilities.

Signs are not messages but places where the Creator is presence in an active way: speaking, living, giving, drawing us into the divine life.

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