In Search of Divine Wisdom: Perspectives on the Church and MCC from Old Testament Wisdom[1]

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As one form of the church in ministry, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) has wrestled with how to describe and understand the relationship between the particular faith tradition from which it emerges on the one hand, and its engaged stance beyond this community on the other. Unfortunately, these two options can sometimes be portrayed as distinct or even mutually exclusive: *either* MCC should remain faithful to its particular Mennonite perspective *or* it should adopt a more generic, inclusive perspective in order to broaden its appeal and potential influence.

Supporters of the first option may place a high priority on explicitly articulating the theological basis for their work, and may prove somewhat hesitant to cooperate with other organizations or groups that do not share such an orientation. Those more inclined to the second option often highly value relationships with others interested in similar issues, and may see an explicitly theological orientation as an unnecessary stumbling block to such partnerships. Understood within such a framework, the particularity of the Mennonite tradition may be seen by some as dispensable baggage that MCC should throw overboard, while others may insist upon the centrality of a theologically explicit perspective and view anything less as compromised and flawed.

I believe such a choice reflects a false dichotomy that should be dismantled, and suggest that Old Testament wisdom provides a valuable resource for moving beyond such an impasse. A robust view of biblical wisdom offers a perspective for understanding and articulating how the church and its organizations embody a particular view of the Christian gospel, while recognizing that divine wisdom also lies beyond the church. Instead of requiring a decision between two incompatible options, wisdom and particularity coexist in a dynamic relationship that moves in both directions. Deepening our understanding of, and commitment to, the particularity of

the Christian gospel leads us to live out this particularity, which in turn reflects a distinctive form of wisdom, while modeling alternative practices and engaging in debate, even without explicit theological articulation, prompts interest in our particularity by people outside the church. In effect, lived particularity embodies wisdom, and embodied wisdom testifies to particularity.

In this paper I discuss three aspects of OT wisdom that prove especially relevant for the church and its organizations such as MCC about the relationship between wisdom and particularity. First, the OT provides examples where wisdom is recognized as such beyond cultural, ethnic, national, and religious boundaries. Second, the OT addresses specific issues in both a particular mode that explicitly links them to a broader narrative and a wisdom mode that participates in an inter-national, inter-cultural, and inter-religious pursuit of wise living in which theological particularity remains implicit. Third, Deuteronomy describes the essential link between its particular perspective and the wisdom it reflects, and insists that the locus for this wisdom lies in a committed, obedient people. After discussing these elements and their concrete implications, I briefly reflect on my experience with restorative justice and point to specific MCC program areas to illustrate the interpretive potential of this perspective.

As an expression of the church's ministry, MCC can challenge the broader Christian body and the "world" both to move beyond mere tribalism and to avoid adopting a generic or a-religious perspective. A major challenge, however, lies in recognizing that MCC is not uniquely called to this task but does so as part of the broader church. This suggests that MCC should not simply seek to develop, reflect, and embody its own wisdom based on its laudable 90-year history, but should rather see itself as yet another way in which the church with its 2,000 years of history and experience seeks to embody the gospel in our time and place.

Recognizing Wisdom Beyond Boundaries

The Bible portrays Solomon as renowned for his wisdom,[2] and in so doing provides a remarkably broad perspective on what "wisdom" entails. The biblical narrative associates Solomon with judicial acumen (1 Kings 3:16-28); literary and musical composition (1 Kings 4:32); and knowledge of

the natural world, including biology, zoology, botany, and the like (1 Kings 4:33). In a paradigmatic account of his wisdom, the Queen of Sheba arrives in Jerusalem with her impressive retinue in order to test him.

Though often unnoticed, 1 Kings 10 portrays an intriguing encounter between *two* intellectual giants, since the passage assumes the Queen of Sheba, as someone capable of testing Solomon, to be wise herself. While she comes ready to ask "all that was in her heart/mind" (v. 2), Solomon responds to all of her queries. The account then states that the Queen "sees all of the wisdom of Solomon," which is then listed: "the house that he had built, the food of his table, the seating of his officials, and the attendance of his servants, their clothing, his valets, and his burnt offerings that he offered at the house of the LORD" (vv. 4-5). This list broadens still further the categories of wisdom associated with Solomon to include architecture, cuisine, administration, fashion, and even religious observance and ritual. Upon witnessing this impressive array of knowledge and insight, the Queen is left breathless ("there was no more spirit/wind/breath in her," v. 5).

Two elements of this account stand out. First, the Queen of Sheba is able to both test and recognize Solomon's wisdom *as an outsider*. Second, and related to the first, there is no indication that the Queen converts to follow the Israelite God. Indeed, her response suggests the opposite: "Blessed be the LORD *your* (not my/our) God . . . " (v. 9). Thus, while both the narrative introduction and conclusion make sure to attribute Solomon's wisdom to God (1 Kings 10:1, 23-24), the Queen recognizes it without subsequently becoming a worshiper of the LORD. In effect, this account provides an example where divine wisdom is seen and even praised by someone outside the boundaries of a particular social, cultural, national, ethnic, and faith community.

While we may celebrate the idea that others could recognize the wisdom of an ancient Israelite king and perhaps, by extension, our own faith tradition, we should note that such recognition can move in the opposite direction as well. Though much ink was spilled in the last century debating its Solomonic authorship, the book of Proverbs itself is attributed both to Solomon and to other sources.[3] Though these latter named figures remain largely unknown, an entire section of Proverbs appears to derive from a foreign, Egyptian source. Ever since its publication in 1923, the "Instruction

of Amenemope"[4] has prompted great debate because of its apparent similarity to Proverbs 22:17-24:22 in vocabulary, theme, setting, and style. I will not rehearse the comparison here but only quote the conclusion reached by an eminent OT scholar: "As a basic observation it may be said that there is practically unanimous agreement that the work of Amenemope influenced the collection that begins in Prov. 22:17."[5] Whatever the nature of this influence, it is significant that Proverbs draws upon this Egyptian document, since it demonstrates that "foreign" material was accepted as wise and brought into the Bible itself.

However, while most scholars agree that this section of Proverbs derives in some way from the "Instruction of Amenemope," it would be a mistake to see it as the mechanical copying of material from an Egyptian source or to portray it as a pale imitation. Rather, this passage reflects both a partial incorporation of foreign wisdom and a process of selection, shaping, and reorientation. In effect, Proverbs recognizes wisdom "out there," but evaluates and incorporates it within its own system and tradition. To deny a connection between these two documents, or simply to identify commonalities without noting key differences, fails to acknowledge this element of discernment.

Some people may be comfortable with the idea that the Queen of Sheba recognized Solomon's wisdom but then balk at the notion that elements of Egyptian wisdom were *also* recognized as wise and even incorporated into the Bible itself. Others may enjoy the possibility that foreign material was included in the Bible and employ this to downplay the particularity or uniqueness of the latter, or to imply that religions or cultures are ultimately compatible or even fundamentally the same. Neither perspective proves adequate, however. On the one hand, as a community that believes in a creator God who forms *all* people in the divine image, we should not be surprised to encounter wisdom in the traditions and teachings of others, whether in the polytheistic context of ancient Egypt or in other religious traditions or secular societies in our own day. On the other hand, concentrating solely on similarities minimizes or even fails to see the significant differences between these documents and their broader contexts.

Thus, OT wisdom presents a double challenge and opportunity for the contemporary church and its organizations such as MCC. The Queen of

Sheba account underscores the possibility that wisdom may be tested and recognized beyond the limits of our community, while Proverbs provides a biblical warrant to seek, recognize, and critically discern divine wisdom wherever it may be found, inside our particular faith community/tradition and beyond its boundaries. Ultimately, true wisdom derives from God, even if and when this is not recognized by those who reflect it; at the same time not everything purported to be wise "out there" is so. While the potential of divine wisdom exists within other traditions, this possibility must be discerned and evaluated in light of the revelation we have received.[6]

Engaged in Dual Discourses

Like the double challenge noted above, the OT also values distinct modes of articulation that prove relevant here. As has long been recognized, the Pentateuch provides an intriguing mixture of narrative and legal precepts. Rather than disconnected elements, legal material lies embedded within the narrative plot of the Pentateuch, as reflected immediately in the introduction to the Ten Words (commandments): "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me . . ." (Exodus 20:2-3). This introduction places the legal material to follow within the context of deliverance described in the preceding narrative, and thus presents the giving of the law as the culmination of the Israelites' march from bondage – not into individualistic freedom but into *true* freedom, which consists of serving God and obeying the divine will.

Connections to this broader story are not limited to the law's introduction. The legal material itself also appeals to this broader context in motivational clauses stating *why* these laws should be followed. To cite one striking example: "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien *for you were aliens in the land of Egypt* . . ." (Ex. 22:21). In effect, appeals to the larger narrative provide a precedent and motivation to listen and obey. As this statement and many others indicate, law is not a negative counterpoint to grace in the OT, but rather obedience implies a living out of the deliverance already experienced. While people often grant that biblical law is embedded in the "great story" of God's people, this narrative also leads to the giving of the law as yet another instantiation of grace. If we

want to speak of a narrativizing of law, we must also see that the Pentateuch legalizes its narrative.[7]

In contrast, wisdom material reflects a distinct mode of articulation. Where biblical legal material and the prophets frequently refer to the patriarchs/matriarchs, the Exodus account, wilderness wandering, and other aspects of salvation history, this entire motif is notably absent from Proverbs. The word "Egypt," for instance, appears only once in the book, and then in an adjectival rather than storied manner: "I have decked my couch with coverings, colored spreads of *Egyptian* linen . . ." (Prov. 7:16). In Proverbs references to the distinctive Israelite narrative or story characteristic of Pentateuch and prophetic material has all but disappeared – or at least has become implicit rather than explicit.

To cite one example, Deuteronomy and Proverbs each address the issue of removing boundary markers twice and, in doing so, illustrate the contrast between the mode of articulation each reflects:

'Particular' mode (Pentateuch)	'Wisdom' mode (Proverbs)
You must not move[8] your neighbor's boundary marker, set up by former generations, on the *property* that will be allotted to you *in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess*. (Deut. 19:14)	Do not move the ancient boundary marker that your ancestors set up. (Prov. 22:28)
"Cursed be anyone who moves a neighbor's boundary marker." All the people shall say, "Amen!" (Deut. 27:17)	Do not move an ancient boundary marker or encroach on the fields of orphans, for their redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you. (Prov. 23:10-11)

Both of the verses in Deuteronomy reflect a direct, pivotal connection to the particular story of the Israelite people. While initially the first passage seems virtually parallel to its counterpart in Proverbs, the second part uses several key terms related to both the promise and eventual entry into the land. First, the term "property" (NRSV) or "inheritance" (KJV, NAS) appears repeatedly to depict the shift from landless wandering to occupation

beyond the Jordan River, with Numbers and Deuteronomy anticipating this divine gift and Joshua describing the fulfillment of the promise.[9] Whereas "inheritance" focuses on the nature of the land as a divine gift, the verb "possess" depicts the Israelites' entry into the land and their role in actively claiming the promise.[10] Finally, reference to "*the* land" linked to these two key terms confirms that this verse does not reflect a generic usage but rather one linked to the Abrahamic promise of land in Genesis (Gen. 12:1, 7; 15:7, 18), where the latter two terms also appear together:

> Then he said to him [Abram], "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you *this land to possess*." (Gen. 15:7)[11]

Appearing in a key scene near the end of the book, the second verse warning against moving a boundary marker in Deuteronomy also reflects the narrative plot of the Pentateuch. Here Moses gathers the people together for a covenant ceremony to prepare for crossing the Jordan. The people's response, "Amen," signals their commitment to these teachings and acknowledges the consequences of neglecting them. Thus, where the initial passage signalled its connection to "salvation history" through its use of several key terms, the second appears within a pivotal moment of the narrative itself.

In contrast, neither case in Proverbs reflects a link to the particular, ongoing narrative of the Israelite people. What's more, both of these verses in Proverbs also appear in the section linked to the "Instruction of Amenemope" earlier, and appear to have a parallel there as well.

Amenemope 6, 7:12-15	Proverbs 23:10-11
Do not move markers on the borders of a field or alter the position of the measuring line. Do not be greedy for a cubit of land or encroach on the boundaries of a widow.[12]	Do not move an ancient boundary marker or encroach on the fields of orphans, for their redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you.

The Proverbs passage refers to a strong "redeemer" or "avenger" (*go'el*) who may intervene on behalf of the orphan, and so reinforces the

earlier warning that the LORD will act on behalf of the grieved party (Prov. 22:23). While other material here has direct parallels in Amenemope, this earlier verse is unique to Proverbs and reorients the material under the sovereignty of the LORD. Nonetheless, while reference to the LORD would certainly call to mind the Exodus account for an Israelite audience – after all, this is the foundational narrative in which the name "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be" is revealed to Moses (Ex. 3) – Proverbs does not make any explicit reference to the particularity of the tradition. It is worth noting that Amenemope also shows concern with the plight of the orphan and the widow, a common theme in Ancient Near Eastern material more generally. Like the landmark issue, this concern is not unique to the Bible, but the *reason* for it is frequently linked in a unique way to the particularity of the tradition, as we noted in reference to the motivational clauses within the legal material.

Thus, not only do the passages regarding boundary markers in Proverbs lack an explicit connection to the "salvation history" routinely referred to in the Pentateuch and prophets, they have direct counterparts within the Egyptian document where concern with removing landmarks also appears. Given Israel's Ancient Near Eastern context, such similarities should not come as a surprise;[13]such a connection should not be downplayed or treated as secondary but celebrated. While it would be a mistake to suggest that this reflects a universalism where all religions or faith systems are fundamentally similar, it does provide a point of contact where external wisdom was recognized as something to be cherished.

As we have seen, warnings against removing boundary markers appear in both Proverbs and Deuteronomy as well as in the Egyptian "Instruction of Amenemope." Where the legal material explicitly and repeatedly lays out the particular theological grounding of its tradition, in Proverbs this link remains understated and implicit. Indeed, the lack of such connections reflects a wisdom mode also found in Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Job that contrasts significantly with the particular mode of the Pentateuch. While this has historically led wisdom material to receive less attention and to be seen as less important, this need not be the case. Rather, the book of Proverbs participates in a broad international, inter-religious wisdom discussion. Indeed, this wisdom mode provides a biblical

framework for our contemporary discernment of wise living and for joining in common cause with non-Christians on issues of mutual concern, whether ecological matters, peace-building, or whatever else, neither insisting on prior theological agreement or conversion nor sinking into a lowest common denominator approach that denies particularity.

The contrast I have outlined challenges the church and its organizations like MCC to articulate arguments in distinct modes of discourse. On the one hand, we must articulate our common faith and pursue its implications, taking the theological claims of the Christian tradition seriously without diluting its language or equating rich faith terminology with generic so-called equivalents. On the other hand, in certain contexts we may do well to adopt a wisdom mode of discourse that temporarily puts aside explicit appeals to the internal particularities of the tradition. This does not imply rejecting the particular (unless "temporarily" becomes "permanently"), but rather moves from an explicit to an implicit depiction.

Wisdom Embodied in a People

Deuteronomy links the possibility of wisdom to the particularities of tradition – and the locus of this link is the people. Two key verses from Deuteronomy 4 provide the basis for our discussion:

> I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. 6 You must observe them diligently, for ***this*** *will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples*, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" (Deut. 4:5-6; emphasis added.)

A few things are worth noting here. First, while we might expect the term "those" near the beginning of v. 6, the term "this" is significant. What draws the attention of the nations are not the commandments themselves or even the story that is shared. First and foremost, the nations respond to observing these commands embodied in the life of Israel. Only then, once *shown* their wisdom, do the nations hear the statutes and proclaim "what a great nation." They come to recognize the wisdom of Israel not by what is "on the books/scrolls" but by its incarnate obedience.

Second, the nations do not respond to specific individuals but to a

"wise and discerning *people*." Though not obvious in English, the pronoun "you" in v. 6 is plural, which emphatically underscores this communal element. Wisdom visible beyond this particular group is embodied in life but also in community.

Third, the word "hear" can be understood in two ways. The first way sees the nations recognizing Israel's wisdom through the life of the people and then hearing the statutes. However, the term "hear" (*shama'*) is the same word as "obey" in biblical Hebrew, so that while we may tend to separate these elements, in Deuteronomy cognitive listening is not distinct from enacted obedience. If you hear something but do not obey it, then you did not "hear."[14] Thus, it is possible that the nations come to regard these statutes as wise not only by hearing them but by *really* hearing them, or obeying them themselves. In this reading, discerning wisdom moves beyond a spectator sport to an invitational engagement, where recognizing the wisdom of this way of life includes the implicit invitation to join in.

Deut. 4 describes how the nations will regard Israel as a "wise and discerning people" through its obedience to the laws of the Pentateuch; this group embodies its wisdom by living out a distinct calling. Since the wisdom recognized by a watching world lies in the articulation and enfleshment of this way of life, neglecting this particularity results in the loss of wisdom, as is demonstrated later in the book.[15]

This discussion challenges the church and its organizations like MCC in several ways. First, by living and working in a particular manner out of its distinctly Christian – and even specifically Mennonite – perspective, the church embodies wisdom that may be seen as such by "the nations." Deuteronomy encourages us to be confident that we have wisdom to share and that, as in the Queen of Sheba account, this may be recognized beyond ourselves. Second, it warns against allowing the particularity of this perspective to be lost. It is one thing to consciously, strategically, and temporarily allow particular theological claims rooting wisdom to be implicit rather than explicit. It is quite another for a wisdom mode to supplant the particular by making it secondary, optional, or replacing it altogether. Deuteronomy warns that the danger is, once this root is diminished or forgotten, that the wisdom associated with it disappears as well.

Perhaps the most significant challenge Deuteronomy raises is its

insistence that wisdom is embodied in a people. For MCC, this raises the issue of self-understanding: is MCC its own people or is it *part* of a people (the church) called to embody divine wisdom in the world? While Deuteronomy outlines a division of labor where distinct groups have different roles, responsibilities, and expectations (Aaronide priests, Levites, kings, prophets, and judges, to name a few), there is no para-people who embody this particular wisdom while running alongside but without being part of Israel.

Thus, this perspective suggests that it is problematic to consider an organization like MCC to be a para-church agency – one that runs parallel to, but is not 'of,' the church. To substitute MCC for the church or to distinguish its wisdom from that of the church, introduces an unnecessary tension that effects an impoverished view of the church and its calling. While a persistent temptation, this perspective should be avoided.

Wisdom at Work

Mennonites have long been at the forefront of what was initially identified as "Restorative Justice." I am writing this paper in Waterloo, Ontario, where the innovative actions of Dave Worth and his colleagues led to the first Victim Offender Reconciliation Program (VORP). In what follows I describe how the wisdom perspective described above has been helpful for understanding my own journey with respect to restorative justice, and I suggest how it may offer a useful perspective for considering other areas of MCC's involvement as well.

Restorative Justice:
Reflections on Searching for and Encountering Wisdom

After studying at Canadian Mennonite Bible College, I applied to work with the John Howard Society, an agency working with offenders in local penitentiaries. During my interview I was informed that the organization was committed to "restorative justice" and I was asked to describe this approach. Though I had never worked in the field before, I summarized what I had learned about OT law in a course with Waldemar Janzen – taking out all the God-language and explicit references to biblical material. At the conclusion of the interview I was told that I had responded to this question better than any other applicant and was immediately offered the job. Looking back, this

experience seems to reflect a successful attempt at moving from a particular to a wisdom mode.

Upon accepting the position I was given Howard Zehr's book *Changing Lenses*,[16] which articulated the agency's orienting perspective. Zehr contrasts a retributive model of justice with a "restorative" one that he explicitly derives from the Bible, drawing heavily on OT law. While I was surprised that a secular NGO would adopt its approach from an explicitly Christian resource, here was an example where the wisdom of a faith-filled perspective was found compelling beyond its own particular community.

In my role with the John Howard Society I made presentations regarding restorative justice for various audiences. When addressing a church community I would explain how this approach to justice emerged from an understanding of Exodus 22 and its appeal to "repay/pay back/make restitution" (which, as I learned later, translates the verb form of the Hebrew noun *shalom*). In addressing lawyers or parole officers I would describe how an approach seeing crime as an offense against a victim that must be addressed makes more sense than one portraying it as an offense against the state (and in Canada, the Queen!) that must be punished. I would provide statistics about recidivism rates and the inordinate cost of imprisonment, and I would push for a view of the criminal justice system that moved beyond portraying it negatively as a system whose function is to "lock up the bad guys" to depicting it positively as a system whose goal is to promote a safer society. In these and other ways I argued that a restorative perspective offers an improved alternative over the court system and its frequent use of incarceration as a default "solution" to the problem of crime.

Although I advocated for restorative justice in both contexts, the theological basis for doing so was explicit in one and "bracketed out" in the other.[17] For those with a common faith basis, the Christian and specifically Mennonite tradition provided a point of contact and allowed for a profound engagement of the Bible and each other with respect to a pressing contemporary issue. For us, restorative justice was not simply a strategy to be employed but an approach that grew out of and continued to reflect an attempt to live faithfully in light of our biblical tradition. At the same time, appeals to biblical principles were not convincing in a court of law or with its officers. Indeed, a whiff of theology in this second context may well have been enough to immediately disqualify it from consideration,

even if the rationale and perspective of restorative justice proved convincing. For me, this experience was a poignant example of being engaged in "dual discourses."

Later, I was exposed to aboriginal perspectives on restorative justice. Reading *Returning to the Teachings* by Rupert Ross,[18] I was struck by how much the Canadian aboriginal viewpoint he articulated resonated with material in Zehr's book, and how different both of these positions were from the dominant criminal justice paradigm in North America. The communal perspective and focus on addressing wrongs done to the victim contrasted sharply with the common emphasis on individual rights and the clash of lawyers, as well as the goal of punishment, method of incarceration, and relative silencing of both victim and offender within the court system. Encountering "circle sentencing" as practiced in the Northwest Territories and "family group conferencing" from Australia and New Zealand – both of which grew out of local aboriginal perspectives – also made a significant impression on me,[19] since these approaches saw a broader social context than mediations between one victim and one offender. I was left to ponder how insights from these approaches could benefit the VORP model, where the wider circle of those affected by an offense was much less involved or even recognized. This interaction with viewpoints derived from beyond my tradition, in this case aboriginal perspectives from Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, enhanced my perspective. In doing so, it also provided a concrete example of how "foreign" wisdom could be accepted as such, and prompted me to return and re-evaluate my own tradition.

Potential links to OT wisdom do not end there. During a brief stint working with young offenders, troubled teens, and teenage mothers, I was constantly asked by co-workers what prompted my interest in conflict resolution. Their questions offered an opportunity to state explicitly how my commitment grew out of my faith and worldview – in which they proved quite interested. I was persistently thrust into witnessing to my faith, an experience which showed me that adopting a wisdom mode represents neither a one-way street nor a matter of shoving faith under the carpet to avoid inconveniencing or offending others. Rather, in my experience adopting a wisdom mode often prompts people to ask about the basis of

your commitment and gives you a chance to articulate what grounds your perspective and practices. Like the nations in Deut. 4, others may recognize certain practices as wise, which then prompts interest in the undergirding faith(fulness) from which the practices emerge.[20] Rather than choosing between two poles, lived faith and wisdom represent two sides of the same coin and should not – cannot! – be separated.

As this overview attests, OT wisdom has helped me to understand my experience in the field of restorative justice. It has also strengthened my attempt to live wisely according to my own tradition, to recognize wisdom beyond it, and to make common cause on specific issues with both Christian and non-Christian colleagues.

Possibilities for Further Exploration

The preceding description of OT wisdom not only resonates with my own interaction with restorative justice but proves helpful for understanding the work and vision of the church. I believe such a perspective also sheds light on different areas of MCC's involvement and its own self-understanding.

For instance, a wisdom perspective has explanatory value for considering MCC's role at the forefront of the expanding "fair trade" movement. First, the idea of developing self-help products emerged from a particular tradition, and it is worth exploring further what elements within the Mennonite tradition gave rise to this idea and its implementation. Second, while fair trade emerged from the Mennonite tradition and especially the work of MCC, this approach has gained traction outside this particular community, so that other groups, organizations, and agencies have adopted, adapted, and developed their own versions of it. People from outside the tradition have seen the value and wisdom of fair trade and have increasingly adopted it as their own. What grew from Mennonite soil has spread beyond this "experimental plot," to use a phrase from John Howard Yoder.[21]

And the list goes on. As an arm of the church, MCC has been involved in development work, agricultural innovation, peace-building efforts and training, human rights advocacy, environmental concerns, aboriginal issues, inter-faith dialogue, cooperation across religious traditions, and many other things. In each area, the issues and tensions discussed above appear, so that, in my view, a wisdom perspective may well offer a helpful way for

conceptualizing and articulating MCC's role and approach.

The wisdom perspective insists that we resist a false dichotomy, where MCC and the broader church must *either* be faithful to (and promote) a Mennonite Christian perspective *or* be open to insights beyond this particular tradition. Similarly, it guards against the temptation for MCC to see itself as its own people or as a para-people that runs alongside, but is not ultimately 'of,' the church. In contrast, it is important to realize that the impetus for engaging in such issues has been nothing other than attempting to live faithfully and wisely as followers of Jesus. And, as this paper suggests, it is also important to see that the OT remains a vital witness for doing so. Indeed, one crucial way to follow Jesus' example is to recognize the ongoing significance of what we call the "Old Testament" but what for Jesus were the only Scriptures he had.

Conclusion

The OT wisdom tradition offers a helpful perspective for considering the complex relationship between valuing the particularity of the Christian, and specifically Mennonite, tradition and being open to discover divine wisdom beyond it. As OT wisdom material attests, Ancient Israel participated in an international, inter-cultural, and inter-religious dialogue in search of wise living that recognized the permeability of such boundaries to divine wisdom. By extension, this insight pushes us to accept the possibility that our wisdom can be recognized beyond our own tradition, and also requires us to be willing to discern wisdom in the traditions of others.

The OT reflects both particular and wisdom modes of discourse. In contrast to the Pentateuch's repeated reference to the particularities of the Israelite tradition, Proverbs' wisdom mode allows its faith commitments to remain implicit. This provides a biblical precedent for cooperation with other people, cultures, and religious groups on issues of mutual import without insisting upon prior theological agreement or conversion, but also without resorting to a lowest common denominator. Finally, Deuteronomy insists that wisdom is embodied in a people committed to discern and follow the divine will, so it is vital to understand that distinctive wisdom requires particularity, which in turn provides the basis for discerning divine wisdom beyond itself.

At the outset I identified a tension between seeing the Mennonite particularity of the church and its organizations such as MCC as expendable and insisting that an explicit theological orientation be central. I have suggested that the difficulty does not lie in choosing one option over the other but in refusing to split the two asunder. By embodying Mennonite/Anabaptist theological perspectives and acting as a catalyst for recognizing divine wisdom lying outside the Christian fold, the church and its agencies such as MCC can demonstrate that these are not mutually exclusive but integrally related.

Embodying particularity inevitably leads to interaction with those beyond ourselves, and this interaction gives us an opportunity to re-evaluate our own tradition. Making a unique contribution to a broad wisdom discussion requires particularity, while the distinctiveness of the Christian tradition leads us to search for ways in which our perspective may be enriched by persons and perspectives outside the church. While one side or the other may be stressed in specific contexts or with respect to specific issues, the dynamic relationship between wisdom and particularity should be a significant source of creativity and inspiration – one to be celebrated rather than feared.

Notes

[1] I originally presented a version of this paper at the "Table of Sharing" conference celebrating the 90th anniversary of the Mennonite Central Committee in Akron, Pennsylvania on June 13-14, 2010. My thanks go to Alain Epp Weaver who coordinated the conference, the many participants who interacted with an earlier version of the material presented here, and the anonymous peer-reviewers of the present version of the paper.

[2] There has been ongoing debate regarding the historicity of such attributions, including the claim that there is no historical connection between Solomon and wisdom (see James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, revised and enlarged [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998], 35-44). Our interest here lies in the biblical portrayal of Solomon rather than in an historical reconstruction.

[3] Headings within Proverbs refer to several people, including "the officials of King Hezekiah" (25:1); Agur, son of Jakeh (30:1); and King Lemuel, whose contribution is further described as "an oracle *that his mother taught him*" (31:1). Such notations precede contemporary authorship debates by millennia and complicate simplistic views of Solomon's relationship

to the book. Even in contemporary settings, the role and function of an 'author' of a cookbook or some other collected anthology may well be different from that of a novel, history book, or science experiment. For an overview of complications related to contemporary views of authorship, see Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 101-20.

[4] James Bennett Pritchard, "The Instruction of Amen-Em-Opet," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), 421-24.

[5] Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 1998), 290.

[6] While the focus here is on OT wisdom, the prominence, significance, and implications of the NT's identification of Jesus Christ with both cosmic wisdom and the wisdom of God incarnate (*logos, sophia,* etc.) often goes under-appreciated. For a helpful attempt at tackling this issue, see Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, "The Invisible Curriculum – On Being Wisdom's School," in *Mennonite Education in a Post-Christian World: Essays Presented at the Consultation on Higher Education, Winnipeg, June 1997*, ed. Harry Huebner (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 1998), 129-43.

[7] For a Jewish scholar's brief but compelling critique of how Christians tend to play narrative against law, along with an alternative proposal, see Adele Berlin, "Numinous *Nomos*: On the Relationship Between Narrative and Law," in *"A Wise and Discerning Mind": Essays in Honor of Burke O. Long*, ed. Saul M. Olyan and Robert C. Culley, Brown Judaic Studies, no. 325 (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2000), 25-31.

[8] Underlining marks where the phrase "move/remove a boundary marker" appears in both contexts using exactly the same terms. The Hebrew verb form is slightly different, which accounts for the difference in translation between "you must/shall not" and "do not." Italics have been added for emphasis.

[9] The term *nachalah*, the noun form of the term "allotted," appears 224 times in the OT and 46, 25, and 50 times in Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua respectively. Thus, more than half of the term's appearances occur within these three books to identify the plots of land beyond the Jordan described as "inheritance" to various Israelite groups.

[10] The verb *yarash* appears 71, 29, and 27 times in Deuteronomy, Joshua, and Judges respectively, again representing more than half of its 232 occurrences in the entire OT. The prominence of this term here is further reinforced when contrasted with 11 occurrences in the Psalms, the book with the next highest total. Though very significant, the issue of God commanding the occupation of the land and the slaughtering of the Canaanites lies beyond the scope of this paper. For a classic early study in this regard, see Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980). For an excellent recent effort, see the forthcoming commentary by Gordon H. Matties, *Joshua*, Believers Church Bible Commentary Series (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2011).

[11] Although obscured in translation, the Hebrew idiom employed here ("... the land, this one...") explicitly refers to "the land," and then further emphasizes it with the indicative pronoun "this."

[12] The translation here is taken from Nili Shupak, "The Instruction of Amenemope and Proverbs 22:17-24:22 from the Perspective of Contemporary Research," in *Seeking Out the*

Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays Offered to Honor Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday, ed. Ronald L. Troxel, Kelvin G. Friebel, and Dennis R. Magary (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 218. Determining the extent of correspondence between the two documents proves more complicated than comparing Deuteronomy and Proverbs, since Amenemope is written in a different language and writing system. The ANET translation differs slightly, as it begins with "Do not carry off the landmark at the boundaries of the arable land...." (Pritchard, "The Instruction of Amen-Em-Opet," 422).

[13] For various precedents to biblical material in the broader Ancient Near Eastern context and an attempt to engage the theological implications, see Peter Enns, "The Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern Literature," in *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 23-70.

[14] Thus, the *shema'* ("Hear O Israel, the LORD our God is LORD alone...," Deut. 6:4) does not refer just to cognitive belief but represents a call for embodied obedience. It could be translated "*Obey,* O Israel...." While the NRSV suggests that the blessings and curses in Deut. 28 depend on whether the people will "obey" (Deut. 28:1, 2, 13) or "not obey" (Deut. 28:15, 45), the term here is the same as "hear" in chapters 4, 6, and elsewhere.

[15] In direct contrast to the present passage, Israel is called a "foolish and senseless (literalistically translated, 'not-wise') people" in Deut. 32:6, precisely because it has forgotten its particularity.

[16] Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005).

[17] I have adopted the phrase "bracketed out" from my former advisor, Gerald T. Sheppard, to describe how the internal particularity of the tradition has been consciously and temporarily removed to engage in what I have called "a wisdom mode." For an example of his use of this phrase, see Gerald T. Sheppard, "Wisdom," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, ed. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 1074-82.

[18] Rupert Ross, *Returning to the Teachings: Exploring Aboriginal Justice* (Toronto: Penguin, 2006).

[19] Kay Pranis, Barry Stuart, and Mark Wedge, *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community* (St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press, 2003); Gale Burford and Joe Hudson, eds., *Family Group Conferencing: New Directions in Community-Centered Child and Family Practice* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2000).

[20] From an OT perspective, playing lived "works" off against a cognitive "faith" is largely non-sensical. The Hebrew term often translated as "truth" (*'emeth*) and then interpreted in an abstract, philosophical sense shares the same root as *'emunah*, which means 'faith*fulness*.' While I suspect the same could be said with respect to the NT and Paul's appeal to faith as well, I will leave this issue to my NT colleagues. Once recognized, this link between 'truth' and 'faithfulness' suggests that both faith and making a "truth claim" requires discipleship, while embodied particularity also makes a claim about what is true.

[21] Malinda Berry's paper on "organic theology" presented at the MCC conference in June 2010 suggests a similar dynamic with respect to several cookbooks that have emerged from the Mennonite tradition. What she describes as organic theology resonates well with what I describe here as "a wisdom mode." See her "Extending the Theological Table: MCC's World

Community Cookbooks as Organic Theology" in Alain Epp Weaver, ed., *A Table of Sharing: Mennonite Central Committee and the Expanding Networks of Mennonite Identity* (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2011), 284-309.

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