

Scriptural Reasoning 'Texts' and 'Traditions of Reading'

WISDOM & FOLLY

“WISDOM & FOLLY” – SCRIPTURES

Jewish Text 1

Devarim 4: 5-8

ה רָאֵה לְמַדְתִּי אֶתְכֶם חֻקִּים וּמִשְׁפָּטִים כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוִּי ה' אֱלֹהֵי קָדְשִׁי
לַעֲשׂוֹת כִּן בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם בָּאִים שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ.
ו וְשִׁמְרַתֶּם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם כִּי הוּא חֻכְמַתְכֶם וּבִינַתְכֶם לְעֵינֵי הָעַמִּים
אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁמְעוּן אֶת כָּל-הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה וְאָמְרוּ רַק עִם-חֻכְם וְנִבּוֹן
הַגּוֹי הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה.
ז כִּי מִי-גּוֹי גָּדוֹל אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ אֱלֹהִים קִרְבִּים אֵלָיו כִּי אֵל קָדְשׁ יִבּוֹ
בְּכָל-קְרָאָנוֹ אֵלָיו.
ח וּמִי גּוֹי גָּדוֹל אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ חֻקִּים וּמִשְׁפָּטִים צְדִיקִים כְּכֹל הַתּוֹרָה
הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם.

Deuteronomy 4: 5-8

⁵ See, I have taught you laws and rules as the Lord my God commanded me, to do thus in the land into which you are about to come to take hold of it. ⁶ And you shall keep and do [them], for that is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the peoples who will hear all these laws and will say, 'Only this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' ⁷ For what great nation is there that has a god so close to it like the Lord our God whenever we call upon Him? ⁸ And what great nation is there that has just laws and rules like all this Torah that I am setting before you today?

Glosses

- v. 5: 'laws and rules' - *chuqim umishpatim*. Hebrew is rich in synonyms for 'law'; these two words could also be translated as 'statutes' or 'precepts'. Traditional commentators often define the word *choq* as referring to commandments for which there is no apparent or rational reason, usually those associated with ritual.
- v. 6: 'for that is your wisdom and understanding' - *ki hi chokhmatkhem uvinatkhem*. *Chokhmah* ('wisdom') and *binah* ('understanding') appear often in the Tanakh, but also have an afterlife in the mediaeval and later Jewish mystical path known as kabbalah, where they represent the second and third highest aspects or attributes (*sefirot*) of God.

Jewish Text 2

Jeremiah 5: 20-25

כ הַגִּידוּ זֹאת בְּבֵית יַעֲקֹב וְהִשְׁמִיעוּהָ בִיהוּדָה לְאִמֹר .
כא שְׁמָעוּ-נָא זֹאת עִם סֹכְל וְאִין לֵב עֵינַיִם לָהֶם וְלֹא יִרְאוּ
אֲזַנַיִם לָהֶם וְלֹא יִשְׁמָעוּ .
כב הָאוֹתֵי לֹא-תִירְאוּ נְאֻם-ה' אִם מִפְּנֵי לֹא תִחִילוּ אֲשֶׁר-שִׁמְתִי
חֹל גְּבוּל לַיָּם חֶק-עוֹלָם וְלֹא יַעֲבֹרְנָהוּ וַיִּתְגַּעְשׂוּ וְלֹא יוֹכְלוּ
וְהָמוּ גִלְיוֹ וְלֹא יַעֲבֹרְנָהוּ .
כג וְלַעֲם הַזֶּה הָיָה לֵב סוֹרֵר וּמוֹרָה סָרוּ וַיִּלְכוּ .
כד וְלֹא-אָמְרוּ בְּלִבָּבָם נִירָא נָא אֶת-ה' אֵל קִינוּ הַנְּתִן גִּשְׁמִים
וִירָה (יֹרָה) וּמִלְקוֹשׁ בָּעֵתוֹ שָׁבַעַת חֲקוֹת קִצִּיר יִשְׁמָר-לָנוּ .
כה עוֹנוֹתֵיכֶם הִטּוּ-אֵלֶּה וְחַטֵּאתֵיכֶם מָנְעוּ הַטּוֹב מִכֶּם .

Jeremiah 5: 20-25

- ²⁰ Say this to the House of Jacob
and announce it in Judah , saying:
²¹ Hear this, O foolish people,
who have no intelligence;
who have eyes but do not see,
who have ears but do not hear!
²² Should you not revere Me, says the Lord,
should you not tremble before Me,
Who set the sand as a boundary to the sea,
as a law for ever, that cannot be passed?
Though its waves rage, they cannot overcome,
though they roar, they cannot pass it.
²³ But this people have a rebellious and defiant heart;
they have turned aside and gone away.
²⁴ They have not said in their hearts,
'Let us revere the Lord our God,
Who gives the rain, early and late, in its time,
Who keeps for us the weeks set for harvest.'
²⁵ Your iniquities have turned these aside,
and your sins have withheld good from you.

Glosses

- v. 6: 'foolish people' - *am sakhal*. Hebrew has a rich vocabulary of words for folly, of which *sakhal* is one.
- v. 6: 'no intelligence' - *ein lev*. Literally 'no heart' -- in the Tanakh, the heart is the seat of intelligence, not of emotion (which is located in the kidneys).
- v. 22: God is characterized here as the One who set limits on the sea at creation, an act that symbolizes His unlimited power to set boundaries, both in nature and upon human behaviour.
- v. 23: 'rebellious and defiant heart' - *lev sorer umoreh*. These words echo the 'rebellious and defiant son' of Deuteronomy 21: 8, who refuses to listen to his parents and may be executed for his defiance. Quoted in this text, they evoke an image of the Jewish people as a disobedient child.
- v. 24: 'Who gives the rain, early and late, in its time' - *hanoten geshem yoreh umalkosh be'ito*. Another echo of Deuteronomy (11: 14), this time from the second paragraph of the Shema, the central creedal statement of Judaism. Made up of three paragraphs from the Torah (Deuteronomy 6: 4-9; 11: 13-21; Numbers 15: 37-41), the Shema proclaims the unity of God and commands us to love Him and remember His words. The second paragraph describes the benefits of obeying God's words and the punishments that will follow disobedience, including God's withholding of rain.

Jewish Text 3

Mishlei 3: 13-20

יג אֲשֶׁר־י אָדָם מָצָא חָכְמָה
וְאָדָם יָפִיק תְּבוּנָה.
יד כִּי טוֹב סִחְרָה מִסֶּחֶר-כֶּסֶף
וּמִחֲרוֹץ תְּבוּאָתָהּ.
טו יְקָרָה הִיא מִפְּנִיִּים (מִפְּנִינִים)
וְכָל-חֶפְצֶיךָ לֹא יִשְׁווּ-בָּהּ.
טז אֶרֶךְ יָמִים בִּימִינָהּ
בְּשֵׁמֹא אוֹלָה עֲשֶׂר וְכָבוֹד.
יז דִּרְכֶיהָ דִּרְכֵי-נֹעַם
וְכָל-נְתִיבוֹתֶיהָ שְׁלוֹם.
יח יֶעֶז-חַיִּים הִיא לַמַּחְזִיקִים בָּהּ
וְתִמְכֶיהָ מְאֹדָּה.
יט ה' בְּחָכְמָה יָסַד-אֶרֶץ
כּוֹנֵן שָׁמַיִם בְּתְבוּנָה.
כ בְּדַעְתּוֹ תְּהוֹמוֹת נִבְקָעוּ
וּשְׁחָקִים יִרְעֲפוּ-טָל.

Proverbs 3: 13-20

¹³ Happy is the man who finds wisdom,
and the man who obtains understanding.

¹⁴ Her value in trade is better than silver,
her yield, better than gold.

¹⁵ She is more precious than rubies,
all your possessions cannot equal her.

¹⁶ Length of days is in her right hand,
in her left, riches and honour.

¹⁷ Her paths are paths of pleasantness,
and all her ways are peace.

¹⁸ She is a tree of life to those who grasp her,
and he who holds fast to her is happy.

¹⁹ The Lord founded the earth by wisdom;

he established the sky with understanding;
²⁰ by His knowledge the depths burst asunder,
and the heavens dripped dew.

Glosses

- v. 13: understanding' - *tevunah*. From the same root as the word *binah*, and a synonym for it.
- vv. 17-18: These verses, traditionally understood as referring to the Torah, are sung in synagogue during the sabbath morning service, when the Torah scroll is replaced in the Ark after the week's portion has been read from it.

Jewish Text 4

Mishlei 18: 2-7

ב לֹא-יִחַפֵּץ כֶּסֶל בְּתַבּוּנָה
כִּי אִם-בְּהִתְגַּלּוֹת לְבוֹ.
ג כָּבוֹא-רָשָׁע בָּא גַם-בוֹז
וְעַם-קָלוֹן חֲרָפָה.
ד מִיָּם עֲמֻקִּים דְּבָרֵי פִי-אִישׁ
נֶחַל נֹבֵעַ מְקוֹר חֲכָמָה.
ה שְׂאֵת פְּנֵי-רָשָׁע לֹא-טוֹב
לְהִטּוֹת צְדִיק בַּמִּשְׁפָּט.
ו שִׁפְתֵי כֶּסֶל יִבְאוּ בְּרִיב
וּפְיוֹ לְמַהֲלָמוֹת יִקְרָא.
ז פִּי-כֶּסֶל מְחַתֵּה-לוֹ
וּשְׁפָתָיו מוֹקֵשׁ נַפְשׁוֹ.

Proverbs 18: 2-7

- ² A fool does not desire understanding,
but only to reveal his heart.
- ³ When the wicked man arrives, so does contempt,
with the rogue comes scorn.
- ⁴ Deep waters are the words of a man,
a flowing stream, a fount of wisdom.
- ⁵ To favour a wicked man is not good,
nor to lead astray the innocent man in judgement.
- ⁶ The lips of a fool lead to strife,
and his mouth invites blows.
- ⁷ The mouth of a fool is his ruin,
and his lips are a trap for him.

Glosses

v. 2: 'a fool' - *kesil*. Another word from the group of synonyms for fools and folly.

v. 2: 'to reveal his heart' - *behitgalot libo*. Since the heart is the seat of intelligence in the Tanakh, this could be rephrased as 'to show off his [supposed] intelligence'.

Christian Text

Corinthians 1: 17-29

17 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. ¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written,

'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'

20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

Glosses

- v. 19: 'the discerning' – *ton suneton*, lit. 'those who can put things together'; this can also be translated 'the prudent' or 'the clever'.
- v. 22: 'signs' – *semeia*, an outward (visible) indication of otherwise hidden truth or power. For this reason, the word can also mean 'miracle'—an act which is a special sign of the presence, activity, or intervention of God.
- v. 22: 'Greeks' – since *ethnoi* ('nations') appears in the next verse, the reference is probably to Gentiles in general.
- v. 24: 'those who are called' – *kletoi*; even though the gospel is addressed to everyone, Paul reserves the term *kletoi* to those who have accepted it. Paul frequently calls members of the church 'the called ones'.
- v. 26: 'according to worldly standards' – *kata sarka*, lit. 'according to the flesh', by which Paul means 'by the standards of fallen humanity'.

Islamic Text 1

[Qur'anic Arabic text to be added]

Surah Luqman ('Luqman', 31: 12-19)

¹² We bestowed (in the past) Wisdom on Luqman: 'Show gratitude to Allah.' Any who is (so) grateful does so to the profit of his own soul: but if any is ungrateful, verily Allah is independent of all wants, worthy of all praise.

¹³ Behold, Luqman said to his son by way of instruction: 'O my son! join not in worship (others) with Allah; for false worship is indeed the highest wrongdoing.'

¹⁴ And We have enjoined on man (to be good) to his parents: in hardship upon hardship did his mother bear him, and in two years was his weaning: (that you hear the command), 'Show gratitude to Me and to your parents: to Me is (your final) goal.

¹⁵ 'But if they strive to make you join in worship with Me things of which you have no knowledge, obey them not; yet bear them company in this life with justice (and consideration), and follow the way of those who turn to me (in love): in the end the return of you all is to Me, and I will tell you the truth (and meaning) of all that ye did.'

¹⁶ 'O my son!' (said Luqman), 'If there be (but) the weight of a mustard-seed and it were (hidden) in a rock, or (anywhere) in the heavens or on earth, Allah will bring it forth: for Allah understands the finest mysteries, (and) is well-acquainted (with them).

¹⁷ 'O my son! establish regular prayer, enjoin what is just, and forbid what is wrong: and bear with patient constancy whatever befalls you; for this is firmness (of purpose) in (the conduct of) affairs.

¹⁸ 'And swell not your cheek (out of pride) at men, nor walk in insolence through the earth; for Allah loves not any arrogant boaster.

¹⁹ 'And be moderate in your pace (of walking), and lower your voice; for the harshest of sounds without doubt is the braying of the ass.'

Glosses

ayah 12: 'gratitude' - *shukr*, from the root *sh-k-r*.

ayah 13: 'false worship' - *shirk*, from the root *sh-r-k*.

Islamic Text 2

[Qur'anic Arabic text to be added]

Surah al-Baqarah ('The Cow', 2: 8-18)

⁸ Of the people there are some who say: 'We believe in Allah and the Last Day'; but they do not (really) believe.

⁹ Fain would they deceive Allah and those who believe, but they only deceive themselves, and realise (it) not!

¹⁰ In their hearts is a disease; and Allah has increased their disease: and grievous is the penalty they (incur), because they are false (to themselves).

¹¹ When it is said to them: 'Make not mischief on the earth', they say: 'Why, we only want to make peace!'

¹² Of a surety, they are the ones who make mischief, but they realise (it) not.

¹³ When it is said to them: 'Believe as the others believe': they say: 'Shall we believe as the fools believe?' Nay, of a surety they are the fools, but they do not know.

¹⁴ When they meet those who believe, they say: 'We believe'; but when they are alone with their evil ones, they say: 'We are really with you: we (were) only jesting.'

¹⁵ Allah will throw back their mockery on them, and give them rope in their trespasses; so they will wander like blind ones (to and fro).

¹⁶ These are they who have bartered guidance for error: but their traffic is profitless, and they have lost true direction,

¹⁷ Their similitude is that of a man who kindled a fire; when it lighted all around him, Allah took away their light and left them in utter darkness. So they could not see.

¹⁸ Deaf, dumb, and blind, they will not return (to the path).

Islamic Text 3

[Qur'anic Arabic text to be added]

Surah al-Baqarah ('The Cow', 2: 142-5)

¹⁴² The fools among the people will say: 'What has turned them from the *qibla* to which they were used?' Say: To Allah belong both east and west: He guides whom He wills to a way that is straight.

¹⁴³ Thus, have We made of you a nation justly balanced, that you might be witnesses over the nations, and the Messenger a witness over yourselves; and We appointed the *qibla* to which you were used, only to test those who followed the Messenger from those who would turn on their heels (from the faith). Indeed it was (a change) momentous, except to those guided by Allah. And never would Allah make your faith of no effect. For Allah is to all people most surely full of kindness, most merciful.

¹⁴⁴ We see the turning of your face (for guidance to the heavens: now shall We turn you to a *qibla* that shall please you. Turn then your face in the direction of the sacred mosque: wherever you are, turn your faces in that direction. The people of the Book know well that that is the truth from their Lord. Nor is Allah unmindful of what they do.

¹⁴⁵ Even if you were to bring to the people of the Book all the signs (together), they would not follow your *qibla*; nor are you going to follow their *qibla*; nor indeed will they follow each other's *qibla*. If, after the knowledge that has reached you, you were to follow their (vain) desires, then you would indeed (clearly) be in the wrong.

Glosses

ayah 142: *qibla* - the direction faced during prayers.

ayah 143: 'nation' - *ummah*.

ayah 143: 'the *qibla* to which you were used' - Jerusalem, the first *qibla* of the Prophet and his followers.

ayah 144: i.e. the sanctuary at Mecca.

Islamic Text 4

[Qur'anic Arabic text to be added]

Surah al-A'raf ('The Heights', 7: 59-72)

⁵⁹ We sent Noah to his people. He said: 'O my people, worship Allah! You have no other god but Him. I fear for you the punishment of a dreadful day!'

⁶⁰ The leaders of his people said: 'Ah! we see you evidently wandering (in mind).'

⁶¹ He said: 'O my people! No wandering is there in my (mind): on the contrary I am an apostle from the Lord and Cherisher of the worlds!

⁶² 'I but fulfil towards you the duties of my Lord's mission: Sincere is my advice to you, and I know from Allah something that you know not.

⁶³ 'Do you wonder that there has come to you a message from your Lord, through a man of your own people, to warn you, so that you may fear Allah and haply receive His Mercy?'

⁶⁴ But they rejected him, and We delivered him, and those with him, in the ark: but We overwhelmed in the flood those who rejected Our signs. They were indeed a blind people!

⁶⁵ To the 'Ad people, (We sent) Hud, one of their (own) brethren: He said: 'O my people, worship Allah! You have no other god but Him. Will you not fear (Him)?'

⁶⁶ The leaders of the unbelievers among his people said: 'Ah! we see you are an imbecile!' and 'We think you are a liar!'

⁶⁷ He said: 'O my people! I am no imbecile, but (I am) an apostle from the Lord and Cherisher of the worlds!

⁶⁸ 'I but fulfil towards you the duties of my Lord's mission: I am to you a sincere and trustworthy adviser.

⁶⁹ 'Do you wonder that there has come to you a message from your Lord through a man of your own people, to warn you? Call in remembrance that He made you inheritors after the people of Noah, and gave you a stature tall among the nations. Call in remembrance the benefits (you have received) from Allah, that so you may prosper.'

⁷⁰ They said: 'Do you come to us, that we may worship Allah alone, and give up the cult of our fathers? Bring us what you threaten us with, if it be so that you tell the truth!'

⁷¹ He said: 'Punishment and wrath have already come upon you from your Lord: do you dispute with me over names which you have devised—you and your fathers, without authority from Allah? Then wait: I am amongst you, also waiting.'

⁷² We saved him and those who adhered to him by Our mercy, and We cut off the roots of those who rejected Our signs and did not believe.

Glosses

ayah 65: 'Hud' - An Arabian prophet whose people lived in Yemen. There exists a shrine in Yemen that is claimed to be that of the prophet Hud, and is the venue for passionate Sufi celebrations.

ayah 66: 'imbecile' - or 'fool'

"WISDOM & FOLLY" – TRADITIONS OF READING

JEWISH TEXTS

Introduction and Context

The Jewish Bible, known as the Tanakh, consists of three parts: *Torah* ('Teaching': Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), traditionally believed to have been given by God to Moses (c. 1250 BCE) *Nevi'im* ('Prophets': Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Twelve Minor Prophets), spanning the period from Moses' death down to about 500 BCE

Ketuvim ('Writings': Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles), dating from different periods, from the time of King David (c. 1000 BCE) to about the second century BCE.

Each of the three texts chosen for study comes from one of these divisions.

The first text comes from the fifth book of the Torah, Deuteronomy (*Devarim*), which is essentially composed of three very long speeches given by Moses to the people of Israel, assembled in the plains of Moab (modern Jordan) before they cross into the land of Israel. Moses exhorts the people to remain faithful to the covenant that God made with them at Mount Sinai, reminds them of their failures and mistakes up to this point, and goes over most of the laws given to them by God, before the book ends with an account of his death.

The second text comes from the book of the prophet Jeremiah (*Yirmiyahu*), who witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 BCE. The book contains rebuke and denunciation of the Jewish people, both for turning to idols and for failing to maintain social justice, together with warnings of approaching disaster as punishment for their sins; there are also prophecies of their future redemption and reconciliation with God. Parts of the book (though not this passage) are read on sabbath mornings in synagogue as *haftarot*, readings from the Prophets that follow the Torah reading.

The last two texts both come from the book of Proverbs (*Mishlei*). King Solomon is traditionally credited with writing it, though the book itself names several different authors of the proverbs it contains, such as Agur and Lemuel. Many of the proverbs are concerned with the desirability of obtaining wisdom and living by it, or warn of the consequences of folly and wickedness. The book of Proverbs is not read formally in synagogue, and is thus not very familiar to most Jews, but phrases taken from it do appear in the prayerbook, and there exists a rich tradition of commentary on the book as a whole.

Points to Consider

- Are Texts 1 and 3 talking about the same type of wisdom?
- Are Texts 2 and 4 talking about the same type of folly?
- How is wisdom acquired?

The Text in Tradition and Today

The Hebrew term *chokhmah* can be translated as ‘wisdom’, but its range of meanings is wider, including concepts such as ‘skill’, ‘knowledge’, ‘reasoning powers’, and ‘expertise’ of different types. Betzalel, the builder of the desert Tabernacle (*mishkan*), is described as endowed by God with ‘wisdom, understanding [*tevunah*], and knowledge [*da’at*], and every type of craft’. In the book of Proverbs, in particular, it is linked with moral virtue, but this is not the only way in which it is used. The book of Ecclesiastes (Kohélet), traditionally ascribed to King Solomon, praises wisdom, but notes sadly that the wise man dies, just like the fool, and concludes that wisdom cannot be the ‘point’ of human existence.

However, very early on *chokhmah* became identified with the Torah, partly under the influence of Text 1, where the laws given by God to the children of Israel in the Torah are described as the people’s ‘wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations’. Many passages in the Tanakh praising wisdom, in particular the lyrical songs about wisdom, or sung by a personified wisdom, in the book of Proverbs, were understood as referring to the Torah. In one of these songs, the figure of Wisdom claims that ‘the Lord created me at the beginning of His course, as the first of His works of old’, and that ‘I was with Him as a *oman* [confidant/artisan]’ (Proverbs 8: 30), and same idea appears in Text 3. In the midrash, this was elaborated into a speech by the Torah itself:

I was the artisan’s instrument of the Holy One, blessed be He. Just as in this world, when a mortal king builds a palace, he does not build it all by himself but by the expertise of an artisan, and the artisan does not build it by himself, but with the aid of plans and sketches, so that he knows how to arrange the rooms and how to place the mosaics—just so the Holy One, blessed be He, looked into the Torah and created the world.
(Bereshit Rabba, 1: 1)

Wisdom is thus both a ‘tool’ of God, used in the very process of creation, and also embodied in the Torah given to the children of Israel. It follows that, for humans, true wisdom is to follow God’s divine wisdom, as revealed in the Torah, and conversely, folly consists of turning away from the divine wisdom and abandoning it, as Jeremiah notes (Text 2). The prophet marvels that the people are unable to look at God’s wisdom as revealed in His creation and realize that the laws and rules He has set for them are part of the same wisdom. Folly is blindness, a refusal to recognize and to learn from the world around us and to draw logical conclusions.

Coming from God, wisdom in its broadest sense is associated with life, happiness, goodness, and prosperity, as described in Text 3. It is the source of wealth, honour and long life, as well as leading to pleasantness and peace. In sharp contrast, folly is inevitably associated with the opposite qualities—death, hostility, evil, and disaster. Text 4 classifies the fool with the wicked, and notes that he does not even desire true wisdom—all he wants is to show off his (imagined) cleverness. His words lead only to strife and controversy, and in the end will cause his destruction.

CHRISTIAN TEXT

Introduction and Context

The first letter to the Corinthians is one of the New Testament 'Epistles' written by Paul to the emerging Christian churches. The Epistles appear in the New Testament after the four Gospels, although they were almost certainly written down sooner (1 Corinthians was probably written between 52 and 57 CE, from Ephesus). Most of the Epistles are written by Paul, though not all of them. They are followed by the visionary apocalyptic book of Revelation, which is the last book of the Christian Bible.

The Mediterranean port of Corinth controlled the land route from the Greek Peloponnese to the mainland. Many freedmen and wealthy merchants lived there, and the impression we have of it is that it was a place of fierce competition and commercial success—a boom town, which was comparatively free of the heavy restrictions of tradition or a hereditary governing class.

Paul's first surviving letter to the Christian community at Corinth is written to a church that had a substantial core of Jewish members, but a good number of pagans belonging to it too. The Corinthians' interest in spiritual exploration generated many problems and questions, some of which they had clearly asked Paul to help with—and this is a main reason for the letter. One of the problems seems to have been that they carried their ethos of competition from the market place into the church, and were vying with one another for spiritual prestige. Perhaps more than in any other letter, we here discern the early Christians 'warts and all'—but Paul makes their weaknesses a vital part of the stuff of his preaching about God's grace.

Points to Consider

- What might 'the wisdom of the world' be, in Paul's mind? What are its features?
- What does Paul mean by saying that the 'cross of Christ' is an *apparent* folly that is *really* wisdom?
- The cross is his main example of such folly, but are other associations also triggered in our minds: things God has done or people He has

chosen who have seemed foolish to the world? And what else, apart from the cross, might Paul mean by 'things that are not'?

The Text in Tradition and Today

Paul seems to be talking about his own preaching ministry as well as about what Christ has done in this passage. His preaching, he hopes, will be powerful (like the cross), but he wants it to have an integrity and truth that do not depend on clever arguments or attractive rhetorical devices. Those things bring it down to the level of our 'fallen' existence. Maybe the community at Corinth was a bit too embroiled in ways of thinking and acting that Paul associated with fallen or unredeemed life ('boasting', for example (v. 29), which means sinful self-reliance, rather than recognising that everything one has that is worth anything is a gift from God). The Corinthians' divisions, arguments and competitiveness would have been part of this evidence of the Fall—and perhaps also their willingness to be swayed by glitzy new ideas, or persuasive speakers.

The worldly wisdom that rejects the gospel has, Paul thinks, already been condemned by the prophets. He quotes Isaiah 29: 14 as evidence, and the rhetorical questions that follow in v. 20 are all scripturally derived (Isaiah 19: 11; Isaiah 33: 18; Isaiah 44: 25; Job 12: 17). In v. 21 Paul says the world 'did not know God through wisdom', by which he means wisdom that falls short—wisdom perhaps that is merely rational acrobatics, and not personal commitment and transformation. Cleverness might pass for wisdom in a worldly perspective, but it fails to see how God might be acting in a suffering Saviour. If Paul is saying that his own preaching must be conformed to the cross in some way—sharing its superficial folly but deep wisdom—then what 'conformity to the cross' might he be asking for from those who read his letter?

How is God made manifest in this suffering of the cross? And how can human eyes be open to it? Not, it seems, because big signposts are put up for them. 'Asking for signs' is condemned—a desire for miracles shows a failure to trust in God. An external substitute for trust is being asked for whenever a miracle is wanted. So instead of a sign that is easy to read, Paul gives his readers a paradox—forced to the extreme! 'For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.'

A Jewish perspective on the Christian Text

I find this text disturbing in its assertion that no wisdom can be relied upon—presumably, not even the God-given wisdom (such as the Torah) that exists in the world before the Christian era (though I note that Paul is happy to rely on the wisdom of earlier prophets by quoting their words). How could it be that all previous wisdom becomes worthless with the advent of Jesus? I also find it hard to apply the word 'foolishness' to God—He may be incomprehensible and utterly 'other', but never 'foolish', even in human terms.

ISLAMIC TEXTS

Introduction and Context

The Meccan *surah* (chapter) named after Luqman the Wise (no. 31) is the obvious choice on the nature of wisdom. It begins with the Arabic letters *alif lam mim* and is largely devoted to God and His names and works of creation. The passage about Luqman is especially eloquent and a favourite for public reciters.

The *surah* 'The Cow' (no. 2) also begins with the letters *alif lam mim*, followed by a mention of the revelation itself, and devotes the next four *ayat* (verses) to a description of the righteous, followed by two *ayat* about the outright rejecters of faith. These are followed by thirteen *ayat* about the hypocrites or dissimulators, of which the first eleven are selected here because they include the theme of folly. A second passage from the same *surah* is given that also describes a type of folly.

'The Heights' (no. 7) begins with the letters *alif lam mim sad* and is a long *surah* that opens with the story of Adam, Satan and Eve, followed by a majestic passage on the Garden, Fire and the greatness of God and the beauty of His creation. Next comes a long passage, of which the initial part only is given here, which recounts the stories of various prophets, highlighting the similarity of their messages and of the reactions from their communities. The longest story comes last and is that of Moses and Pharaoh, the most oft-told story in the Qur'an.

Points to Consider

- Who was Luqman the Wise? Is there a comparable figure in the Torah or Gospel?
- What is the nature of the fools and the folly in Texts 2-4 ?

The Text in Tradition and Today

Luqman

The proverbial wisdom of Luqman is striking, and there is the obvious word-contrast at the beginning of the passage between *shukr* ('gratitude') and *shirk* ('polytheism'), a theme that is also found with regard to Abraham in 'The Bee', 16: 120-1.

Who was Luqman? Abdullah Yusuf Ali, author of probably the best-loved English translation of the Qur'an, identifies him with Aesop, the Greek sage. There are three stories or morals in Aesop's fables that are echoed in the Qur'an and *sunnah* (the practice of the prophet):

1. Aesop's moral, 'A hypocrite deceives no-one but himself.' Cf. Qur'an 2: 9 in Text 2 above.

2. Aesop's moral, 'If you feel no shame, do as you wish.' The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, in an authentic *hadith*, 'Truly, one of the teachings that people in the words of the early prophets was, "If you feel no shame, do as you wish".' Therefore, according to this *hadith*, Aesop was an early prophet or transmitted wisdom from earlier prophets.
3. Aesop's fable of the wise man who was bitten by an ant and so burnt the whole colony of ants, for which he was reprimanded. In the Prophet Muhammad's retelling of this story, the wise man was a prophet of God who was reprimanded by God with the words, 'Because an ant bit you, you destroyed an entire nation of creatures that worshipped Me?'

Apart from this passage, probably the most often-quoted *ayah* about wisdom is 'He grants wisdom to whom He pleases; and he to whom wisdom is granted, receives indeed a benefit overflowing; but none will grasp the message but people of understanding.' ('The Cow', 2: 269, another *surah* that begins with the letters *alif lam mim*).

The Cow

The fools in Text 2 are the hypocrites, outwardly members of the Muslim community but inwardly rejecters of true faith. They accuse true believers of folly but are the true fools; their folly being their shallow faith and their delusion that they can deceive God and the believers.

The fools in Text 3 are people of the Book who do not understand the importance of symbolism and the inner meaning of rituals, such as facing a particular direction in prayer. These verses remain a scathing criticism of Jews, Christians, Muslims and others who reduce religion to empty outward practices devoid of spiritual passion and love for God.

The Heights

The prophets are accused of being fools, but they are the truly wise.

A Jewish perspective on the Muslim Texts

In reference to Text 2 (Q 2: 144-145): Does this imply that the People of the Book (I presume this refers to Jews and Christians) 'know' that the correct direction of prayer is to the Ka'aba in Mecca but somehow refuse to accept this? Is there an assumption in the text that those who do not accept the prophet's message and abandon their own traditions of revelation are defined as foolish?

APPENDIX

TALES OF THE WISE - Selections from *Kitab al-Adhkiya*' by Ibn al-Jawzi¹ (translated by Usama Hasan)

1 WISDOM OF THE PROPHETS

- 1.1 Ibn 'Abbas said: When Ishmael (peace be upon him) was in his youth, he married a woman from (the Arabian tribe of) Jurhum. Abraham (peace be upon him) came to visit him but his son was out earning his living, so he asked his daughter-in-law about their living conditions. (She did not know who he was.) She replied, 'We are in a bad state, conditions are tight and severe,' and complained much. Abraham said, 'When your husband returns, convey my greeting of peace to him and tell him that I would like him to change the threshold of his door.' When Ishmael returned, his wife conveyed the message. He said, 'That was my father, and he has ordered me to separate from you. Return to your family.'²
- 1.2 On the authority of Abu Hurayrah, that the Messenger of Allah (may God bless him and grant him peace) said: Two women went out, each with one child. A wolf devoured one of the children, and they disputed about the other (each claimed the remaining child as her own). They referred the matter to David (peace be upon him), who ruled in favour of the elder woman. They then passed by Solomon (peace be upon him), who said, 'Bring me a knife, that I may cut the child in half and divide him between you.' The younger woman cried out, 'Don't do that! I give my half to her!' Solomon replied, 'Then he is your son,' and ruled in her favour. (Bukhari and Muslim)
- 1.3 On the authority of Muhammad b. Ka'b al-Qurazi, who said: A man came to the prophet Solomon (peace be upon him) and complained, 'O prophet of Allah! One of my neighbours keeps stealing my geese, and I do not know who it is.' Solomon ordered the call to prayer and addressed the congregation. During his sermon he said, 'One of you steals his neighbour's geese and then comes to pray with feathers all over his head!' Upon hearing this, one of the audience wiped his head. Solomon said, 'Seize him, for he is the thief!'
- 1.4 It is reported from Jesus (peace be upon him) that Satan came to him and said, 'Do you not think that only Allah's decree will come to pass

¹ Imam Ibn al-Jawzi was a Hanbali scholar of Baghdad, known for his expertise in law, tradition and admonition. He died in 597 / 1201 AH/CE. He wrote a sister book to *Tales of the Wise*, i.e. *Tales of the Fools*, including stories of Juha. Juha in the Arab world and Hoja (Mulla) Nasruddin in Turkey are the main 'wise fools' of the Islamic tradition, but there is no such figure in the Qur'an.

upon you?' He replied, 'Yes, that is so.' He said, 'Then throw yourself off this mountain, for if safety is decreed for you, you will survive.' Jesus replied, 'O accursed one! It is for Allah, mighty and magnificent, to test his slaves. It is not for the slave to test his Lord!'

- 1.5 On the authority of 'Ali: When the Messenger of Allah (may God bless him and grant him peace) proceeded to Badr,³ we found two men from Quraysh there. One of them escaped, but we seized the other. We kept asking him about the size of the Meccan army and he kept answering, 'By Allah, they are large in number and extremely strong!' We beat him every time he said this and then brought him to the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace) who asked him the same question, to which he gave the same answer. The Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace) tried to extract an accurate figure from him but the man remained stubborn. Finally, the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace) asked him, 'How many camels do they slaughter?' He replied, 'Ten, daily.' The Messenger of Allah (may God bless him and grant him peace) said, 'The army is a thousand strong: each camel suffices a hundred soldiers.'
- 1.6 On the authority of 'Abu Hurayrah: A man complained to the Messenger of Allah (may God bless him and grant him peace), 'I have a neighbour who keeps causing me harm.' He said, 'Go home and empty your possessions onto the street.' When he did that, people crowded around him, asking him what happened. He told them that he had complained to the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace) about his neighbour, and that the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace) had ordered them to do this. The people began saying about the neighbour, 'May Allah curse him! May Allah humiliate him!' This reached the neighbour, who said, 'Return to your house, for by Allah, I will not harm you again.'
- 1.7 On the authority of al-Husayn: A man came to the Messenger of Allah (may God bless him and grant him peace) with the killer of his relative, so the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace) asked him, 'Will you accept the *diyah* (blood-money)?' He replied, 'No.' He asked, 'Will you then forgive him?' He replied, 'No.' He said, 'Then go and kill him (in retaliation)!' When the man left, the Messenger of Allah (may

² In the *hadith*, the story continues that Ishmael married again into another tribe and Abraham returned later for a similar visit. His new daughter-in-law mentioned that conditions were similarly severe, but she praised God and was content with what she had. Abraham asked her to convey the message to Ishmael to 'keep the threshold to his door', so he kept her as his wife. Ibn al-Jawzi comments that this story illustrates the wisdom of both Abraham and Ishmael.

³ A desert plain between Mecca and Medina, scene of the first military battle in Islamic history. A Muslim army of 313 men from Medina led by the Prophet Muhammad defeated a Meccan polytheist army over a thousand strong. Several Meccan leaders were killed in the Battle of Badr, which was a decisive event in early Islam.

God bless him and grant him peace) said, 'If he kills him, he will be like him!' A person reported this to the man, who was leading the murderer with a leash around his neck. Upon hearing this, the man set the killer free.

Ibn Qutaybah commented: The Messenger of Allah (may God bless him and grant him peace) did not mean that the man will be like him in sin and deserving the Fire, for killing in retaliation is allowed by Allah. However, the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace) disliked retaliation and loved forgiveness, so he said these words so that the man would think that they would be equal in sin and thus spare his life. However, what the Prophet meant was that both of them would have taken a life and thus they would be like each other, even though the murderer would have been a transgressor and the other would have been taking retaliation.

- 1.8 'Aishah was asked, 'Did the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace) ever joke?' She replied: 'Yes. There was once an old woman with me, who asked the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace), "Pray to Allah that He makes me among the People of the Garden." He replied, "The Garden is not to be entered by old women." He then heard the call to prayer and went out to pray. When he returned, he found the woman weeping. He asked, "What is the matter?" They said, "You told her that the Garden is not to be entered by old women." He said, "Allah will transform them into young, loving virgins.'"
- 1.9 A woman came to the Messenger of Allah (may God bless him and grant him peace) complaining about her husband. The Prophet asked, 'Is he the one with the whiteness in his eye?'⁴ She returned and caringly looked at her husband's eyes (thinking the whiteness to be a symptom of disease). He asked her what the matter was, and she told him about the Prophet's question. The man said, 'Aren't the whites of my eyes larger than the dark sections?'
- 1.10 Anas b. Malik reported: A man came to the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace), asking him for a mount. He said, 'I shall give you a camel's child.' The man said, 'O Messenger of Allah, what will I do with a camel's child?' He replied, 'Do any but camels give birth to camels?'

2 WISDOM OF THE COMPANIONS

- 2.1 It is reported from Abu Bakr (God be pleased with him): When the Messenger of Allah (may God bless him and grant him peace) made the

⁴ Either the Prophet (peace be upon him) was simply joking or, as is more likely, this humour had a psychological impact by making the woman forget her superficial complaints against her husband and value his deeper qualities which she was taking for granted.

sacred migration, he would ride with Abu Bakr seated behind him. Abu Bakr knew the routes due to his frequent journeys to Syria. When they passed by anyone, the people would ask, 'Who is this sitting in front of you, O Abu Bakr?' He would reply, 'A guide, who shows me the way.'

- 2.2 When Ibn Muljam (the killer of 'Ali, God be pleased with him) was brought to al-Hasan b. 'Ali, the murderer said, 'I wish to whisper a secret into your ear.' Al-Hasan refused, saying, 'He wishes to bite my ear.' Ibn Muljam said, 'By Allah, had I had the chance, I would have torn his whole ear off!'
- 2.3 Al-'Abbas (God be pleased with him) was asked, 'Are you greater (older) than the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace)?' He replied, 'He is greater than me, although I was born before him.'
- 2.4 Mujahid narrated that once the Caliph 'Umar b. al-Khattab was with his Companions when he smelled a bad odour. He said, 'Whoever has broken wind should get up and make ablution,' but the person was shy. He repeated his words, adding, '... for Allah is not shy of the truth.' Thereupon, Jarir b. 'Abdullah said, 'Should we not all get up and make ablution?'
- 2.5 Abu Bakr travelled on a trade journey, a year before the death of the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace), to Busra with Nu'ayman b. 'Amr and Suwaybit b. Harmalah, both of whom had taken part in Badr. They were also given to playing practical jokes.

Nu'ayman was in charge of the provisions for the journey. One day, Suwaybit asked him for food whilst Abu Bakr was not with them but his friend refused, saying, 'Only when Abu Bakr returns.' Suwaybit said, 'I will have my revenge!'

They passed by some people, to whom Suwaybit said, 'Will you buy one of my slaves?' When they agreed, he said, 'This slave talks a lot, and he will say that he is a free man. When he says that, ignore him.' So they bought Nu'ayman for ten young she-camels and tied a turban or rope around his neck. Nu'ayman said, 'This man is playing a joke on you. I am a free man, not a slave!' They replied, 'He told us about you,' and took him away.

When Abu Bakr returned, he found out what had happened so he went after those people, returned the camels to them and brought Nu'ayman back. When they returned to Madinah, they told the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace) and his companions about the incident. They all laughed heartily.

[Nu'ayman b. 'Amr was a Medinan companion of the Prophet who would joke a lot and make the Prophet and his companions laugh. He would often take food from the market on credit and bring it to the Prophet

(may God bless him and grant him peace) as a gift. When the seller demanded payment, he would bring him to the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace) saying, 'Please give him the price of his goods.' The Prophet would say, 'Did you not give it to me as a gift?' He would reply, 'By Allah, I did not have the money to pay for it, but I wished that you could eat it.' The Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace) would laugh and order that the seller be paid for his goods. Nu'ayman was one of the bravest champions of the Ansar, and took part in Badr, Uhud, Khandaq and all the other major battles. He passed away during the caliphate of Mu'awiyah, circa 41 AH.]

- 2.6 A man came to the doorman of Mu'awiyah⁵ and said, 'Tell him that his brother, from both his father and mother, is at the door.' Mu'awiyah said, 'I do not know him, but let him enter.' When the man entered, Mu'awiyah said, 'Which brother are you?' The man replied, 'The son of Adam and Eve.' Mu'awiyah instructed that the man be given a dirham, upon which the man said, 'You give your brother, from both your father and mother, only a dirham?' Mu'awiyah replied, 'Were I to give money to all my brothers from Adam and Eve, you would not get this much!'
- 2.7 'Umar b. al-Khattab appointed al-Mughirah b. Shu'bah as ruler over Bahrayn⁶ (Eastern Arabia), but its people disliked him. He was later appointed elsewhere, but the people of Bahrayn feared that he would be appointed over them once again. One of them had an idea to prevent this from happening. He collected a hundred thousand dirhams from his people and took the money to 'Umar, saying, 'Mughirah embezzled this amount from the treasury and entrusted it to me for safe-keeping.' 'Umar summoned Mughirah and demanded an explanation. Mughirah replied, 'He is lying: it was actually two hundred thousand.' 'Umar asked, 'What led you to this?' He replied, 'Poverty and need.' 'Umar asked the man, 'What do you say (i.e. where is the rest of the money)?' The man was thus forced to admit that he was lying.

3 WISDOM OF THE CALIPHS AND THEIR MINISTERS

- 3.1 'Abdul Malik b. Marwan⁷ dispatched Sha'bi⁸ as his ambassador to the Byzantine emperor, who was extremely impressed with the envoy. He asked Sha'bi if he was from the ruling family, and was told that he was

⁵ Sixth caliph of Islam who fought a divisive war against the fourth caliph, 'Ali. Mu'awiyah was also the effective founder of the first major dynasty in the caliphate, the Umayyads, whose capital was Damascus.

⁶ Nowadays known as Al-Ahsa', an eastern province of (Saudi) Arabia. The classical Bahrayn was close to, but different from, the two islands off its coast known as modern-day Bahrain.

⁷ A major Umayyad caliph of the first Islamic century, revered for his nobility and courage. All four of his sons served as caliph after him.

⁸ Sha'bi was a traditionist and scholar who learnt directly from several of the Prophet's companions. His illustrious students included Imam Abu Hanifah, founder of the earliest of the four major Sunni schools of law.

not. When it was time for al-Sha'bi to return to Damascus, the emperor entrusted him with a parchment containing a message for the caliph, to be delivered after he had been briefed about their conversations. After Sha'bi had recounted everything to the caliph, he gave him the parchment. 'Abdul Malik read the message: 'I am amazed at the Arabs that they do not make this ambassador their king!' 'Abdul Malik told Sha'bi, 'He wishes to make me jealous of you, and provoke me to kill you.' Sha'bi replied, 'Were he to see you, Chief of the Believers, he would not think highly of me.' The incident reached the emperor, who admitted that 'Abdul Malik was right.

Chapter 15: The Cleverness of Thieves

Al-Mubarrid said: Ahmad b. al-Ma'dil of Basra said: I was sitting with 'Abdul Malik b. 'Abdul 'Aziz al-Majishun⁹ when one of his companions entered, saying, 'Incredible!' He was asked what happened, so he narrated his story: 'I travelled out of the city to my distant orchard. Whilst I was in the desert, far from the houses of Medina, a robber appeared and demanded my robe. I said, "Why should I give you my robe?"

He replied, "I have more right to it than you."

"Why?"

"Because I am your brother. I have no clothes, but you do."

"Can we discuss this?"

"No! You have worn it for a while, and now I wish to wear it as you have worn it."

"You wish to strip me and expose my private parts?"

"There is no harm. We have transmitted from Malik¹⁰ that he said, 'There is no harm in a man bathing naked.'" (i.e. a man may be naked whilst alone.)

"The people will meet me and see me naked."

"If there were any people on this route, I would not have accosted you here."

"You seem to be a reasonable man. Let me proceed to my orchard, where I will disrobe and have the garment sent to you."

"Never! You only want to send me your men to take me to the governor, who will imprison me, flog me and chain me by the ankles."

"No. I swear to you, oath upon oath: I will fulfil my promise and not disappoint you."

"No! We have transmitted from Malik that he said, 'Oaths made to robbers are not binding'."

"Then I swear that I will not violate this oath by exploiting a legal loophole."

"This is a compound oath made to a robber."

"Let's stop debating. By Allah, I will have this robe sent to you out of my own good will."

The man lowered his head for a while, then raised it, saying, "Do you know what I was thinking?"

"No."

⁹ A member of a famous traditionist, scholarly family of Medina.

¹⁰ Known as the 'Imam of Medina', one of the early great traditionists and founder of the traditionalist Maliki legal school in early Sunni Islam.

“I was thinking about the situation of robbers from the time of the Messenger of Allah (may God bless him and grant him peace) until today. I have never heard of a robber taking items with deferred delivery, and I dislike to introduce an innovation into Islam for which I will incur its sin and the sin of all who follow it after me until the Day of Resurrection. Remove your robe.”¹¹ So I removed my robe and gave it to him, and he took it and went on his way.’

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¹¹ A learned robber, indeed. He uses a legal technical term for deferred delivery, and also refers to the Prophet’s teaching that ‘Whoever sets a good example in Islam will attract the reward of everyone who follows that example until the Day of Judgement, without their reward being reduced. Whoever sets a bad example in Islam will incur the sin of everyone who follows that example until the Day of Judgement, without their sin being reduced.’