

STUDY 2

‘The Only Wise God’

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DOXOLOGIES OLD AND NEW

In 1 Timothy 1:17 Paul utters a doxological exaltation that lauds God as ‘the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, [to him] be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.’¹ This exaltation flows from Paul’s personal and experiential knowledge of God’s mercy, by which he reckons himself to be chief among sinners (1 Tim. 1:15f.), and it alerts us to the fact that the true knowledge of God only comes to us personally through the great gift of redemption.

In the older versions the word ‘wise’ was inserted—‘the only *wise* God’. Though the word does not appear in the Greek, its importation is understandable when we see the close parallel to the pattern of Romans 16:27, ‘to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.’ In the case of the benediction in Jude 24–25—‘Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only [wise] God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.’—the word ‘wise’ appears in the Byzantine text, but is not used in modern Western translations.

It is perhaps surprising to realise that a phrase so embedded in our doxological language (‘the only wise God’) has such little textual provenance. However, when we consider the attributes ascribed to God in these and other places (e.g. 1 Chron. 29:11–12; Job 12:13, 16–22; Dan. 2:20–22; Rev. 4:8–11; 5:9–14; etc.) it is beyond doubt that our commonly received doxological heritage preserves an unquestionable biblical truth. God alone is ‘wise’, since, by self-definition, God alone is God! Biblical wisdom is not accumulated as a body of knowledge (though it does have definite content, which could be summarised as ‘the whole counsel of God’). It is known only in and through knowing God (see, for example, the covenantal/redemptive context of Deut. 4:5–8; cf. Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 9:10).² God can only be known in his redeeming acts. Ipso

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the English Standard Version.

² The relationship between wisdom and creation has been subject to much reflection, and we will come to address this in the School in due course. We have a session on ‘Creation and Wisdom’ a little later, followed by a session on ‘Wisdom and Covenant’. These themes are inseparable, for a variety of reasons, but not least because the Pentateuch is written from the point of view of the exodus. Israel viewed both its horizons (from creation to the coming of Messiah) from their standpoint as God’s redeemed people. Without prejudice to any discussion of Pentateuchal dating and authorship, even if we allow that it goes back to Moses, Moses was not there at Genesis 1:1! In other words, Israel stood as the gracious recipient of Yahweh’s covenant promises. They stood, moreover,

‘The Only Wise God’

facto, Christ and him crucified is the wisdom of God, because Christ is his redeeming word to the world. But we will see more of this particular theme in the various studies that lie ahead of us in the School.

GOD ALONE THE SOURCE OF WISDOM

The fear of the only wise God

Biblically speaking, any so-called wisdom that is not submitted to and held in the context of relationship with God is not true wisdom at all. ‘The fear of God which is the beginning of wisdom’ (as in Ps. 111:10) is a concept deeply enmeshed in biblical connotations and associations. Worship and obedience from the manward side, with holiness and covenant faithfulness on the Godward (for example), may all find commodious shelter under the concept. Ontologically, the God whom we fear is the Holy One. But he is characteristically (especially in Isaiah) ‘the Holy One of Israel’. The fear that is due to his name is not simply because of his unapproachable holiness, but because of his inexpressible mercy in making and keeping covenant with his people. Practically, the responses of obedience and worship (which are in reality indivisible) are our entrance into the wisdom that the fear of God brings.

Together, these things mean that ontologically and practically the phrase ‘only wise God’ is inescapable. It is not just that God alone is ‘wise’ (in the same way that God alone is good, or holy, or love, or light), but any wisdom we may have could only be known in and through him. This was the case in the original creation and it is inherent in our calling to exercise the dominion which belongs to being made in his image and likeness (Gen. 1:26ff.). Such wisdom as is needed for a vocation such as this was never to be from us, but from him who made us. We were created to grow in wisdom and stature—to express and to fill out the various elements that ‘image and likeness’ contains—in and through submission to his word in joyful obedience to his will. The exchange of ‘wisdom-so-called’ for true wisdom relates finally to the desire to be ‘as God’. In other words the nature of human sin tells us much about the source of true wisdom. In wanting to be ‘as God’ we became fools, though professing to be wise. We became children of a different ‘father’, the Serpent, in and through our hearing of his voice. By negative illustration these things prove to us (as if such proof were needed!) that God alone is the source of true wisdom.

The ‘only wise God’ and the plan of salvation

In Romans 16:27, Paul rounds out his magnificent benediction with the doxological prayer statement, ‘to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus

as the beneficiaries of God’s mighty acts of redemption in his faithfulness to these promises. It is only from this perspective—vouchsafed to them in their own exodus history—that they could then understand what it meant for God (i.e. Yahweh) to be Creator of heaven and earth. They could also understand (if they had ears to hear and eyes to see) what this meant for the nations as recipients of the covenant promises through Abraham and, indeed, what this meant for the whole of the created order. In this way we must read the Bible canonically, not chronologically. Israel knew God because God knew Israel. It is therefore no accident (as a quick overview of Isaiah or Revelation would show us) that creation and redemption are joined at the hip in true biblical faith.

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'The Only Wise God'

Christ! Amen.' This ascription of God as the 'only wise' One takes its place in an immediate context, which in turn is freighted with meaning from the broader context of Romans. The *immediate context* is that the God so described: (i) is able to establish/strengthen the Roman believers; (ii) that he does so in accordance with/by means of the gospel/preaching of Jesus Christ; (iii) that this gospel is the revelation of God's long secret mystery; and (iv) that this mystery, attested to in the Scriptures, now leads to the obedience of faith of the nations.

These clauses summarise much of the teaching of Romans (as well as much of the understanding as to what the apostolic ministry was about), which forms the *wider context* of this ascription. The God so prominently described in Romans, is the God whose wrath is revealed from heaven; who sends the Son as the propitiation for sin, justifying and redeeming those under the bondage of the Law, sin and death; who has testified to this climactic action of redemption in the persons and writings of the Scriptures; who has in his Son raised up a new humanity, who are of the Spirit and who live in the powerful reality of Fatherhood and his plan for the world to come; who has done all of this in the faithfulness to his covenant to Israel and the nations; and who has thus raised up and equipped a new worshipping community . . . it is *this God* who is 'the only wise God'. Thus, the 'depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God' (Rom. 11:33a) is revealed in his actions in history. These actions of judgement, grace and glory demonstrate 'How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!' (Rom. 11:33b).

Two things come tumbling out of all this: firstly, God's wisdom is only known in and through his acts of redemption (since we only come to know *him* in this way), and secondly, true wisdom can only be known 'from above'. Indeed the whole of Romans (consisting of a series of 'exchanges'³) tells us the saga of how our ungodly exchange (rendering us fools) is reversed by God's own exchange. Through the gracious exchange of the cross, where in his Son our sin was condemned, we are rendered the beneficiaries of and participators in his wisdom. This route is the only one by which we may know the wisdom of God. And it comes from God alone.

But even more than this, God's mysterious wisdom is worked out in the plan and purpose of what we have come to call 'salvation history'. God's hidden wisdom in the covenants, the people of Israel, the worship, the Law and so on, was Christ. He has now been revealed. This timing was part of the wisdom of God, as was the content (Christ) himself. Moreover, it was not just that the apostles saw God *had* revealed the mystery of Christ in history, but that he was *continuing* to reveal it through their preaching.

The letter to the Romans is as much about this matter as it is about the content of the gospel. Indeed, we could say that much of the New Testament is given over not simply to understanding the revelation brought to us in Christ, but also to the 'administration/stewardship' (*oikonomia*) of the mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:9).⁴ In all

³ For a very clear exposition of this see, 'The Romans Exchange' (chapter 7) of *In Christ Alone: Living the Gospel Centered Life* by Sinclair B. Ferguson (Reformation Trust Publishing, Lake Mary, 2007), pp. 39–44. In brief Romans describes: the exchange of the truth for a lie; the exchange of communion for condemnation; the exchange of the Obedient Adam for the disobedient; the exchange of our unrighteousness for his righteousness; and the exchange (in us, by the work of the Spirit) of belief for unbelief.

⁴ For example, the pattern of 'to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles' seen prominently in the outline of the missionary ministry in Acts, is given theological voice in Romans 9–11. So also the (seeming) paradoxes of power/weakness and wisdom/foolishness expounded in the Corinthian letters relate to the divergence between our

'The Only Wise God'

these things God alone is 'wise'. He alone is able to lead, direct and fulfill the various callings associated with the church's mission, since he alone is the Creator–Sustainer who providentially oversees all circumstances associated with that mission. The wisdom that his people need comes from hearing him, and in so hearing, to be led by him as the Shepherd–Sage of the flock.

WISDOM FROM ABOVE AND 'WISDOM-SO-CALLED' FROM BELOW

There is a wisdom and a 'wisdom-so-called'

In James 3:13–18 we have a strong and clear exposition of the fact that there are two competing 'wisdoms'. Thematically, this goes all the way back to Genesis 3, where the Serpent offers an alternative and independent source of 'wisdom' to our first parents.

The theme of the 'two ways' can be traced through the Old Testament wisdom literature, where the constant reality of the 'two ways' is frequently expounded (e.g. in the competing call and claims of Wisdom and The Adulteress in Proverbs). Much wisdom literature is built around the contested path of true wisdom. In terms of the Former Prophets, such a contest is constantly present. The implicit question that runs throughout these books is: 'Will the judges and kings of Israel (and Israel itself) walk according to wisdom or folly?'

In the Later Prophets this theme becomes a repeated refrain, with the alternative bases of trust (e.g. syncretistic/idolatrous worship on the high places; alliances with other nations; the Temple; human political machinations; military power; wealth; etc.) being constant distractions from the true fear of Yahweh in which the nation(s) ought to have walked. The implicit question, from Genesis 3 all the way through to the coming of Messiah, is: 'Which way will you choose?' And, foundational to this question is the deeper one: 'To whose voice will you listen?'⁵

James 3:13–18

If we allow that James 3:13–18 is part of a lengthier exposition of James 3:1–2, the matter of wisdom and pastoral ministry is very much in view in these verses. Even if this connection is not demonstrable beyond doubt, the principle of the matter would be identical for pastor/teacher/elders as for the whole people of God, but especially so.

While there is much that could be said about James as an example of New Testament wisdom literature and the connections between James and Old Testament wisdom themes (and indeed, the Sermon on the Mount),⁶ the things of immediate and

means and God's, and how the latter is truly 'wise' and the former is really 'foolish'.

⁵ The contrast between the two ways does not end here, of course. The Sermon on the Mount and the weight of many of Jesus' parables hold up to us the competing claims of the two ways. In Acts the designation of the church as people of 'the Way' may allude to this and many of the letters have competing options (e.g. Spirit/Flesh; Wisdom/Folly) as ubiquitous themes. In other New Testament passages (notably 1 Cor. 1–2 and Rom. 1) we find direct teaching on the two ways, akin to that in James 3:13–18.

⁶ Many good commentaries pick up on these connections, but a detailed analysis of the many linguistic,

'The Only Wise God'

obvious concern are: (i) there are two types of wisdom;⁷ (ii) these have two different origins; (iii) they are evidenced by two different sets of attitudes and actions; and (iv) they are mutually exclusive.

We may speak of the two roots of these competing wisdoms as meekness or gentleness (James 3:13) on the one hand and pride or arrogance (James 3:14) on the other. This thought accords with Proverbs 11:2, where we are told, 'when pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom', and it is echoed in many other places (e.g. Prov. 16:18; 21:24; 29:23; cf. Dan. 4:30ff.). Moses—as the premier example of meekness in the Scriptures outside of our Lord himself (Num. 12:3)—was also designated as the shepherd–leader of the flock of God (e.g. Ps. 77:20; Isa. 63:11–12; cf. Hos. 12:13; Acts 7:35). He was besieged by folk coming to seek his wisdom in adjudication over personal and difficult matters (Exod. 18:13ff.). From our own experience I daresay we are all aware of this. Instinctively we are drawn to seek wisdom and counsel from the meek, rather than from the proud.

This passage in James also makes it clear that wisdom is not expressed in what we know but how we live. In 1 Corinthians 8:1, Paul puts it this way, '“knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up'. True wisdom in James 3:13, 17–18 is closely aligned to the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23). Conversely, wisdom-so-called closely resembles the deeds of the flesh (Gal. 5:19–21). As in Galatians, their source is the matter of vital importance. The flesh does not produce the fruit of the Spirit, and the Spirit does not produce the deeds of the flesh. To be of the flesh is to be yet unregenerate (as in Rom. 8:5ff.), and therefore to belong still to the prince of this world (2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2; 1 John 5:19; etc.). Those born from above bear the fruit of their Father, reflecting in their lives the Father's wisdom. Likewise, those who yet belong to their earthly 'father' represent his 'wisdom' in their actions (John 8:38, 41, 44; cf. 1 John 3:8–12). In James 3, then, we are faced with two different *families*, not just two different ways of *thinking*.⁸ For this reason we will come to see repeatedly that the wisdom-so-called is not morally neutral, for it is the expression of hatred towards the true Father.

It is sobering that James draws a very close link between the 'natural' wisdom of humanity and the 'demonic' wisdom against which the wisdom of God is revealed. That 'natural' wisdom can be not only 'earthly' but 'demonic' is a hard pill for us (Western educated, scientific rationalists) to swallow! While the comparison has its limitations what is *not* in view here is the 'hardware' of the human mind, but the 'software' by which it operates.⁹ We may be able to speak about these things helpfully in two ways: the noetic effects of sin, and the spiritual bondage of the human mind.

thematic and theological parallels between James and Matthew 5–7 can be found by Virgil Porter, *The Sermon on the Mount in the Book of James* in two parts: in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162:647, July 2005, pp. 344–360 and *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162:648, October 2005, pp. 470–482.

⁷ It is perhaps significant that James does not directly use the word 'wisdom' in relation to that which comes 'from below'. Everything that James nominates as coming from below stands in contrast to the wisdom from above, but it is not wisdom at all. It is wisdom-so-called, but James seems reticent to speak of it directly as wisdom, or accord dignity to it by using the term he prefers to keep for the true wisdom of God.

⁸ It is notable that the oft quoted verse, 'Resist the devil and he will flee from you' (and its parallel in 1 Pet. 5:9) comes in the context of humbling ourselves before God. In other words it has to do with recognising the authority of the Father, and submitting to him. This, by its very nature, indicates that the wisdom by which we will then operate is not earthly and demonic. The Evil One has lost the contest at that point, and must flee the scene.

⁹ The main limitation being that the white matter of the brain is hardware and software together!

'The Only Wise God'

(i) The noetic effects of sin

Firstly, many (particularly Reformed) theologians emphasise the noetic effects of sin. This is to say that we may think logically, but our logic will always lead to wrong conclusions. As James Denney has put it:

... the depravity which human sin has produced in human nature extends to the whole of it. There is no part of human nature that is not affected by it. We are not water-tight compartments ... what touches us for harm, with a corrupting, depraving touch, at a single point, has effects through our nature none the less real that they may be for a time beneath consciousness.¹⁰

The entrance of sin into the world through our first parents did not bring the human race into a state of 'brutish irrationality (that is, the inability to reason) ... fallen men [and women] are able to mount and to follow a logical argument',¹¹ but it does mean that our reasoning, of itself, will always be misinformed, misdirected, and incomplete. This affect on human reasoning has been called the 'noetic effect of sin', meaning that sin affects the functioning of the human mind (*nous*). Because we have been created in the image of God to relate to him, and to know all things in relationship to him, a mind cut off from that relationship will always see things awry.¹² Thus: 'The very gifts of will, personhood, natural gifts, intelligence and the like, which have come to [us] from God—including the very image of God that [we are]—[we use] perversely'.¹³

In Paul's language from Romans 1, we 'suppress the truth' with our reason, as much as with any other part of our nature. According to the biblical understanding of worship, those who make idols become like them (Ps. 115), so that there is a global effect of our exchange of true worship for false. The effects of sin do not destroy human reasoning processes, but they do ensure that all human reasoning will be twisted in terms of its motivations and outcomes, and limited in terms of the data which we take into account. The *Tendenz* (tendency/inclination) of the human mind and its wisdom will always lead away from the truth of God rather than to it.

The exchange between Jesus and Peter in Matthew 16:13–23 provides a stunning example of this. Even with 'good data' (e.g. Jesus' own physical presence and that which God the Father had revealed to Peter from heaven about him), Peter's logic (e.g. of what Messiah would be like and therefore what he could expect from Jesus) led him to a 'demonic' conclusion (viz. rebuke the Son of God for his talk about being killed in Jerusalem). Jesus' rebuke is about Peter's ungodly *reasoning*, as preserved in the Jerusalem Bible's translation 'Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my

¹⁰ J. Denney, *Studies in Theology*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1910, p. 83.

¹¹ R. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 1998, p. 452.

¹² It is in this regard I confess my ambivalence over the oft-repeated statement 'all truth is God's truth'. Does this imply that we may equate 'facts' with 'truth'? Does it mean that we may hold a 'fact' to be true, without any wider frame of reference and interpretive issues raised by so doing? Does the biblical category of Truth allow us simply to assemble facts, and thereby think that we may arrive at Truth? What are we saying about epistemology on the one hand and the biblical doctrine of revelation—especially what we speak of theologically as 'special revelation'—on the other if 'all truth is God's truth'? As Cornelius van Til (?) said, 'there is no such thing as an uninterpreted fact'. Christians and non-Christians alike may note the same fact, but what this fact means and where this leads them will be vastly different. The 'fact' of the cross meant very different things for Peter and Pilate. And it will mean very different things for the same person at different times (e.g. Saul and Paul!).

¹³ G. Bingham, *The Things We Firmly Believe*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1992, p. 83.

'The Only Wise God'

path, because you are thinking not as God thinks but as human beings do' (Matt. 16:23).

(ii) The spiritual bondage of the mind

Secondly, we may speak of the matrix in which our minds operate. We, as whole persons, are held in an unbreakable set of relationships governed by powerful spiritual enemies such as sin, death, the wrath of God, the Law, conscience, Satan, principalities and powers, the world system, the flesh, idols, the harlot-city, the beast, and all the related actions that these powers engender (such as envy, jealousy, hatred, lust, greed, etc.). The Scriptures relating to these themes are many and varied, and in a School of this nature we perhaps need not rehearse them at this point.¹⁴ Suffice to say that the human mind is not free standing. This could never be the case ontologically, and certainly the need for our redemption from these enemies indicates that the sinful mind is not in a morally neutral state.¹⁵ Even as the redeemed community, the church must go on in the renewal of the mind (Rom. 12:2) by which they would be brought to maturity. The key to this is the preaching of the word of righteousness (see Heb. 5:12–14) and therefore the renewed mind is not 'free standing' but 'gospel/Spirit standing'. It is only in this way that we are given true spiritual and moral orientation in the world.

GOD ALONE IS WISE: WISDOMS IN CONFLICT

The material that the above opens is reflected in many other places in the Scriptures, but two New Testament passages in particular take us into similar territory. Doubtless we will be returning to these at various points through the School.

Romans 1:18–32

While in other places in the New Testament we read of the coming day of wrath, from which we are warned to flee (e.g. Rom. 2:5; cf. 1 Thess. 1:10; 2:16), the emphasis in this passage falls on the *present* and *continuous* action of God's wrath being experienced under sin *now*. In particular, Paul repeats the line that God 'gave them

¹⁴ Geoffrey Bingham has given expositions of these themes in many places, ranging from succinct summaries (for example, *The Things We Firmly Believe*, pp. 99–103) through to extensive treatments (e.g. *The Clash of the Kingdoms*, 1989; *Christ's Cross Over Man's Abyss*, 2003; *The Dominion of Darkness and the Victory of God*, 1998; etc., all published by NCPI, Blackwood). It is notable that there is scarcely a book or Living Faith Study (or TLS tape!) where the theme does not emerge in Geoff's teaching, and where the cross is not proclaimed. This stands in sharp contrast to most of what we might call academic theology where one is hard pressed to find even a mention of such things in the tables of contents or indexes of otherwise fine and helpful treatments of substantial topics. The lack is even more disconcerting given the (commendable) rise of biblical theology in recent decades. My fear is that much biblical theology will finally be found to be un-biblical for this very reason.

¹⁵ This has important implications for the preaching of the gospel. It is often suggested that the primary need for the effective communication of the gospel is a clear and logical presentation of the case for Christ, which has an apologetic powerful enough to compel the mind's submission to the gospel through the logic of the case presented. What may be missed in this view is that the hearers do not come with a mind free of presuppositions, the origin of which has to do with the *nature of sin*, rather than with the mind having picked up a few warped thoughts which the argument may straighten out.

'The Only Wise God'

over' to their lusts, passions and depraved mind (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28) as a manifestation of his wrath in the current experience of sinners. As C. K. Barrett puts it: 'God's judgement has already broken forth; only he has consigned sinners not to hell but to sin—if indeed these be alternatives'.¹⁶

The idea of God 'giving over' has a fulsome Old Testament background, particularly in the prophets. On the one hand it is seen reflected in those places where the wicked are caught in their own snare (e.g. Ps. 7:15; 9:15; 35:8; 37:15; 57:6; 94:23; Prov. 5:22; 11:5; etc.). Of this principle, the account of Haman's demise in the book of Esther is perhaps the clearest and most dramatic example. On the other hand it is seen where Israel reaped the negative harvest of her idolatry and the alliances with the nations which this often entailed. One of the clearest examples of this can be found in Ezekiel 16 where God gives Israel over to the hands of her 'lovers' (the idols and the nations served by them) who degrade and abuse her, which suffering is God's judgement on her unfaithfulness. The same principle is seen in other places (e.g. Isa. 3:16–24; Hos. 2:9–13), and was clearly understood by the Old Testament writers as being the normative pattern of God's dealing with human sin and rebellion against him.

Paul has explained that his purpose is to proclaim the gospel, which is the power of God to salvation. In the light of the above discussion, the gospel is that which releases sinners from the current experience of the dreadful wrath of God, not simply as a coming eschatological crisis, but as the current reality of life in which men and women are given over to their sins. The eschatological deliverance from the wrath to come is no less emphasised in other places in Paul's theology (e.g. Acts 17:31; Rom. 2:5, 16; 2 Tim. 4:1; cf. 1 Thess. 1:10; 2:16), but here (in Romans 1) his focus is on the action of God's wrath in the actual current experience of men and women. In their innermost being, as men and women are given over to their sins and all that flows from this, including various forms of physical, emotional and psychological suffering and turmoil; in the haunting and howling of their troubled minds and consciences; and in the breakdown of all human relationships, men and women are in the active grip of God's personal wrath towards them.

The reason for this fearful state is not hard to find in the passage. God has revealed himself to men and women, and goes on doing so (vv. 19, 20) but human beings do not want to receive this revelation. Rather they suppress the truth of God that he is bringing to them every day (v. 18) and thus men and women operate towards him in a perverse exchange. They exchange God's glory for idolatry (v. 23); God's truth for a lie (Rom. 1:25); and both are brought together in false worship: whereby they worship and serve the creation/creature, 'rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen' (Rom. 1:25b). In the face of such persistent human wickedness, and in the light of its consequent experience of wrath, the gospel is indeed gracious good news! God himself has sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins, even sins such as these!

It is in this context of the sinful exchange, that we find Paul speaking of the matter of foolishness. In verse 21 the refusal to worship God (by glorifying/honouring him as God and giving thanks to him), means that men and women have become 'futile in their thinking', having 'foolish hearts' that are 'darkened'.¹⁷ One's 'heart' (*kardia*)

¹⁶ C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, A. & C. Black, London, 1962, p. 38.

¹⁷ The verbs in the latter part of the verse should be taken as divine passives. The subject of the verb is not named, but God is the one who is implied. Men and women 'became futile' (*emataiōthēsan*) in their thinking and

‘The Only Wise God’

stands for one’s ‘whole intellectual and emotional life’.¹⁸ It is ‘the most comprehensive term for the human faculties, the seat of feeling (Rom. 9:2; 10:1); will (1 Cor. 4:5; 7:37; cf. Rom. 16:18); [and] thoughts (Rom. 10:6, 8)’.¹⁹ Here the whole heart is ‘foolish’ (*asynetos*), so that in verse 22 Paul is able to summarize the contradiction: in professing wisdom, men and women became fools (*emōranthēsan*, to make/render foolish).²⁰ In all of this, we should not lose sight of the fact that this foolishness is linked with hostility towards God, and is manifest in the exchange of proper worship for idolatry. Foolishness is rebellion.²¹

1 Corinthians 1-2

For Paul, there is no thought of any wisdom independent of God’s action in Christ and, in particular, in Christ as the Crucified One. Paul’s statements on the matter are plain. He says that ‘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’ (1 Cor. 1:18). In the preaching of Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1:23), Christ becomes both the power and wisdom of God to all who believe (1 Cor. 1:24). Paul saw that the preaching of the cross must not be emptied of its power by couching it in ‘words of eloquent wisdom’ (1 Cor. 1:17). In coming to the Corinthians with the message of Christ crucified—and with that message alone (1 Cor. 2:1–3), since he had deliberately shunned ‘plausible [i.e. persuasive, enticing] words of wisdom’ (1 Cor. 2:4)—Paul knew that the Corinthians’ faith had been brought to rest on the wisdom and power of God, rather than on the wisdom of men (1 Cor. 2:5).

Of central importance to Paul’s teaching is the fact that the wisdom ‘from below’ (to import James’ term) is entirely opposed to the wisdom from above and that this earthly wisdom finds God’s wisdom to be utterly incomprehensible. Indeed we are told that we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:12–14).

Behind this statement lies an understanding of the spiritual blindness which points us to two things we need to note. Firstly, ‘no human means exists by which God’s

their hearts ‘were darkened’ (*eskotisthē*). Barrett’s translation preserves the sense well, ‘even as they made themselves out to be wise, they were turned into fools’ (Barrett, *Romans*, p. 37). The action is part of his ‘giving over’ in a just and deliberate punishment for their rejection of God.

¹⁸ J. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 39A, Word Books, Dallas, 1988, p. 71.

¹⁹ W. Sanday and A. Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, The International Critical Commentary, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1975, pp. 44f. (verse numbers clarified).

²⁰ When did this happen? Though there is no direct quotation from the Old Testament account of the Fall in this section, the allusions to wisdom and knowledge and the theme of the over-reaching rebellion of human beings which is met by the judgement of God, is best seen as alluding to that background. For more detailed discussion on this point see J. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, pp. 60f.

²¹ In two references (Luke 6:11 and 2 Tim. 3:9) foolishness/folly and fury/rage are virtually equated. ‘But they were filled with fury [*anoia*] and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus’ (Luke 6:11). Compare: ‘But they will not get very far, for their folly [*anoia*] will be plain to all, as was that of those two men’ (2 Tim. 3:9). The word *anoia* is a negated form of *nous* (reason, mind, understanding). To be without understanding, from these references, is not simply to be without knowledge. It is to be hostile in mind and opposed to the messengers of God.

‘The Only Wise God’

truth can be grasped by those without the Spirit. The Spirit himself begets knowledge of the things of the Spirit’.²² Secondly, the wisdom ‘taught by the Spirit’ is embodied in the word (*logos*) of the cross. It is in and through the word of the cross that the wisdom of this world is shown to be nothing other than ‘foolishness’ (1 Cor. 1:18–21).²³ Consequently, Paul can say that ‘the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men’ (1 Cor. 1:25).

The whole of Paul’s argument is built on a seeming paradox: the wisdom of this age regards the wisdom of God (in the cross) as foolishness, but in reality the ‘foolishness’ of the cross is the ultimate expression of Divine wisdom. Thus, in order to become truly wise, one must renounce the ‘wisdom’ of this age, and embrace the ‘foolishness’ of the wisdom of God.²⁴ Paul’s conclusion is this, ‘Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise’ (1 Cor. 3:18). Thus, ‘the force of Paul’s rebuttal to the Corinthians becomes clear: *the truth about God is revealed not through philosophy but through prophecy, not through rhetoric but by revelation.* The secret saving purposes of God for the whole world are now laid bare by the Spirit’s disclosure that the wisdom of God is made known through the cross’.²⁵

Indeed, the matter is even more confronting than this, astounding though this statement is. Paul clearly indicates that the purpose of God in his wisdom is to judge the wisdom of this world. Paul does not set the two wisdoms side by side, as if they were equal, though opposite, alternatives. They are radically incompatible, and so opposed is the wisdom of this age to the wisdom of the cross (i.e. the wisdom of God), that God *must* judge it. James has said that such wisdom is ‘natural, earthly, demonic’. Paul would agree!

Quoting from Isaiah 29 Paul says, ‘For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart”’ (1 Cor. 1:19).²⁶ This comports with Paul’s statements that God is ‘shaming’ and ‘nullifying’ the wisdom of

²² T. R. Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ*, IVP, Downers Grove/Leicester, 2001, p. 263.

²³ The term ‘foolishness’ has a moral connotation in the Bible. To speak of the wisdom of this current age as ‘foolishness’ is to label it as something that is not just deficient or even ignorant of the facts, but something that is actually malevolent to God and his purposes.

²⁴ R. Hays, ‘Wisdom According to Paul’, pp. 111–123 in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* ed. Stephen Barton (T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1999), the following quote from p. 115:

Philosophers, Torah scholars, and most significantly, popular orators—all the esteemed pundits of Paul’s day—all fail to understand what is really going on in the world. Their vaunted wisdom had failed to grasp the truth about God . . . God has exploded common sense by an eschatological revelation of the truth ‘through the foolishness (*mōria*) of our proclamation (*kērygma*)’. The word *mōria* points to the utter craziness of the gospel message by common sense standards. How can the ignominious death of Jesus on a cross be the event of salvation for the world? One would have to be a fool to believe that. Yet that is precisely what the gospel declares.

²⁵ Hays’ italics, ‘Wisdom According to Paul’, p. 120.

²⁶ The context of the original words from Isaiah 29:14, quoted here from the LXX, is significant for our theme. The oracle in which this statement is found is a warning against Jerusalem of coming judgement. The reason for this judgement is because there is no fear of God amongst the populous (which is the meaning of Isa. 29:13, ‘this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men’) and thus no wisdom (which is associated with true fear of God and thus obedience to his commands, as in Ps. 111:10). The result of such ‘fearless’ living is both deception and pride (as described in Isa. 29:15 and 16 respectively). In view of the nature of the ‘wisdom of the wise men’ and its deleterious effects, God could not let it stand, as it was nothing less than a rebellion against him. In essence the ‘wisdom of the wise’ is a manifestation of the spiritual blindness of God’s Old Testament people, a blindness that was not relieved by repentance in the light of Isaiah’s ministry of the wisdom from above.

'The Only Wise God'

this age (1 Cor. 1:27–28) and that he is bringing the 'wise' of this age to judgement by catching them in their own cleverness (1 Cor. 3:19). In such statements, the motif of conflict between the two wisdoms that was implicit in James is here made explicit. The world is presented as operating with a sort of wisdom that is not morally neutral, but spiritually hostile to God.

The Corinthians had been deeply affected by the prevailing social morés, which valued highly the philosophical wisdom of the age and the mode of its presentation. Hays' comment is instructive: 'we must bear in mind that the term "wisdom" can refer, in the Corinthian setting, both to the possession of exalted knowledge and to the ability to express that knowledge in a powerful and rhetorically polished way'.²⁷ The enchantment lay not simply (or even primarily) in the *content*, but also in the *style*. In a contemporary world, where image triumphs over substance in all forms of communication and presentation—not least in the evangelical church—this is a sombre warning.

Paul's argument is both unambiguous and striking. In this current arena of conflict, the wisdom of God is only wise to those who are being saved (e.g. 1 Cor. 1:18, 21b, 24). To the world at large, it seems to be foolish and is thus largely rejected. Moreover, this refusal to see and receive the wisdom from God is Satanic in its origin (so 2 Cor. 4:3–4). In view of this, the only possible way to defeat the world's system of wisdom (which is no less 'natural, earthly and demonic' in Paul's theology than in James') is through the proclamation of the wisdom of God, the wisdom 'from above'. This proclamation is at one and the same time the revelation of God's wisdom to the world, and the judgement upon that world's wisdom.

²⁷ Hays, 'Wisdom According to Paul', p. 113.